



Testimony

of

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before the

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Good morning, Chair Velázquez and members of the committee. I am Ricky Wong, Assistant Commissioner for the Bureau of Government Affairs at the New York City Department of Health and Mental Hygiene (the Health Department). On behalf of Commissioner Vasan, thank you for the opportunity to testify today on Introduction 995, which would require the Health Department to create a public awareness campaign on the dangers of purchasing cannabis or cannabis products from unlicensed cannabis retailers. I'm grateful for the opportunity to speak about this legislation. First, I wanted to provide some background on the agency's thinking on this issue since New York State legalized consumption and possession of up to three ounces of cannabis for adults ages 21 and over in 2021.

The Health Department is tasked with protecting the health and safety of all New Yorkers, which includes the provision of evidence-based information and resources regarding recreational drug use. The Health Department implemented a multi-pronged strategy to educate providers and the public—including minors and young adults—on the health considerations of cannabis use and legalization. We established an agency workgroup in order to organize cannabis work and published four public education fact sheets and a general information postcard covering the following topics: Safer use, Health Effects, Legal Use, and Know Your Rights. These materials are available in multiple languages online and in print and have been distributed to community organizations and at community events. We are currently in the early stages of developing a public education pamphlet specifically targeted towards youth.

Communicating potential health impacts of substance use is an important part of our mission. Like any substance, cannabis can have associated health risks and benefits. Health risks linked to cannabis include higher risk of motor vehicle crashes, earlier onset of psychotic disorders for those already at risk; more frequent breathing and coughing symptoms, especially when smoking or vaping cannabis; vaping-related lung injuries; and cannabis use during pregnancy can have harmful effects on a baby's development.

Restrictive drug policies have limited research on how cannabis affects health, but existing research shows that cannabis can be helpful for some conditions, including chronic pain in adults; chemotherapy-induced nausea and specific Multiple Sclerosis symptoms. The Health Department is still learning more about the long-term effects of cannabis and will continue to educate the public as we learn.

Now I want to speak about unlicensed cannabis retailers, and synthetic cannabinoids.

Sale of adult recreational cannabis is currently legal only through the New York State Office of Cannabis Management licensed Conditional Adult Use Retail Dispensaries. The Health Department is aware of the increasing presence of unlicensed cannabis retailers as the State continues to implement retail licensing. Products sold in unlicensed retailers have not undergone state-regulated quality and safety controls.

The Health Department is aware of the risks of using unregulated products and we agree with the Council that more education is needed. The Health Department uses population-level data and surveys to identify health trends across the city. To date, we have not seen an increase in adverse health outcomes associated with using products purchased at unlicensed cannabis retailer nor an increase in emergency department visits associated with cannabis use. Even though we are not seeing negative effects in our data, we still want New Yorkers who chose to consume cannabis to be sure that it is safe for use, and not a synthetic cannabinoid product. I want to take some time to explain what a synthetic cannabinoid product is.

Synthetic cannabinoids are not cannabis and have different use patterns and health effects than cannabis. They consist of leaves sprayed with chemicals that are either smoked or ingested. Synthetic cannabinoids contain a dangerous mix of chemicals sprayed on to plant material, making its effects unpredictable. Health effects can include erratic behavior, severe anxiety, paranoia, confusion, hallucinations, nausea, vomiting, rapid heart rate, and seizures. In New York State, it is illegal to possess, sell, offer to sell, or manufacture synthetic cannabinoids. Currently, our data shows that emergency department-related visits involving synthetic cannabinoids make up a very small proportion of drug-related emergency department visits overall and decreased slightly between 2021 and 2022.

We encourage members of the public who wish to purchase cannabis to purchase it from OCM licensed facilities to ensure it has gone through the proper regulatory process and is deemed safe for use.

I will now turn to the proposed Introduction 995. The Health Department supports the intent of this legislation to raise awareness, particularly among youth, of the health risks associated with cannabis, including cannabis purchased at unlicensed retailers, and synthetic cannabinoids. We look forward to working with Council to meet the need for youth-focused communications about cannabis-related health risks while ensuring that these efforts complement existing education efforts already underway by the Health Department and OCM.

The Health Department remains committed to providing evidence-based, accessible information regarding cannabis and synthetic cannabinoid use; and we are happy to discuss with Council how we can best support the intention of this legislation.

Thank you for the opportunity to testify here today. I would be happy to answer any questions.