

# Public Health Commissioner Ready for Everyday Challenges

Many Chicagoans know her by sight, thanks to daily Covid-19 briefings **By Delia O'Hara**

**With Chicago's Covid-19 cases waning, Dr. Allison Arwady hopes that the CDPH, with its 600 employees, can give more attention to everyday public health issues like substance abuse, mental health, air quality, and mosquito control.**

**A**LLISON ARWADY, MD, MPH, officially became Chicago's commissioner of public health in January 2020, just in time to meet the Covid-19 crisis head-on. She had been acting commissioner for several months, and chief medical officer since 2015.

Right away, Dr. Arwady says, she decided that "the most important thing was just to be very available and very transparent about what we knew and what we were still learning."

More than 300 public health officials around the country have left their jobs since then—fired, pushed out, stressed out—due to controversies and even harassment over public health measures and messaging put in place to manage the novel coronavirus, but Dr. Arwady is still standing. (She credits Mayor Lori Lightfoot and Illinois Governor J. B. Pritzker for having "co-owned Covid.") Many Chicagoans know her by sight, thanks in large part to the Facebook livestream, "Ask Dr. Arwady," she presented daily, including weekends, at the height of the pandemic (now once or twice a week). And she says she still likes her job, which she notes involves a great deal more than dealing with Covid-19.

Health equity is a major goal. Healthy Chicago 2025, the five-year plan set for release in March 2020, was finally introduced in September of that year. "No matter what health outcome you're looking at, it does not hit people equally," she says. Covid-19 was a stark example of that, causing much more illness and death among the city's Black and Latinx residents.

The vaccination campaign "gave us a chance to put our money where our mouth was," and the Chicago Department of Public Health (CDPH) prioritized getting shots to the hardest-hit communities.


But with Chicago's Covid-19 cases waning, Dr. Arwady hopes that the CDPH, with its 600 employees, can give more attention to everyday public health issues like substance abuse, air quality, and mosquito control. Mental health will receive increased emphasis going forward. The



pandemic "has reinforced for me how critical it is to have a very strong team that feels empowered to make decisions," she says.

The CDPH was flush with funds during the pandemic, and that money made a big difference in terms of outcomes for Chicago residents. Dr. Arwady says she hopes the public has come to understand the importance of investing in public health all the time. "Our work is prevention-based. When we're successful, people don't notice us," she says.

Dr. Arwady grew up in a family of four siblings in Kalamazoo, Michigan, where her father was a newspaper publisher and her mother was a schoolteacher. She thought she might be a science writer but decided after college to go to medical school instead. Catching up on her science requirements, she discovered public health and "fell in love with the field." In her spare time, she sees patients in internal medicine at CommunityHealth, a free clinic, and is a docent with the Chicago Architecture Foundation, leading walking and boat tours of the city.

"It turns out that's one of the most anonymous things I can do in Chicago, because the guests are mostly tourists," she says. 

## Career Highlights

**ALLISON ARWADY, MD, MPH**, obtained a bachelor's degree in history and literature from Harvard University in Cambridge, Massachusetts, a master's degree in public health from the Mailman School of Public Health at Columbia University in New York City, and her medical degree from Yale University Medical School in New Haven, Connecticut, which included a year spent as a CDC research fellow in Botswana. She also served a civic leadership academy fellowship at the University of Chicago. As to her accomplishments, she says, "I'm really proud of the way the Chicago Department of Public Health has come through this pandemic so far."