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## Longtime Environmental Health leader Jay Frerotte retires

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By **ANTHONY CONROY**

Jay Frerotte, who retired as Pitt's assistant vice chancellor of environment health & safety in January, was one of the key people developing the University's response to the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020. But the planning for this worldwide emergency began much earlier in Frerotte's 21-year career at Pitt.

In 2007, Jerome Cochran, the late executive vice chancellor, turned to Frerotte and asked that he begin building the infrastructure for a University-wide pandemic plan. Years later, that effort is one of the defining accomplishments of Frerotte's career.

Molly Stitt-Fischer, who succeeded Frerotte as environmental health and safety director praised his "foresight" in the planning, which helped lay "the foundation for our response to a rapidly changing situation and allowed the University to have an effective management team in place before a pandemic was officially declared."

Even more critical, she said, is that his "public health expertise and extensive knowledge of effectively delivering training, accurate information, and support for all the stakeholders required to maintain critical operations was, and remains, key to preserving the wellness of our entire community."

Frerotte, 62, began his career in Baltimore as a sanitarian at the city's health department. From there, he moved to the Johns Hopkins Hospital to be an environmental sanitarian and later added the roles of safety manager for the hospital and Johns Hopkins University.

"When I came here (in 2002), I had natural reservations because I had been a manager, but I wasn't the EH&S director at Hopkins. So I wondered if I was cut out for it," he said. "But I was from the Pittsburgh area, and I knew what to expect from the people. That proved true, because the people in Pittsburgh are authentic and care about honesty and hard work and doing things the right way. It was nice to come home."

Since his arrival, Frerotte — once described by the Pitt Chronicle as having “a perfect combination of John Wayne confidence and Mr. Rogers sensitivity” — brought credibility and leadership to the role, taking over a department that he was told was “rigid” and “uncooperative.”

Beyond battling those perceptions, Frerotte’s first major challenge at Pitt was overseeing EH&S’s role in the construction of the BST-3 building.

“When I first got here, (BST-3) was just a concept,” he said. “We also received the money for the Pitt Regional Biocontainment Lab. I, along with other Pitt people, went down to Washington to the National Institutes of Health to start planning for that facility. To see that from concept to groundbreaking to completion, I learned a tremendous amount from that.”

Another challenge has been keeping up with his colleagues on the research side.

“Pitt was already a top-tier research institution when I got here, and we’ve just really fortified our position in research nationally,” he said. “We worked really hard to get the EH&S Department be a part of that. Safety’s really an active part of the research enterprise here. We lay eyes on all of the protocols and visit all the labs. But that didn’t just happen. It was a years-long process to get where safety is integrated in every safety application.”

## **‘Like the world had changed’**

After COVID-19 hit, no other issue would test Frerotte’s skills like the new emerging coronavirus.

“I had people come up to me and say, ‘You mean we have a plan for something like this?!’” said Ted Fritz, vice chancellor of public safety and emergency management and Frerotte’s most recent supervisor. “Of course, this was only an emergency plan and that plan had to be further developed, but it sure was nice knowing we had a starting point when COVID-19 hit America.”

Frerotte, Fritz and other members of the Emergency Command Committee worked to keep up with the pace of changing guidance and the necessity of information.

“(Fritz) was giving a daily update to the University leadership every night,” Frerotte said. “That was a big part of our day, where we’d say, ‘OK, what happened today?’ We’d write it all down, we’d update all these statistics, and then it would be released. ... It was a growing network where people were feeding in data, such as how many students were calling Student Health Services who were sick.”

The University recorded its first confirmed case on March 21, 2020, after a student reported symptoms. It didn’t take long for the second, even though by then most students had left campus after the University effectively shut down in-person activities.

“At the time, there were 371 cases in Pennsylvania, with most in Philadelphia,” Frerotte said. After Pitt’s first case was confirmed, “we had several calls about how we were going to control and investigate it. It was a Saturday. Then, at 6:30 that night, I got a call from (Pitt Police Deputy Chief) Holly Lamb that there was another case, a student taken from (a residence hall) to the UPMC Presbyterian hospital emergency department with symptoms.”

The second student had been traveling abroad before returning to campus, Frerotte said.

"So we went from having our first case to, by that night, having someone in the emergency department," he said. "That kind of told us, 'It's here. It's here in Pittsburgh. It's on campus.' That elevated things. It was like the world had changed."

Another challenge was figuring out how to reopen the University to in-person classes and activities. When the students, faculty and staff returned to Oakland after of remote learning and working from home, Pitt resumed on-campus activities — but with a robust roster of new rules and restrictions in place.

"There was a lot of anxiety," Frerotte said of the return to campus. "We'd get questions about social distancing and mask wearing. We were just trying to keep ahead of it. So, as the return began, I gave every department or school a liaison out of the EH&S office — like a go-to person. The liaison from this office would walk through their space as they reopened it and advise on everything with the social distancing and with signage."

John Williams, former director of Pitt's COVID-19 Medical Response Office, said Frerotte brought "inexhaustible energy, unflappable calmness, and a persistent drive to get the job done. He made contributions to every aspect of our efforts."

Frerotte was lauded for helping open mass vaccination clinics — such as the ones held at the Petersen Events Center not long after the vaccinations became available. In addition to organizing the clinics, Frerotte helped get masks and personal protection equipment distributed, and sourced freezers to hold the vaccines.

"Jay is the behind-the-scenes hero who was the connector to university resources that were needed to make those clinics possible," said Melissa McGivney, a pharmacy professor who led Pitt's vaccination efforts. "There was no job too big or too small for Jay to conquer — his goal was always to create the best experience for people coming to Pitt to be vaccinated."

In 2021, the University was asked if it could handle off-campus mass vaccination clinics for two of Pittsburgh's most vulnerable and underserved communities.

"Jay immediately stepped in to lead obtaining all the equipment needed to run a full-scale mass vaccination clinic at the Homewood YMCA and Hill District former Shop 'n Save," said Dr. McGivney. "He worked to design the layout of the vaccination process based on the (Petersen Events Center), secured tables, chairs, pipe and draping for the areas to make the flow as smooth as possible. He secured Pitt Movers and water and snacks from Pitt Eats to be brought to each site and connected with University Police for security and connections with Pittsburgh Police for support of the events."

Added Williams: "He went above and beyond to make sure everyone had what they needed and did so with grace and kindness."

Helping to organize clinics like the one in the Hill District was one of the most rewarding experiences Frerotte had at Pitt, he said.

"It was gratifying because it's an underserved community in a lot of aspects," he said. "The Pitt administration deserves a lot of credit for that — for, a) consenting to do that, and then b) providing the resources to make that happen. It's Pitt giving back to the community in a huge way."

## Building a credible program

After arriving in Oakland, Frerotte was tasked with reinvigorating a department and hiring the most qualified people with expertise in workplace, chemical, biohazard, and animal safety. His establishment of new audit processes and knack at good hiring helped to boost Pitt's safety credentials.

"I have always been impressed with Mr. Frerotte's professionalism; knowledge about laboratory biosafety; and his ability to oversee and coordinate efforts to keep faculty, staff and trainees safe across the University," said Lee Harrison, professor in the Infectious Disease Division and director of the Center for Genomic Epidemiology at the School of Medicine. "Most importantly, Mr. Frerotte has always demonstrated extraordinary passion in his commitment to the health and wellbeing of the University community that goes well beyond his job responsibilities."

He, and those he hired, brought a customer-service approach to how the department handled campus concerns — striking a friendlier, more approachable tone.

"His leadership in the realm of safety is second to none," said Fritz, who said he will miss talking about sports with Frerotte and "being able to bounce off of him some tricky and complicated issues."

"He was able to achieve a drastically lower rate of workplace injuries at Pitt; he was key in developing one of the largest, safest and finest regional biocontainment laboratories at any university in the country. Pitt is a highly respected research institution in part because of its exemplary safety record. Jay's style is not dictatorial, but educational, and his superb staff has adopted it."

Frerotte, who retires as the assistant vice chancellor of EH&S, plans to spend more time playing golf and traveling with his wife of 38 years, Susan, also a Pitt retiree. The two will be heading south for the remainder of winter and visiting with their son and daughter, who are building their own families in Savannah, Ga. Each has a son, and a third grandson is on the way, Frerotte said.

Despite the traveling, Frerotte has no immediate plans to leave Pittsburgh – or Pitt – anytime soon.

"I just re-upped my Pitt season tickets for football," he joked. When not watching Pitt sporting events and Pittsburgh Penguins games, he said, "I'm going to do the things I like to do. I always promised myself that I'd retire when I was eligible, and I've been lucky enough to do that."

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