

Remarks by Chancellor Kent Syverud

Delivered on October 4, 2021

Location: Goldstein Alumni & Faculty Center

Remarks: Chancellor’s Medal Award Ceremony, Public Health Team

*The Chancellor was introduced by Vice Chancellor for Strategic Initiatives and Innovation, Mike Haynie.*

Thank you, Mike. Welcome to our recipients and guests. Thank you to the Chancellor’s Office team for organizing this reception.

I want to begin by thanking Mike Haynie for his leadership and work with this team we honor today. I also want to recognize Dean Diane Murphy of Falk College, who has made it possible for our outstanding public health faculty to serve on this team. Thank you both.

This is a happy day. It is my privilege today to present the Chancellor’s Medal for Outstanding Achievement to the Syracuse University Public Health Team. The twelve individuals we honor today are collectively the largest group ever recognized with the Chancellor’s Medal.

The Chancellor’s Medal was first awarded in 1967 as the Centennial Medal on the occasion of Chancellor William Pearson Tolley’s 25th anniversary as chancellor. The Centennial Medal was given to recognize service to higher education and society and was presented in the years 1967-1971. The name of the award was changed to the Chancellor’s Medal in 1972. Since that time, it has been awarded to individuals in honor of their trailblazing and extraordinary contributions to society or the University.

This particular award was announced at our 2021 Commencement ceremony last May. It recognizes the extraordinary contributions to Syracuse University in 2020 and 2021 by the SU Public Health Team.

It has been almost five months since we announced this award. In the interim, Covid has not gone away, nor have the stresses on the individuals we honor today. The pandemic instead is well on its way to becoming an endemic illness, one that we will learn to deal with and live with each day for many years. It not going to end with a bang, but with a drawn out and stressful set of adjustments and sacrifices every day.

And yet. We need to pause today and again reflect about what we learned, and what this team did, to get us to today, a day when our university is amazingly intact and thriving. What this team did at Syracuse is, in my view, truly extraordinary, and merits the Chancellor’s medal as much as any other set of achievements in our history.

When this pandemic hit us early in 2020, there was no blueprint for how to respond. None of us had faced a similar challenge in our lifetimes. Each and every day, this university was confronted with tough decisions, where no choice was free of uncertainties and risks and consequences. The stakes were incredibly high for all of our people. Their lives, their health – both physical and mental, and their families and livelihoods were on the line.

Back then in early 2020, would anyone have predicted that Syracuse University would become a case study for how a team responds to a global pandemic, a leader that wealthier universities would turn to for guidance, including universities with huge and famous public health schools and medical centers? That is what happened in the following months, and this team we honor today is such a key reason why.

This team made recommendations and executed on surveillance testing, clinical testing, wastewater testing, quarantine, isolation, contact tracing and vaccination.

This team navigated through shifting public health guidelines, sifted through scientific studies, and designed new protocols.

This team answered hundreds – if not thousands – of questions from worried faculty, staff, students, and families.

This team has withstood pressures from every direction. There were days when the incoming was mostly friendly fire, and we expected this team to stand up to their friends and colleagues. That, I can testify, is a lonely experience.

In every case and through every situation the pandemic has thrown at us, this team has addressed public health and safety on the Syracuse University campus. They did it with facts, with data and analysis, with compassion and with absolute integrity.

You designed and managed a massive on-campus testing program. You developed and deployed contact tracing protocols and quarantine procedures. You designed and implemented the wastewater surveillance system. And you did all this while ensuring that the University was in compliance with rapidly changing public health guidelines and directives.

Your work has touched every aspect of Syracuse University. The outcomes tell the story.

We were able to be on campus for the 2020-2021 academic year. We did it safely. And, every person on this team has contributed to these outcomes in some way.

There is so much that each of you have given our University. I know that you have sacrificed your own work-life balance, time with your families and personal lives to ensure that the people who make up Syracuse University stayed safe and healthy.

The team includes faculty, staff, and a postdoctoral researcher. It includes a physician, scientists, and public health experts. It includes technology, logistics and project management experts. Most importantly – it includes people who put the greater good, health and safety ahead of any individual interest. In doing so, this team achieved wonders: a healthy, safe, and thriving Syracuse University.

For that I thank you, and I ask all of us to join me in thanking:

* Urvashi Bhattacharya, director of strategic initiatives and project management for the Division of Business, Finance and Administrative Services;
* Kathleen Coughlin, director of health center operations and administration at the Barnes Center;
* A.J. Florkowski, operations program manager with the Institute for Veterans and Military Families (IVMF);
* Adam Hepburn, executive director of operations in the Office of Strategic Initiatives and Innovation;
* Joseph Hernon, former director of emergency management and business continuity planning;
* Pruthvi Kilaru, former program manager in the Department of Public Health in the David B. Falk College of Sport and Human Dynamics;
* Brittany Kmush, assistant professor of public health in Falk College;
* David Larsen, associate professor of public health in the Falk College;
* Madeline Mackowski, lab supervisor in the Office of Strategic Initiatives and Innovation;
* Dr. Karen Nardella, University medical director;
* Mandy Patti, project manager, Enterprise Process Support, Information Technology Services;
* Deepjyoti Singh, postdoctoral researcher, Department of Biology, College of Arts and Sciences.

Syracuse University’s Chancellor’s Medal is an extraordinary honor. You are an extraordinary team. You should take great pride in your individual and collective contributions that have touched every member of the Syracuse University community. Please know how much the University appreciates all that you have done and all that you will do.

Thank you.

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