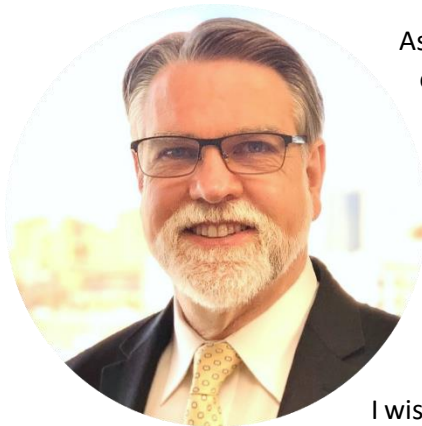




COVID-19 One-Year Reflections



Dr. Mark E. Wilson, MD

Jefferson County Health Officer

As I reflect back on the year that started with our first documented case of COVID-19 in Jefferson County in March 2020, I have a wide range of thoughts and emotions. Many of my emotions are negative: grief over the loss of so many lives we had desperately hoped to save; sympathy for so many who have experienced the pain of financial loss, social isolation, or decline in mental health; disappointment and frustration over the misinformation, anti-science sentiment and divisiveness that have characterized so much of our public discourse. But there is one feeling that rises above all the rest: gratitude.

I wish to express my gratitude for all the people - family, friends, colleagues, acquaintances and strangers - who have reached out to me personally with encouragement, advice, appreciation, love and support. It has been truly amazing, and it will be difficult for me to repay all the kindness I have received from so many. I am also grateful for the employees of the Jefferson County Department of Health, whom I have had the privilege to work with over the last 9 years. They have stepped up and done whatever we have needed to help fight this pandemic. Many have worked into the night and through the weekends. Some have helped me get through the past year by taking major burdens off my plate. I am grateful for our co-leading agency in Unified Command, the Jefferson County Emergency Management Agency, led by Jim Coker, and for the many people from our county government and our local municipalities who have served in critical roles in the Unified Command structure. I am grateful for our local political leaders who have stayed engaged since the very beginning of the pandemic to provide much needed leadership within their own jurisdictions, and to offer me input. I am grateful for our local hospitals, whose staff have worked almost to the breaking point to care for thousands of people seriously ill with COVID-19, and other health care providers who have helped with COVID-19 testing, outpatient care and vaccination. I am grateful for our many friends in the philanthropic, non-profit, faith and business community who have pitched in to support our community through these difficult times. Lastly, I am thankful for all the individual residents of Jefferson County who have done their part to help prevent the spread of the virus, and to care for their neighbors in other ways.

We've experienced a lot of darkness in this past year, but there are many bright lights that have shown through that darkness, and it is my prayer that we will hold on to those lights and keep them shining for years to come.



Q: What were your thoughts at the onset of the pandemic?

A: I remember reading about rapid increase in cases of this new virus reported out of Wuhan, China as early as December, and thinking to myself, “Uh oh, this doesn’t look good.” As time went by, I became more alarmed as I saw reports of ventilators being rationed in Italy, a nursing home outbreak in Washington State, and hospitals running out of personal protective equipment in New York City. Finally, during the second full week of March, 2020, as the first COVID-19 cases popped up in states bordering Alabama, I realized we likely had unidentified cases in or near Jefferson County, and it was time to start taking action to prevent its spread here. On March 12, I made my first public health recommendation to limit the size of large gatherings.

Q: What was your biggest challenge?

A: There were a lot of challenges along the way, but probably the most difficult was working through recommendations for school reopening in late July, after a request for recommendations was made by local school superintendents. I was trying to balance the very legitimate concerns and needs of many groups – children, parents, teachers, the medical community, and the overall community. There was concern about the potential risk from COVID-19 – not just to children, but everyone – as well as the risks associated with children not having in-person learning. As was the case during much of the pandemic, there were still many unknowns at the time, and we were in mostly uncharted territory.

Q: How did your responsibilities change?

A: My personal efforts around multiple pre-pandemic public health projects and initiatives had to be suspended. The pandemic became my sole focus.

Q: How did the pandemic affect you personally?

A: It was very intense for the first several weeks, with very little sleep and sometimes missed meals. It felt like there were multiple fires in the house at once. Later, as things like mask-wearing became more politicized and divisive, I felt discouraged. I started getting a lot of criticism from some, which is hard for me personally because I am a people-pleaser by nature. At the same time, the outpouring of love, encouragement and support from many people was amazing. I am left now with a feeling of disappointment and grief over all the suffering and death that has occurred despite our efforts, mixed with a sense of gratitude for all the examples of kindness, generosity and heroism I have seen.

Q: What were some obstacles you faced?

A: The most frustrating thing early in the pandemic was the lack of resources. JCDH had set aside funds for emergency response soon after I became health officer, but there were things like PPE, hand sanitizer and testing supplies that money could not buy because they simply weren’t available anywhere.

Q: What has kept you motivated during this unprecedented time?

A: Put simply, deep concern for all Jefferson County residents, and a strong sense of my own duty to protect their health.



Q: What was your proudest moment?

A: The thing that's made me the most proud has been seeing multiple Jefferson County Health Department employees step up and pitch in to do whatever was required of them. So many have gone the extra mile to help the residents of Jefferson County, putting in extra hours, and doing things they didn't know they had signed up for when they first took a job here. Probably the most visible example of this was our biggest mass vaccination day on February 15, which ran very smoothly. Our staff received more compliments from the public that day than in any time in memory.

Q: What would you have done differently?

A: Knowing what I know now with 20:20 hindsight, there are plenty of things I would do differently. But knowing what we knew at the time, as we were facing this serious threat with limited knowledge about how this virus behaved, I don't think I would have done anything differently. It's easy to forget that in the beginning weeks, we didn't know that spread of virus via contact with surfaces was not as important as respiratory spread, and we didn't know how well cloth facemasks reduced the spread of the virus.

Q: In what ways, if any, will this experience assist you in your role?

A: Much of my work in public health involves partnerships with others in the community. We had a lot of great partners before the pandemic, but because this has been such an all-hands-on-deck situation, we now have even more. Existing relationships have been deepened by the experience of having gone through this travail together.

Q: How did JCDH prepare for this pandemic or How prepared was JCDH for this pandemic?

A: JCDH has a small Emergency Preparedness and Response division that receives support from the federal government to maintain some level of preparedness for public health emergencies and pandemics. That includes drills with local partners for pandemic response and mass vaccination. JCDH began preparing for COVID-19 specifically in January, and we reached out to others in the community to help them prepare as well. Despite that, no one completely anticipated the complexities and unique features of COVID-19 or the vaccination process.

Q: What is the one message that you would like to convey to Jefferson County?

A: We are not out of the woods yet. Now is not the time to let down our guard, especially with the threat of more contagious and potentially more dangerous SARS-CoA-2 variants. We don't want have more casualties in the final phase of the war.



COVID-19

A One-Year Commemoration | March 13, 2021



James "Jim" Coker

Director of Jefferson County EMA

March 2020 marked the beginning of the longest declared disaster in the history of the State of Alabama: the COVID-19 pandemic. The Jefferson County Emergency Management Agency, working with the Jefferson County Department of Health, initiated a very robust Unified Command structure to meet the many challenges presented by COVID-19. The Unified Command brought together people from many disciplines and agencies; they worked in Planning, Operations, Logistics, Finance, and other areas. A Joint Information Center was quickly developed to bring together many partners with the goal of consistent and unified messaging. The Unified Command identified several solutions: acquiring personal protective equipment, feeding those in need, and testing to determine exposure and infection. Later in the year, the Unified Command developed the registration process for vaccinations by utilizing a call center and an online submission form. The Unified Command is based on the National Incident Management System. It is the very definition of "teamwork"; its actions touched many people in Jefferson County. The first year of the pandemic is coming to a close; the goal to successfully bring COVID-19 to an end in the County remains first in everyone's thoughts.

Q: What were your thoughts at the onset of the pandemic?

A: We were involved with pandemic exercises and training previously; neither prepared us for the impact of an event on a national level. We were concerned when the first cases were identified in the state, and how to best prepare and implement COVID-19 operations within Jefferson County was the top priority.

Q: What was your biggest challenge?

A: The implementation of forming the countywide Unified Command structure was most challenging. It took a substantial amount of planning and structuring to bring together experts from various agencies and disciplines.

Q: How did your responsibilities change?

A: I became one of the two Unified Command Incident Commanders for COVID-19, the other being Dr. Mark Wilson. In addition, my other EMA responsibilities continued on a daily basis.

Q: How did the pandemic affect you personally?

A: My activities were severely limited. To protect our staff from potential COVID-19 exposure, we all went to work, went home, and repeated the same the next day. The hours were very long during the initial months of the pandemic. The ability to see family living out of town was nonexistent. EMA was also very



active in the community prior to COVID-19; events and presentations were commonplace. The events were canceled or rescheduled.

Q: What were some obstacles you faced?

A: An obstacle I faced was determining how to prioritize needs across the county (COVID-19 testing, feeding, and other challenges) for the Unified Command to develop solutions.

An obstacle overcome: we had not worked before using Zoom and other video platforms. Our skill level was rapidly improved which increased our ability to communicate effectively with our partners and elected officials during a time when face-to-face meetings were reduced or eliminated. We had to update some equipment during this time to accommodate the new methods of communications. Daily EMA calls for response did not abate; our staff handled incidents while working within COVID-19 protocols. Jefferson County experienced two tornadoes, the effects of tropical weather, and significant hazardous materials incidents during the ongoing COVID-19 event.

Q: What has kept you motivated during this unprecedented time?

A: I'm motivated by the support of my family and the outstanding work done by the EMA staff. The EMA staff has done an excellent job at finding innovative solutions to complex problems. The support of our elected officials has been instrumental in our continuing operations.

Q: What was your proudest moment?

A: I have those every day; I am fortunate to work with a professional team of EMA staff that is unequaled anywhere in the state. They, in turn, have built very strong relationships with our many partners.

Q: What would you have done differently?

A: EMA has had a very strong relationship with JCDH. Based on what we know now (which couldn't be anticipated, given the scope of the pandemic), we would have increased training integrating JCDH into the Incident Command (ICS) system early during an event.

Q: In what ways, if any, will this experience assist you in your role?

A: The staff at JCEMA has developed innovative ways to work remotely using technology. Using platforms like Zoom has allowed efficient communications during not only the pandemic but other events as well. Remote working has allowed EMA staff and our partners during Emergency Operations Center activations to have full access to data and other information from a wide variety of locations. The ability to leverage technology utilized during COVID-19 improved response during the recent tornado in Fultondale.

Q: How did JCEMA prepare for this pandemic or How prepared was JCEMA for this pandemic?

A: JCEMA had participated with JCDH many times in the past in exercises and training; however, the fact that this was a worldwide pandemic stretched our ability to resource materials such as personal protective equipment (PPE). We were dependent on a logistics pipeline that was not under our influence.



Q: What is the one message that you would like to convey to Jefferson County?

A: The COVID-19 pandemic has certainly been a challenge for us all; we have forged partnerships in ways that, in some cases, were not previously explored. We continue to learn from the past year, and this has made Jefferson County not only stronger, but a leader in planning and response.



COVID-19

A One-Year Commemoration | March 13, 2021



Dr. David B. Hicks, FAAFP
Deputy Health Officer

The mission of the Jefferson County Department of Health is to (1) *Prevent* disease and assure access to quality health care, (2) *Promote* a healthy lifestyle and a healthy environment, and (3) *Protect* against public health threats. Although the spread of COVID-19 into Jefferson County was inevitable, we were proactive in minimizing its impact on vulnerable populations. We worked with nursing homes to enhance protective safety measures, ensured COVID-19 testing options for the uninsured, provided resources for persons experiencing homelessness, and focused on vaccine access equity. The Jefferson County Department of Health has aimed to provide consistent and up-to-date communication with the general public as our understanding of COVID-19 has evolved. We have also issued public health guidance and recommendations based on current scientific, medical, and public health knowledge. As we have partnered with the community to fight this pandemic collectively, we have been proud of your determination. In the past year, our community has mobilized resources by making hand-made masks, donating food, providing shelter to those less fortunate, and much more. Like other times of crisis in the past, this global pandemic has tested our resolve as we all have stayed the course despite the many challenges. There is now light at the end of this tunnel which grows brighter as we walk this path together.

Q: What were your thoughts at the onset of the pandemic?

A: I certainly recognized that this would likely be a once in a lifetime event, but never thought that the pandemic would last over a year. I did have confidence in our health department team since we had been preparing for a potential pandemic for years.

Q: What was your biggest challenge?

A: One of the biggest challenges has been grappling with how quickly misinformation spreads throughout society. We had to increase our engagement on various media platforms to dispel rumors, myths, and falsehoods.

Q: How did your responsibilities change?

A: At the onset, I served as Incident Commander of our health department's internal response. On March 27th, the FEMA Administrator from the US Department of Homeland Security issued a directive to "integrate all emergency management and public health operations" and to "form a unified Emergency Management – Public Health Team." In compliance with the FEMA directive, Jefferson County Unified Command (JCUC) was established with the EMA Director and Health Officer as Unified Incident



Commanders. I remained as JCDH's Incident Commander, but was also appointed as JCUC Public Health Branch Director.

Q: How did the pandemic affect you personally?

A: Like everyone else, I had challenges attempting to maintain a healthy work-life balance. Conceptually, I knew that it would be important to pace myself, as the workdays seemed to never end. I remember having a conversation with my elementary school-aged children trying to explain why I would be coming home late and working on the weekends. I still could not fully express why I needed to sacrifice time with them on behalf of the greater community. I hope that in the future, all of our loved ones will be able to look back and understand why we made the tough decisions that we did. As a physician and public health worker, I have a profound sense of duty to ensure that all have a fair chance to live a healthy life.

Q: What were some obstacles you faced?

A: One of the biggest obstacles we faced early on was how to adequately address the risks to persons experiencing homelessness. I remember scouring for potential quarantine locations for weeks to no avail. There was an abandoned 314,000 square foot office building, a mobile home, a vacant 60,000 square foot warehouse, an athletic stadium, and a partially occupied hotel that seemed to be viable options. Unfortunately, several reasons were given as to why these locations were not deemed to be suitable. I do believe one of the underlying reasons was stigma associated with having COVID-19 and/or homelessness. Ultimately, the health department outfitted its own property to address the concern while we worked on a more permanent solution.

Q: What has kept you motivated during this unprecedented time?

A: I continue to be motivated by observing the tireless efforts of my public health co-workers. They are the unsung heroes in this pandemic who serve with grace and compassion. They often work behind the scenes helping to protect the public from emerging threats. Beyond that, I often think about those less fortunate than me and the privilege and responsibility I have been given. I recognize that life is short and I strive to give more than I take.

Q: What was your proudest moment?

A: We asked our employees to consider working two vaccination clinics on Martin Luther King Day as this was the first day that persons age 75 and older could now be vaccinated. We had over 100 employees volunteer to give up their holiday to serve the community. This is one of countless examples when health department employees went above and beyond by working on evenings and weekends despite facing the same personal challenges that everyone else has been during this pandemic.

Q: What would you have done differently?

A: Although we integrated our operations with the County EMA into a Unified Command structure in late March 2020, we would have benefited by making that transition sooner. That would have taken more burden off our backs since our internal resources at the time were getting strained.



Q: In what ways, if any, will this experience assist you in your role?

A: This pandemic response further illustrates the power of meaningful partnerships to achieve broader community-level goals. I have been able to forge relationships with groups and individuals in Jefferson County that I may not otherwise have been able to do. I hope to leverage this to continue our agency's vision of "A healthier Jefferson County for all".

Q: How did JCDH prepare for this pandemic or How prepared was JCDH for this pandemic?

A: For the past several years, JCDH's Emergency Preparedness & Response Division worked alongside the Jefferson County Health Care Coalition to ensure the Coalition was prepared for a pandemic through simulated exercises. JCDH activated its Incident Command Structure for COVID-19 on January 24, 2020, as more cases were confirmed in the United States well before any cases were identified in the Alabama. Although this pandemic certainly exhibited unique challenges, the strength of our partnerships was evident over the past year.

Q: What is the one message that you would like to convey to Jefferson County?

A: For over 100 years, the Jefferson County Department of Health remains committed to protecting you from public health threats. With your continued support and partnership, we can build upon the foundation that has been laid so that we are even better prepared for future epidemics. There certainly have been valuable lessons learned as we always will strive to promote and protect the health of all persons who live, work, and play in Jefferson County.



COVID-19

A One-Year Commemoration | March 13, 2021



Dr. Wesley Willeford, MD

Medical Director

As we near the one-year mark for COVID-19 in Alabama, I am amazed at how far we have come in understanding how to battle the virus that causes COVID-19. In January 2020, I recall anxiously reading about field hospitals being set up in Wuhan China as a new virus began to spread rapidly throughout China. Shortly after, the virus was identified in more and more places, and I remember the gnawing sensation of worry that began to creep over me. What would this virus look like in the United States, what would the toll be, what could we do to protect as many people as possible? Our Disease Control staff worked around the clock with the Alabama Department of Public Health to come up with plans, track down cases, and perform testing where we could. Unfortunately, we had hoped for a brief burst of activity, but COVID-19 became a marathon. As the pandemic continued, one of the biggest challenges that the Disease Control division faced dealt with performing case investigation and contact tracing on as many as we could. When cases surged, this became difficult to accomplish as we tried to break the chain of transmission of the virus. Now one year later, the United States continues to fight against COVID-19, but we know so much more now. We know that diligent use of masks slows the spread of the virus that causes COVID-19. We have medications that can help people who are in extreme disease. We understand the risk factors that increase the chances of bad outcomes, and most importantly, we have three vaccines so far that have proven to be highly effective at preventing COVID-19. This information has been hard won, but we are now better prepared to deal with COVID-19 going forward. Vaccination is the key to helping us return to normal, and now, one year later, I feel more confident about our ability to control COVID-19 and to protect the lives of the people in Jefferson County.

Q: What were your thoughts at the onset of the pandemic?

A: In January 2020, I recall anxiously reading about field hospitals being set up in Wuhan China as a new virus began to spread rapidly throughout China. Shortly after, the virus was identified in more and more places, and I remember the gnawing sensation of worry that began to creep over me. What would this virus look like in the United States, what would the toll be, what could we do to protect as many people as possible?

Q: What was your biggest challenge?

A: As the pandemic continued, one of the biggest challenges that the Disease Control division faced dealt with performing case investigation and contact tracing on as many as we could. When cases surged, this became difficult to accomplish as we tried to break the chain of transmission of the virus.



Q: How did your responsibilities change?

A: My department expanded to include many new faces, and our clinical operations had to be downsized to accommodate COVID-19 precautions.

Q: How did the pandemic affect you personally?

A: I ended up spending more time at work, and it was more difficult to stay in touch with friends and family.

Q: What has kept you motivated during this unprecedented time?

A: The biggest motivation I had was my parents. Both are older and very vulnerable to COVID-19, and I wanted to work hard to keep them safe.

Q: What was your proudest moment?

A: My happiest moment was when the first vaccines were given to people in Jefferson County.

Q: In what ways, if any, will this experience assist you in your role?

A: The COVID-19 pandemic has taught me a great deal about leadership and the need for common ground during a prolonged crisis, and this is something that I will carry forward with me as I go through the rest of my career.

Q: How did JCDH prepare for this pandemic or How prepared was JCDH for this pandemic?

A: JCDH remains prepared to deal with re-emerging or newly emerging health crises. The major disadvantage with COVID-19 was trying to make the best possible decisions based on limited knowledge of what was clearly a deadly virus.

Q: What is the one message that you would like to convey to Jefferson County?

A: I want to thank everyone for all of their hard work, and I want to encourage everyone who can to get vaccinated as soon as they are able to schedule an appointment.

