



**Testimony**

of

**Ashwin Vasani M.D., PhD,  
Commissioner**

**New York City Department of Health and Mental Hygiene**

Before the

**New York City Council  
Committee of the Whole**

on

**Examining the City's Response and Delivery of Services to Migrants**

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Thank you, Speaker Adams, and Chairs Schulman, Narcisse, and Lee, for the opportunity to testify today at this important hearing. I am Dr. Ashwin Vasani, the Commissioner of the New York City Department of Health and Mental Hygiene. Today I will speak to some of the Health Department's work to support our city's newest community members, people coming to our great city at a moment of extreme need and vulnerability. But before doing so, it is important to acknowledge that the health needs of people seeking asylum in New York are many. Some have immediate health care needs that are responded to at points of entry and our Navigation Center, many require connection to care to manage chronic conditions, reproductive and maternal healthcare, routine screenings, vaccinations, and mental health needs. As a city we are responding to integrate these new community members into the existing healthcare system while also providing targeted care and support in certain situations. This requires a multi-layer response.

The Health Department has been actively involved in the coordinated citywide efforts of the last few months, collaborating with, and providing public health guidance and services to our sibling city agencies, to health care and social service providers, and directly to people recently arrived from the border. In keeping with our role as the public health authority of the city, in early September we published what we call a [Dear Colleague letter](#), which is official public health guidance, distributed to tens of thousands of health care providers across the city, containing an appeal, information, and links to educational resources to provide trauma-informed, linguistically- and culturally responsive, compassionate care to people recently arrived from the border with a series of clinical, social, and contextual considerations. It is an important resource for the large network of healthcare partners who may encounter a newly arrived person from the border. I urge you to continue to help us disseminate the information contained in this letter.

Health Department staff have been intimately involved in the operations of the Asylum Seeker Resource Navigation Center. Members of our mental health Resilience and Emotional Support Teams (REST) have been onsite at the Navigation Center every day since it opened, providing psychological first aid and crisis counseling. To date, Health Department mental health professionals who specialize in emergency response have engaged more than 422 community members at the Navigation Center, providing psychological first aid to 300 community members and crisis counseling to more than 120. Our teams have also been a vital presence for other City,

nonprofit, and volunteer staff at the Navigation Center, providing psychological first aid to more than 100 colleagues as well as training to all Navigation Center staff on managing the psychological environment of the Center and engaging in self-care.

The Health Department's Office of Health Insurance Services is also onsite at the Navigation Center providing in-language health insurance enrollment services and health access information to community members. This is in addition to the services they provide by phone and at our Neighborhood Health Action Centers and other community locations around the City. This work is vital, especially when clients do not qualify for comprehensive coverage, because it helps orient people into the health system. Although we see in many cases that recently arrived New Yorkers are in fact eligible for full health insurance, at least temporarily until their immigration status is determined by a court, oftentimes it is this conversation with one of our enrollers that helps new community members identify more care and financial protection options.

We are also working to ensure that community members who use Navigation Center services are set up with a primary care home at a conveniently located community clinic as part of their visit, regardless of whether they have health insurance. While onsite services at the Navigation Center have proven vital for many, we also want to be sure that new New Yorkers have the fastest possible access to ongoing care with a pediatrician or other primary care provider to help manage their longer-term health. We are immensely grateful for the collaboration of Health + Hospitals in this endeavor as well as the many other community health centers, federally qualified health centers, and other providers who have stepped up to welcome our newest neighbors and provide them with timely and ongoing access to the health services they need.

As this situation has evolved, our staff have consistently answered the call to find additional ways to support recently arrived migrants, employing both novel and tried-and-true methods of outreach and engagement to meet people where they are, and where they live. A particularly successful approach I want to highlight today is the work that we are doing in partnership with the Department of Homeless Services – to support families with young children residing in DHS shelters. This work stems from longstanding collaborations between the Health Department and DHS to refer families living in shelter to existing Health Department programs such as the Nurse-Family Partnership for first-time pregnant people, the Newborn Home Visiting Program for birthing parents, and the Early Intervention Program for developmental work with young

children up to three years of age. We have recently extended to evening and weekend visits with recently arrived families with young children or pregnant people living in sanctuary shelters. To date, these teams have visited more than 650 newly arrived families in shelters to link them to city programs and evaluate their health-related needs such as primary care, OB/GYN care, dental care, and mental health care. As of December 15<sup>th</sup>, our teams have made more than 1712 appointments to date for these families, ensuring that they are linked to service systems that help young families thrive.

In addition to creating new pathways and models of care to meet a challenging set of circumstances, we are also leaning into our existing community-oriented infrastructure available to all New Yorkers regardless of immigration status, including the many services available at our Neighborhood Health Action Centers such as health and wellness classes, workshops, referrals to other neighborhood resources, and connections to primary, mental health, and dental care. Overtime, as our new neighbors integrate into our communities, this infrastructure will require support. New York City is lucky to have a strong network of safety-net providers, and this is a reminder of the importance of federal investment for these systems.

As part of routine surveillance, when cases of communicable diseases are reported from congregate settings, we conduct case and contact investigations and provide guidance on control measures. To prevent transmission of vaccine preventable diseases, the Health Department is supporting vaccination efforts at HERRC and DHS shelters through provision of vaccine, linkages to vaccinating providers, and staffing to do vaccine education and promotion. We are also working closely through the Office of School Health to ensure required immunizations are completed.

I'd like to close by reiterating the importance of taking a trauma-informed approach to working with new community members who have demonstrated extraordinary resilience to arrive in our city and often do so carrying traumatic pre-migration experiences, poor conditions at the border, and pre-existing social and mental health conditions. These realities inform the work we do at the Health Department every day and we are committed to continuing to find ways to support our newest neighbors. The mental health needs of these new New Yorkers will continue to be centered in our response.

Thank you for the opportunity to testify today and I look forward to our conversation.