



**NEW YORK CITY DEPARTMENT OF
HEALTH AND MENTAL HYGIENE**
Ashwin Vasani, MD, PhD
Commissioner

Testimony

of

**Ashwin Vasani, MD, PhD
Commissioner**

New York City Department of Health and Mental Hygiene

before the

New York City Council

**Committee on Health
Committee on Hospitals**

Subcommittee on COVID Recovery and Resiliency

on

Oversight - NYC's Response to the Post-Holiday Surge in COVID-19.

February 14, 2023
City Council Chambers
New York, New York

Good afternoon, Chairs Schulman, Narcisse and Moya, and members of the Health and Hospitals Committees and the Subcommittee on COVID-19 Recovery and Resiliency. I am Dr. Ashwin Vasani, Health Commissioner for the City of New York. I am joined today by my colleague Dr. Celia Quinn, Deputy Commissioner of Disease Control, who will be supporting me in answering your questions. Thank you for the opportunity to provide an overview of COVID-19 in New York City, including where we are in the City's response and what may lie ahead.

This past November, I testified before you about the current state of COVID-19 in New York City, including the Health Department's strategic plan to make our organization more response ready and prepared for pressing health issues, whether chronic or emergent. This plan includes strengthening the bridge between healthcare and public health and between prevention and care, improving our data infrastructure, and investing in our workforce. For COVID-19, this means that we are shifting to a more targeted approach, focusing on people at highest risk for severe COVID-19 outcomes due to age, underlying medical condition, or setting. And we have started to see the success of these efforts—which will continue in the months and years ahead.

Last time, we also discussed how the City was preparing for the winter respiratory season. I am glad to report today that we have weathered the "tridemic" of COVID-19, influenza, and RSV, with rates of all three viruses in decline. As you can see in the Appendix to my testimony – positive test results for both flu and RSV are well within the range that we have seen previously for this time of year. And while COVID-19 transmission remains high, we are at the lowest rate since March 2022 and reported cases and hospitalizations have been steadily in decline since early January – thankfully, we saw nowhere near the spike in COVID-19 cases that we experienced last winter.

We are still in – what we call – respiratory virus season and remain vigilant to ensure that New Yorkers have the tools they need to stay healthy and safe. In December, when COVID-19, influenza, and RSV cases were high, I issued an advisory strongly recommending masking in public indoor settings and crowded outdoor settings—and reemphasizing the importance of taking proven precautions such as vaccination, testing, hand hygiene, and staying home when sick. This remains my guidance to all New Yorkers today. The City also put out a Winter Plan outlining that we were focused on (1) tracking COVID-19 and other respiratory viruses, (2) making testing, treatment, masks, and vaccines available, and (3) protecting New Yorkers at highest risk.

We continue to partner with community-based organizations to engage community members at in-person events and virtual community conversations, make vaccine and testing referrals, distribute educational literature, and provide masks and at-home test kits. And there are additional resources that are offered by our partners at NYC Health + Hospitals, including Test and Treat. However, our success this winter would not have been possible without the assistance of individual New Yorkers, who, as we move forward from emergency response, are integrating infection prevention practices into their daily lives.

To date, over 6.7 million New York City residents have completed their primary vaccination series, and nearly 2 million have received the bivalent booster. These numbers are impressive, but we need many more people to be vaccinated – specifically with the bivalent booster – to continue our progress out of the emergency phase of the pandemic. There are some successes to be acknowledged – including that we have significantly narrowed the gap in primary series vaccination coverage by race. And we have made gains in vaccinating younger New Yorkers, especially children ages 13 to 17 years old – an estimated 92% of whom have received one dose and 82% of whom are fully vaccinated. I urge

every New Yorker who has not been vaccinated or received an updated booster dose to do so. This includes vaccinating your young children to prevent severe outcomes from infection.

Even as at-home testing has become the go-to method for COVID-19 testing, our ongoing routine surveillance enables us to understand the state of COVID-19 transmission in our city. We continue daily monitoring of COVID-19 activity through our robust surveillance system, which includes monitoring case reports, syndromic data, and hospital capacity; sequencing specimens to estimate the prevalence of variants of concern; and wastewater testing. The City also maintains monitoring in our schools to ensure they remain safe and open. This includes tracking COVID-19 case rates among students and staff, assisting with notifications following a school exposure, and supporting principals through the Office of School Health.

We are an organization that stays grounded in the data and are nimble and ready to respond to changing circumstances. COVID-19 continues to mutate, and new variants regularly emerge. Currently, the dominant variant in New York City is XBB.1.5. While this variant is very infectious, we are grateful that it does not appear to cause more serious disease and that COVID-19 vaccines, including the new updated booster, continue to provide excellent protection against severe disease.

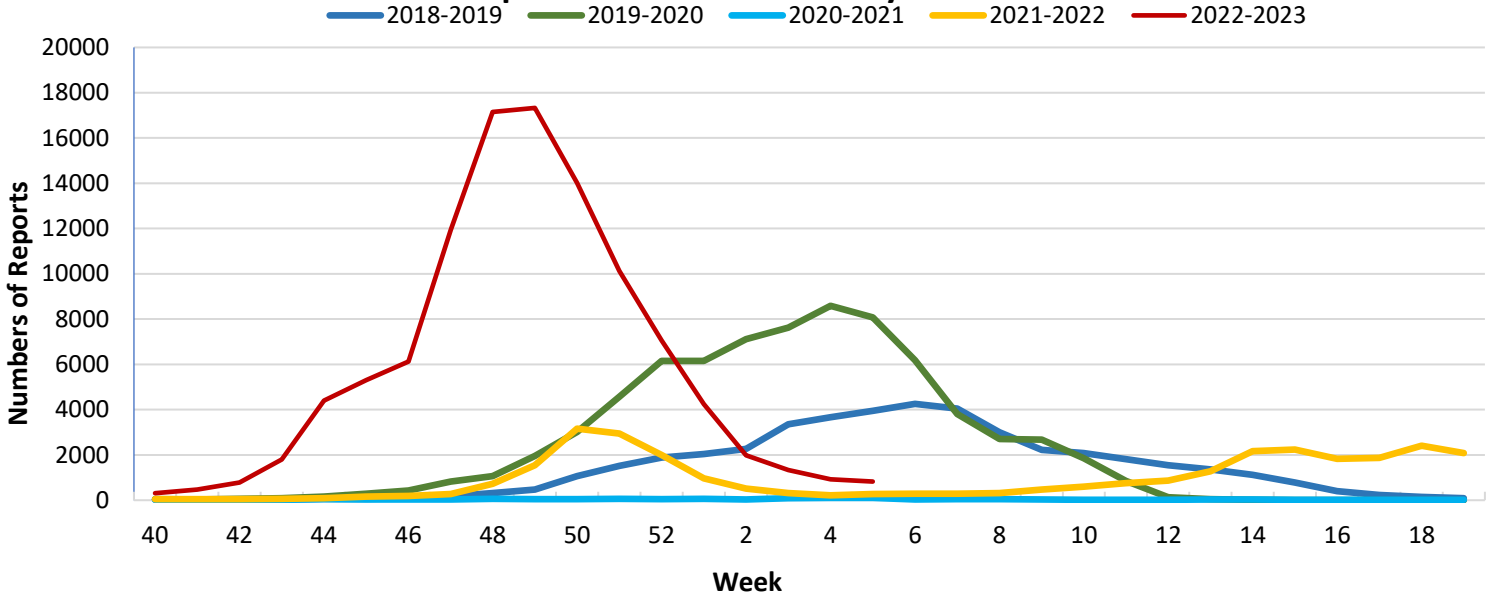
Shifting to what is on the horizon, President Biden recently announced that the federal government will end the public health and national emergency declarations on May 11, 2023. We knew this day would come—maintaining a public health emergency for over three years is unprecedented. The Department is preparing with our sister agencies and State and Federal partners. While we work to better understand the impacts of the end of the emergency declarations, and related plans to commercialize COVID-19 vaccines and treatment, I know that the Health Department, our partners at Health + Hospitals, and the many other safety net health care providers in New York City will make sure that all New Yorkers have access to appropriate and affordable care. We are also comforted by the CDC's message of commitment to maintaining national reporting of vaccine data and ensuring that vaccines and treatments will continue to be available. There is more to come on what this will mean going forward and we will continue to communicate with New Yorkers on where they can get access to COVID-19 tests, treatment, and vaccines.

Before I close, I would like to remind all New Yorkers that COVID-19 is still here and is a part of our new reality; however, I also want to reassure everyone that this is a reality for which we now have proven strategies to manage.

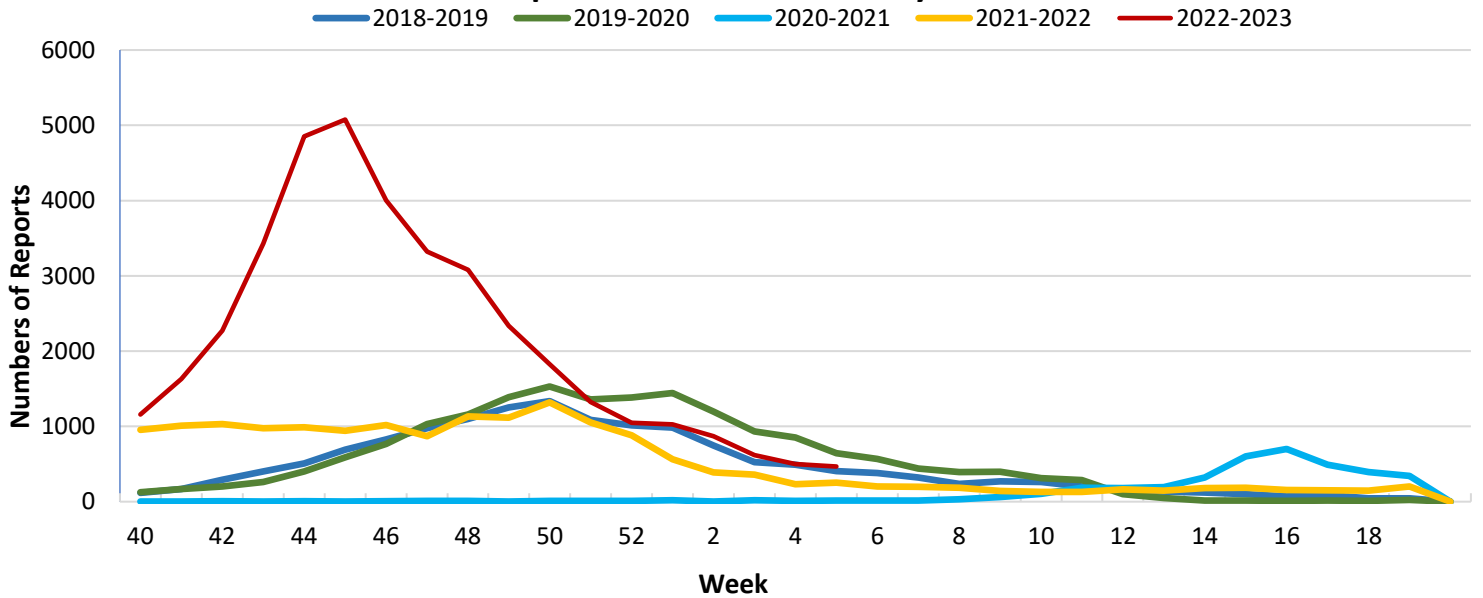
Thank you for allowing me to share our work. I remain, as always, incredibly grateful for our partnership, and for the support City Council has given us throughout the COVID-19 response. We look forward to continuing to work collaboratively to protect the health of all New Yorkers. I look forward to answering your questions.

Appendix

Influenza Positive Laboratory Results Reported to NYC DOHMH by season

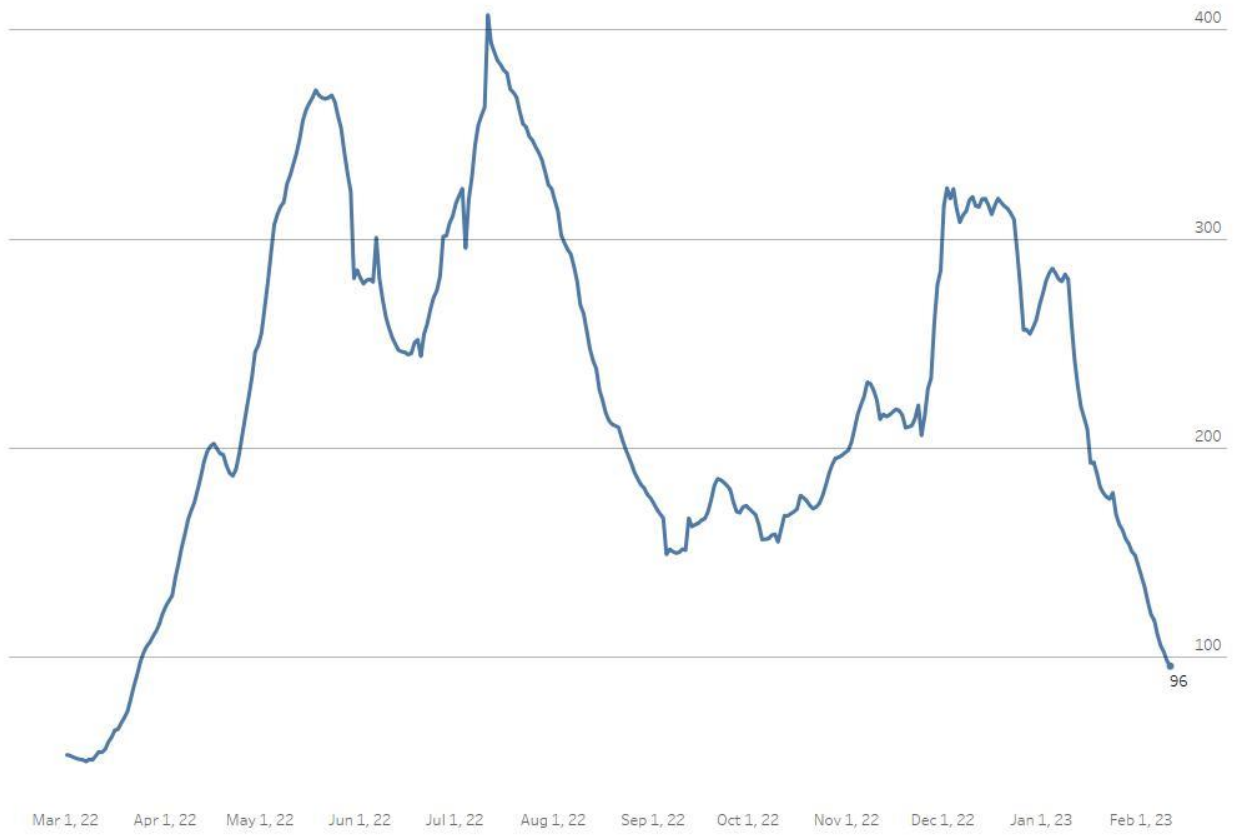


RSV Positive Laboratory Results Reported to NYC DOHMH by season



Citywide Transmission Levels, New York City

7-day average rate of confirmed and probable COVID cases per 100,000 people



Data Source: NYC DOHMH as of 02/13/2023