

Hamilton Board of Health Self-Evaluation Report

Date: Aug 2, 2023

Subject: Summary of Feedback on Hamilton Board of Health's Functioning

Prepared by: MASS LBP

Participants: 14 members of the Hamilton Board of Health

Purpose: To assess the current state, challenges, and potential areas for improvement in the Hamilton Board of Health's governance model.

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The members of the Hamilton Board of Health have expressed diverse opinions and concerns regarding the functioning of the Board. The feedback has been collated from individual interviews to present a comprehensive understanding of the perceptions of the Board members, focusing primarily on the question: What issues do you identify with the Hamilton Board of Health's current governance model that prevent it from fulfilling the tenets of good governance?

Methodology

MASS LBP, an independent public policy consulting firm, was retained to conduct consultations regarding the Hamilton's Board of Health governance model. As part of their interviews with City Councillors, the interviewers also asked councillors, who serve as the Board of Health, to comment on their experience during a qualitative, semi-structured interview. The interviewers took notes with the understanding that they would not attribute specific responses and that the purpose of the interview was to collect information based on the councillors' experience which would later be summarized in a short report.

SUMMARY OF FEEDBACK

Collegial Tone and Need for Diverse Perspectives

The Board of Health's meetings were consistently described by members as being characterized by a collegial tone, reflecting a healthy culture of collaboration and professionalism among the Board members. This respectful environment fosters open dialogue and encourages constructive engagement on crucial health matters. However,

some Board members voiced a need to hear from more diverse perspectives and expressed a desire to be better versed in certain topics. They recognize the importance of being well-informed in their decision-making processes and see the inclusion of additional viewpoints as vital to enhancing the Board's understanding of complex health issues.

Social Determinants of Health

Several board members believe that the Board should be more engaged in issues related to health equity and the social determinants of health. They point to discrepancies in health outcomes across the city which are concentrated in specific wards that typically report higher numbers of low-income renters, lower life expectancy, and during the COVID-19 pandemic, also reported lower levels of vaccine uptake. Other Board members believe the Board and Hamilton Public Health Services should expand its focus and take on more work related to extreme heat, climate change and environmental contamination. Of note, some members expressed skepticism regarding claims that structural inequities in the community necessarily lead to unfair health outcomes.

Political Influences and Non-Partisanship

Some members emphasized the need for non-partisan processes and expressed dissatisfaction with what they characterized as ‘ideologically-driven’ perspectives on both the left and the right which can undermine evidence-based decision making. Other members expressed concern that they did not feel sufficiently knowledgeable on public health matters to make a strong contribution to the review of public health policies.

Support for the Medical Officer of Health and Her Team

A resounding sentiment among Board members was the strong support and trust in the Medical Officer of Health and her dedicated team. The members commended her professionalism and leadership, expressing confidence in her ability to guide the public health agenda in Hamilton. Recognizing the challenges of public health governance, the members emphasized that the MOH's evidence-based approach and commitment to community well-being were integral to the success of the Board's efforts. This faith in the MOH and her team was seen as a unifying factor within the Board, fostering a collaborative environment conducive to achieving the health goals of the community.

Structural Concerns and Accountability

A significant number of Board members raised concerns regarding the existing structure of the Board of Health. Critics of the current structure cite the absence of community voices or those with relevant health expertise and point to other jurisdictions which have adopted different models to address these perceived deficiencies. Many of these Board members also believe that more should be done to ensure that the Board reflects the

community and is more viscerally engaged in questions of diversity, equity, and inclusion. In contrast, some members believe that the Board's current structure is functioning well, referring to the adoption of the Board of Health 20 years ago as an appropriate and sufficient reform. Supporters of the current model believe that it is important that all members of Council continue to serve on the Board and argue that any change to include appointed members could dilute the influence of elected representatives and reduce the Board's accountability to voters.

Challenges of COVID-19 and Support for the Team's Performance

The COVID-19 pandemic emerged as a salient topic in the feedback, reflecting the global challenge that has tested public health systems. Board members broadly commended the Medical Officer of Health's team for their performance during this difficult and unprecedented period in Hamilton. They recognized the complex and rapidly changing landscape that the team had to navigate and appreciated the diligence, responsiveness, and professionalism demonstrated. While some participants expressed concerns about perceived overreach during the pandemic, they also acknowledged that the local public health unit was often implementing provincial directives. The tone of the comments was overall positive, highlighting an understanding of the constraints and pressures faced and a recognition of the team's efforts to protect the community's health and safety during a crisis of significant magnitude.

Conclusion

The feedback from the Hamilton Board of Health members provides some insights into the strengths, challenges, and aspirations of the Board. The collegial and respectful tone reflects a healthy culture that fosters collaboration and open dialogue, even though some members seek a broader diversity of perspectives and deeper knowledge in certain areas. There is a generally shared commitment to addressing health equity and social determinants of health, balanced with diverse opinions on the scope of the Board's responsibilities and the influence of political perspectives.

A unifying thread in the feedback is the support for the Medical Officer of Health and her team. This admiration for her professionalism and leadership is coupled with an appreciation for the team's performance during the COVID-19 crisis, a period that has challenged public health systems globally.

Concerns about the current structure of the Board and its accountability mechanisms reflect differing views on how best to represent the community's interests, with a significant number of members seeking change while others advocate for maintaining the status quo. (For more information, please see the Hamilton Board of Health Governance Model: What We Heard report.)

Taken together, these reflections provide a roadmap for continued dialogue and potential evolution of the Board of Health in Hamilton. The feedback underscores the

importance of evidence-based decision-making, community representation, and the collective desire to enhance public health outcomes. It highlights both the Board's successes and the areas where growth and adaptation may further align its efforts with the complex and ever-changing landscape of public health.