



**NEW YORK CITY DEPARTMENT OF
HEALTH AND MENTAL HYGIENE**
Dave A. Chokshi, MD, MSc
Commissioner

Testimony

of

**Dave A. Chokshi, MD, MSc
Commissioner
New York City Department of Health and Mental Hygiene**

Before the

New York City Council

Committee on Health and Subcommittee on COVID-19 Recovery

on

COVID-19: Looking Ahead

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Virtually
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Good morning Chairs Schulman and Moya, and members of the committees. I am Dr. Dave Chokshi, 43rd Commissioner of the New York City Department of Health and Mental Hygiene. I am joined today by my colleague Dr. Ashwin Vasani, Senior Public Health Advisor to the Mayor and the City's incoming Health Commissioner. Thank you for the opportunity to testify today and provide an update on the City's COVID-19 work.

We are looking forward to working with your committees, as we strive to promote and protect the health of New Yorkers and advance health equity in New York City together.

Looking back

To say this has been a challenging two years would be an understatement. And I'd like to take a moment to acknowledge the collective trauma we have all experienced from this pandemic. This city has lost lives, livelihoods, and with each new wave – some have lost hope. Yet we are once again on the other side of a wave, this one due to the omicron variant, and there is a new horizon ahead, and new cause for hope. We are seeing an average of less than 800 cases per day, as compared to an average of over 40,000 at the peak of the omicron surge. And our other indicators – such as hospitalizations and deaths – continue to decline. We must always remember that these data aren't just numbers – these are people. Our family, friends, neighbors.

In December, Mayor Adams announced a six-pillared plan to combat the winter surge due to omicron: further increase vaccination rates; support hospitals and congregate settings; rapidly increase access to COVID-19 testing; slow the spread, for instance through distribution and promotion of high-quality masks; scale up equitable access to treatment; and reopen schools with the Stay Safe, Stay Open strategy. I am proud to say that we have executed on each of these pillars — and this work was instrumental to the continued decrease in COVID-19 indicators, saving lives, even as our economy continues to reopen.

I wish I could definitively say the worst is over. I know you're tired. I'm tired too. Right now we need New Yorkers to stay vigilant and keep taking certain precautions to help protect our communities, and particularly the most vulnerable New Yorkers.

Time and time again during this pandemic, New Yorkers have done what's needed to slow transmission, even when it was incredibly hard and often painful. In spring 2020, this looked like “staying home” and putting all non-essential activities on pause; during subsequent waves, this meant hybrid school and work, dining only outdoors, getting fully vaccinated in order to partake in certain indoor activities, and delaying or reshaping major life and family moments such as weddings and funerals. But we've taken these actions to protect ourselves and others – particularly those who could not work or learn remotely, those youngest New Yorkers who are still unable to get vaccinated, and those who are immunocompromised and thus at high risk for hospitalization and death. As the science evolved, so have we. We've been flexible and thoughtful, and imaginative in how our city can function under great duress. And this shows that we collectively share some core principles – that we are resilient, that we care about our families, we look out for our communities, and we believe in science.

And though there is still more to be done, I'd like to take a moment to acknowledge all we've accomplished. Through our place-based efforts in communities, our staff and community partners have reached millions of New Yorkers with COVID prevention information and resources via more than 24,000 outreach events and knocked on over 1.7 million doors. Our

community partners are a major reason that over 60% of first and single vaccine doses have been administered to Black and Latino New Yorkers since July 2021.

This work is bolstered by members of our Public Health Corps – a new partnership between the Health Department and NYC Health + Hospitals (H+H) to expand and strengthen our community-based public health workforce and infrastructure and promote health equity for the communities hit hardest by the COVID-19 pandemic. Through the H+H Test & Trace Corps, millions of tests have been conducted, including those in schools, and self-test kits have been distributed on the ground in the community. And the Health Department has worked with congregate care settings, schools, and businesses to address clusters of cases and provide tools to help them control the spread of COVID-19 during surges, such as those due to delta and omicron, and in times of lower transmission as well.

And thanks to our cross-agency, health care provider, and community partner efforts, about 6.4 million New Yorkers are fully vaccinated as of today, including nearly 87% of all adults. If you had told me a year ago that we would achieve that level of vaccination, I would have said that it was my greatest hope, but that it would be extraordinarily difficult. Now, with almost 17 million total doses administered — including over 3.6 million vaccinations administered through our City-run site and mobile infrastructure — I think of the relief this protection has brought to so many New York families, including my own, and am so grateful. Our historic vaccination campaign has saved tens of thousands of lives and prevented even more hospitalizations. This is a monumental achievement for public health and for our City.

Over the past 2 years, we have worked hand-in-hand with our sister agencies, elected officials like yourselves, community and faith groups, and business, healthcare, and social service leaders to break down silos and reimagine government and private sector partnerships, all with a shared goal – to save lives, prevent suffering, and ensure equity for our fellow New Yorkers.

Looking ahead

But we have more to do. Even as we contend with COVID-19 as a more manageable risk, public health protections will remain critically important – particularly for those who are most vulnerable. Put another way: “living with COVID” cannot mean ignoring that too many continue to die from the virus. We need all New Yorkers to get their booster shots to stay “up to date” with their vaccine regimen. This is how we get ahead of future variants of concern and prevent additional hospitalizations and deaths. We also need to urgently increase vaccination rates among our oldest and youngest eligible New Yorkers. Children ages 5-12 are only 41% vaccinated, as compared to the overall rate of 77%. We have worked extensively to increase these rates – but we know that vaccine confidence remains low in many communities, and misinformation is rampant. We are working to do more to combat misinformation and build trust through our partners, through media campaigns, through community health care providers and through elected officials like all of you. We need your help encouraging New Yorkers – particularly those with children or older family members– to get everyone in their household vaccinated now. As a reminder, people can go to nyc.gov/vaccinefinder or call 877-VAX-4NYC to find a vaccine. And all New Yorkers, especially parents with questions or concerns, should call 212-COVID19 to talk to a nurse or public health expert about the vaccines. And in the spirit of “meeting people where they are” — our teams are on the ground in the community and

making calls to New Yorkers to help them make appointments, encourage sign up for the in-home vaccination program, and educate people about vaccines.

In addition to increasing vaccination rates and ensuring all New Yorkers stay “up to date” with booster shots, we want to make sure that people are aware and able to access new treatment options. These new treatments help people feel better faster – and also keep people out of the hospital. But I want to be clear – treatment is not a replacement for vaccination. We still need New Yorkers to get vaccinated to prevent transmission and the worst outcomes of COVID-19, but now they have options for treatment if they do contract the virus. One option is monoclonal antibody treatment, which is available to people aged 12 and older who test positive, have mild or moderate symptoms for 10 days or less, and are at high risk as well. The second, newer, treatment option is antiviral pills. There are two pills currently authorized and available to people who test positive, have mild to moderate symptoms for 5 days or less, and are at high risk for severe illness. Through a City partnership with Alto pharmacy, these pills will be delivered same-day for free to your door. As with so much else during our COVID response, we’ve taken an equity-centered approach here. In addition to working with providers of color and Federally Qualified Health Centers to ensure they are aware of and utilizing this service, the deployment of same-day, home delivery eliminates barriers such as not living near a pharmacy or having time after work to go pick up the prescription and ensures people in communities most at risk for severe illness from COVID-19 have access to this vital medication. And we’ve heard rave reviews about the service – for instance, one patient who is also undergoing treatment for cancer was grateful the medicine came to her door – she wasn’t feeling well and didn’t have anyone to go to a pharmacy on her behalf.

Treatment works best the sooner you begin so it is important to get tested right away if you have symptoms or were recently exposed. If you test positive for COVID-19, talk to your provider about treatment options. If you don’t have a provider, you can speak to an H+H provider by going to [expresscare.nyc](https://www.expresscare.nyc) or by calling 212-COVID19.

And of course, I would be remiss if I did not mention the concurrent, “parallel pandemics” that we continue to address. In addition to COVID-19, this City is experiencing multiple health crises, including those related to mental health, chronic disease, drug overdoses, racism, and loneliness and social isolation. I am proud to say that even with the demands of COVID response, the City and the Health Department have been undertaking work to address these parallel pandemics. In October 2021, the NYC Board of Health issued a resolution on racism as a public health crisis, directing the Health Department to develop and implement concrete priorities for a racially just recovery from COVID-19, as well as other actions for the short and long term. For example, our Coalition to End Racism in Clinical Algorithms tackles the pernicious ways that racism affects the quality of health care for people of color. Additionally, in November, we announced that the first publicly recognized Overdose Prevention Center (OPC) services in the nation have commenced in New York City. In the short time that our partner providers have been operating the OPCs, over 100 overdoses have been averted. Mayor Adams has already taken bold steps to address chronic disease through access to healthy food and expanding lifestyle medicine services – driving home the importance of an upstream, prevention-focused approach where government helps make the healthy choice the easy choice. This is a very high level overview, and we look forward to having the opportunity to talk more about

these efforts in the future — but hopefully it gives a sense of the immense breadth of our work and the urgency, conviction, and innovative spirit with which we must take on these challenges.

This is a pivotal moment for public health, and this pandemic has highlighted the fact that health is not just about what happens in a hospital or doctor's office. We've learned time and time again that we need healthy, resilient communities before crises like COVID-19 strike, so we can respond, heal, and recover as quickly as possible. The holistic view of health that we, the Health Department, take across all of our work, is fundamental to ensuring that all neighborhoods in New York City are able to not just recover from this pandemic, but also thrive.

Finally, as I've said before, there is no economic recovery without investment in public health. We must remember that even when the painful memories of shuttered businesses and schools start to fade. And the time is now for massive and durable investment in our public health infrastructure — just as we think about investment in roads and bridges — at all levels of government to bring about a just recovery for all New Yorkers.

Again, the Department looks forward to partnering with all of you on this work as we forge a healthy and equitable path forward. Dr. Vasani and I are happy to take questions.