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ROBERT W. WHITE II RETIRES AFTER 40-YEAR PUBLIC HEALTH CAREER IN NORTH CENTRAL WEST VIRGINIA

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During his more than 40-year career in public health, regional epidemiologist Robert W. White II of the Monongalia County Health Department has dealt with a few emergencies, such as investigating anthrax reports in the aftermath of the Sept. 11, 2001 terrorist attacks and coming into work at midnight recently when West Virginia received its first call about a potential case of Ebola.

The regional epidemiologist for seven counties, White will retire on Oct. 31.

White’s career has encompassed many of the tasks that make up public health. A Fairmont native and resident, White first joined the Marion County Health Department as a sanitarian aide in 1976 after graduating from Fairmont State College with a degree in health education. He transferred to the Monongalia County Health Department in Morgantown in September 1988 and became sanitarian supervisor. Eight years later, he began working as a part-time epidemiologist while maintaining sanitarian duties.

White earned his Master of Public Health degree from West Virginia University in 1999 and became regional epidemiologist for Monongalia, Preston, Marion, Harrison, Taylor, Barbour and Doddridge counties, reviewing infectious disease reports for accuracy and completeness. “If one of the local health departments needs help, I’m a first responder to them,” he said.

When the Ebola scare occurred in the United States three years ago, White organized hospitals and health departments in the region, teaching them how to respond and instructing them on protocols for recognizing, tracking and treating Ebola. He also organized a response to the smallpox prevention campaign that took place after the 2001 terrorist attacks.

“During his tenure, he has witnessed outbreaks of measles, meningitis, pertussis, norovirus and has assisted in development of policy for handling of returned travelers who are at risk for Ebola,” said Dr. Lee B. Smith, county health officer and executive director of the Monongalia County Health Department. “In addition, he routinely works with reporting of Lyme disease and rabies. His contribution to the safety and well-being of our community has been invaluable, and, like most public health work, occurs in the background.”
But White’s work assignments have often been interesting. He remembered the time that a computer mistake put a monkey into the system as having a reportable, food-borne illness. “It was almost impossible to get that deleted,” he said. “It was really funny. That monkey was investigated by public health officials.”

And at times his job was sobering. “We got a call from the medical examiner. A kid had died from meningitis,” he recalled. “That’s really sad. These are the things we try to prevent in public health. We go out and give vaccines and teach people how to do things the right way. What we do is very important.”

White serves as adjunct faculty in health science at Fairmont State University and has guest lectured at WVU, West Liberty University, West Virginia Wesleyan College and the University of Charleston on various health issues. He also served on several advisory boards, including the WVU School of Public Health and the Health Resources & Services Administration (HRSA) Bioterrorism Training and Curriculum Development Program.

White has been recognized during his career, including with an award for pertussis investigations from the West Virginia Department of Health and Human Resources Division of Infectious Disease Epidemiology. He also won a People’s Choice Award two years in a row for investigative techniques at the West Virginia Infectious Disease Seminar in Charleston. In October 2017, he received a Lifetime Achievement in Public Service Award from the Harrison-Clarksburg Board of Health and a Certificate of Recognition from the Monongalia County Board of Health.

“He has been an excellent epidemiologist, which is to say that he is able to analyze causes and patterns of disease, which is a cornerstone of public health,” Smith said. “His knowledge of the people and health problems in our region has been essential in preventing disease and limiting outbreaks.”

White is married to Margaret Howe-White, who just retired as director of nursing from the Harrison County Health Department. “She is, in my estimation, the best public health nurse in the state of West Virginia,” White says.

He also has two daughters, Elizabeth and Natalie, both of whom live in New York.

During a retirement party on Oct. 27, Smith presented White with the Monongalia Board of Health certificate of recognition plaque. Colleagues from around North Central West Virginia gathered to visit with White. “We wish him well in his retirement, but he will be sorely missed,” Smith said.

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