Dr. Debra Bogen reflects on the whirlwind of her first months as the new director of the Allegheny County Health Department and the experiences she draws on to coordinate a local response to the global pandemic.
By Julia Fraser

Through her lens

When Dr. Debra Bogen stepped up to the podium at a March 4 press conference to be introduced as the next director of the Allegheny County Health Department, she took questions from reporters on her past work at UPMC Children's Hospital and on how she would tackle the region's air quality.

COVID-19 was spreading across the world. The first U.S. case had been reported in January. But it hadn't reached Pittsburgh.

When asked about it, she confided she had been reading the latest research "extensively" and "will keep up." She wasn't due to start her new job until May. Two weeks later, the county and region were confirming cases of the novel coronavirus, and she was directing the county's public health response full time.

"The pandemic didn't quite feel real, even though I knew it was coming," Dr. Bogen said. "I thought I had two months to prepare. But then of course, I didn't. I knew that coronavirus would eventually come to Pittsburgh. I was reading about it every day in the news and thinking about it, but I just couldn't quite operationalize it in my head at that point. I thought I had time on my side to prepare."

Dr. Bogen has still kept up.

Julia Fraser is a Pittsburgh-based freelance reporter. Her last story for h ran in Issue 2, 2018, and looked at Pittsburgh artists and arts organizations that are continuing the cultural legacy of the city's Hill District neighborhood.

Dr. Debra Bogen assumed the position of Allegheny County Health Department director in March.

Elan Mizrahi

Organizing the local response to a global pandemic and spreading a clear message about coronavirus in an era when misinformation flies across social media were added to her job description. In her first nine months on the job, she has emerged as a recognizable public leader, conducting weekly press briefings, removing her mask, and calmly delivering the latest news about cases, deaths and trends that the latest data reveal, whether good or troubling.

In fact, Dr. Bogen shaped her career around tough public health issues long before she urged Allegheny County residents to social distance and wear masks.

"I was really excited about taking this position for the potential it offered to make progress in fields like maternal and child health, infant mortality, chronic disease, and broader public health," she said.

Elan Mizrahi

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Dr. Debra Bogen, director
Allegheny County Health Department

In her office, Dr. Debra Bogen follows the appropriate pandemic safety protocols that she helped establish as head of the Allegheny County Health Department.

She spent more than two decades as part of the medical community in Pittsburgh, most recently as a doctor and researcher at University of Pittsburgh and UPMC Children's Hospital of Pittsburgh.

Trained as a pediatrician, Dr. Bogen focused much of her work on issues of maternal and child health. She is a founder of the Mid-Atlantic Mothers' Milk Bank, a nonprofit that provides donor breast milk to medically vulnerable infants. Prior to becoming director of the Health Department, she co-directed the early childhood cohort of The Pittsburgh Study, a community-partnered intervention following children from before birth to adulthood over the next two decades.

At the March 4 press conference, she described "a fairly wide lens" through which she saw public health. It foreshadowed the leadership the pandemic would demand: the ability to address the needs of diverse populations and a commitment to using data to guide public health policymaking.

"My lens includes years of experience providing direct clinical care to diverse families—but mostly families impacted by economic and racial disadvantage," Dr. Bogen said. "I bring the lens of a community advocate, particularly as an advocate for issues of maternal and child health. I also bring the lens of a scientist, committed to making policies based on the best evidence available."

The coronavirus required a novel public health approach. The Health Department had to get county residents to act in step as soon as possible, something that isn't in the traditional public health playbook.

"Typically, when we talk about public health, we put the message out in pieces over time," she said. "We can talk about the dangers of smoking over time with research, messaging and public health campaigns. But now, it is an emergency, and we need everyone to get on the same page immediately.

"The entire world has to understand how this virus works, how it spreads, and how it impacts health for us to stay safe. Not everyone watches the 6 o'clock news. People get information in so many different ways."

The Allegheny County Health Department's messaging includes daily alerts via email, text and a variety of social media platforms on the latest COVID-19 case counts, hospitalizations and deaths, as well as updates on the latest orders and guidance from the state and local government. The county's COVID-19 website includes information on how to get tested; updated state and county orders; interactive data visualizations with breakdowns of cases by age, neighborhood and demographics; frequently asked questions; and a page devoted specifically to stopping rumors and misinformation about COVID-19.

The challenges of controlling the public health message are compounded by the challenges of controlling the resilient virus. The county reported no new cases one day in mid-June, a local milestone during the pandemic. More than 330 new cases were reported in a single day less than a month later, setting a record that was later shattered this fall.

"What has really surprised me is how amazingly stubborn this virus is and how quickly it spreads," Dr. Bogen said.

"We've seen this all over the world and here: You're doing great, and you get the cases down, but you just need a few cases in the community and a couple events, and it sparks, and it rages, and then it takes weeks to quiet it down. The virus itself has been incredibly durable."

And this durable virus at the center of the pandemic is also a fickle one.

It has killed nearly 1.6 million people globally and almost 600 people in Allegheny County. But an estimated 40 percent of people who get COVID-19 have no symptoms, according to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention.

"The variability in its health impacts is also surprising," she said. "That is a scary virus."

The pandemic has widened the cracks of inequality and exposed public health infrastructure in Allegheny County and the U.S.

"The pandemic has brought to light many needs in our region—most notably the need to make an all-out effort to eliminate long-standing health disparities," Dr. Bogen said. "That will take all sectors of our society to work together and can't be answered in a few lines."

The pandemic has also underscored the region's capacity to collaborate. Dr. Bogen described how from her earliest days in her new position, people from across all sectors of the community have reached out to offer help and support and kind words of encouragement.

The foundations, the business community, the health sector, universities, community groups and organizations, individual citizens, and local and state government have been working together.

"It has given me a great appreciation for what is possible when people work together, as we have seen to address this pandemic," she said.

As the pandemic rages on, Dr. Bogen believes it is important not to lose sight of other public health issues that have dogged the region long before COVID-19.

"Every day I remind myself that there is life after COVID," she said. "We have to continue the Health Department's work in all areas of public health—including improving air quality in our region, especially in the Mon Valley, eliminating childhood lead exposure, eliminating the disheartening disparity in infant mortality rate, improving access to care, food safety and more.

"We have serious work to do." h