# Partners in Preparedness and Response:

How Public Health Personnel and First Responders Helped New York City Care for Older Adults During the COVID-19 Pandemic

In Spring 2020, the COVID-19 pandemic posed incredible challenges for 167 nursing homes in New York City (NYC). These challenges included:

- Limited supplies, such as COVID-19 tests and personal protective equipment
- Caring for a population at high risk for COVID-19
- Increased needs of residents
- Increased fatalities
- Staff shortages

Staff shortages have serious implications for nursing home residents, as many residents have complex health issues that require 24/7 care. Without enough trained staff to prepare medications and perform therapies, residents are at greater risk for negative health outcomes. To meet residents' needs and alleviate staff shortages, nursing homes had to rapidly increase their staff through "surge staffing." However, this was challenging due to the demand for staff at other health care locations, including hospitals and COVID-19 testing sites. Between April and September 2020, 1,272 surge staff helped support health care facilities' COVID-19 response in NYC.

In response to the challenges posed by COVID-19, the NYC Department of Health and Mental Hygiene (NYC Health Department) established the Long-term Care Taskforce.
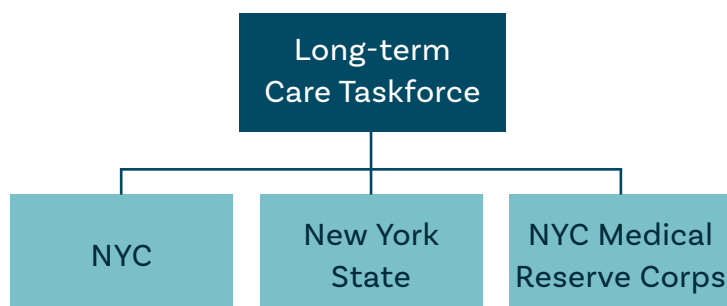
The taskforce helped nursing homes:

- ✓ Recruit qualified staff
- ✓ Connect staff to health care facilities
- ✓ Onboard staff into facilities' workforces

In Summer 2020, the City shifted its focus to addressing nursing home staffing issues, which included creating the Surge Staffing Program. The program helped health care facilities get enough staff to meet their operational needs. For example, nursing homes were connected to temporary health care staff from across the U.S. at no cost. Together with NYC Emergency Management (NYCEM), the NYC Health Department helped the program:

- ✓ Manage staffing contracts
- ✓ Monitor staffing agency performance
- ✓ Assess staffing needs at nursing homes
- ✓ Approve and assign staff to work at nursing homes

By the end of Summer 2020, the Surge Staffing Program filled 1,117 open positions in health care facilities in NYC. Staff traveled from 49 states to provide care, and 15% of the total number of staff members were from New York State.

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       Care Taskforce
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  NYC   New York   NYC Medical
         State    Reserve Corps
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NYC
Health

NYCEM also created a group purchasing organization (GPO) to help health care facilities contract with approved staffing agencies to meet their specific staffing needs. By Spring 2021, at least 62 GPO contracts were executed by health care facilities in NYC. The GPO offered facilities key benefits, such as:

- ✔ Maintaining competitive pay for staff and preventing higher costs for small facilities

- ✔ Requiring staff contracts to be flexible

- ✔ Allowing them to work directly with staffing agencies to find staff who met their requirements

Health care facilities also faced difficulty onboarding staff. In response, the NYC Health Department and Incident Management Solutions designed a Surge Staffing Technical Assistance Program to help facilities:

- ✔ Maintain enough staff in case of absences or COVID-19 transmission among residents

- ✔ Develop surge staffing plans

- ✔ Communicate with staffing agencies

- ✔ Verify staff certification and licensure

- ✔ Set up time, leave and onboarding processes for hundreds of new surge staff

The NYC Health Department's operational capabilities and strong relationships with health care partners, developed over years of preparing for emergencies, were essential to successful collaboration during the City's pandemic response. As the NYC Health Department adapts to ongoing COVID-19 transmission and new health threats, its partnership with a ready and resilient health care system is essential in protecting New Yorkers during future emergencies.

Investments from the Administration for Strategic Preparedness and Response's Hospital Preparedness Program have been critical in fostering collaboration among public health personnel, health care sectors and first responders. Learn more at **aspr.hhs.gov/healthcarereadiness/hpp**.

For more information, visit **nyc.gov/health/HospitalReady** or **nyc.gov/health/mrc**.