



**NEW YORK CITY DEPARTMENT OF
HEALTH AND MENTAL HYGIENE**

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Commissioner

Testimony

of

Ashwin Vasan, MD, PhD

Commissioner

New York City Department of Health and Mental Hygiene

before the

New York City Council

Committee on Health, Committee on Aging, and Committee on Hospitals

on

Older Adults Living with HIV

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Good morning, Chairs Schulman, Hudson, and Narcisse, and members of the committees. I am Dr. Ashwin Vasani, Commissioner of the New York City Department of Health and Mental Hygiene. I am joined by Dr. Celia Quinn, Deputy Commissioner for Disease Control, who will speak later on the oversight topic – older adults living with HIV and the related legislation.

Thanks to advancements in HIV screening, treatment, and prevention, as well as institutional and community efforts to reach the last mile and address inequities, we have a clear opportunity, in our lifetimes, to end the HIV epidemic in New York City. Dr. Quinn will speak to our work in this regard. Before the advent of and widespread access to HIV medications, HIV/AIDS was a leading cause of death in New York City until the early 2000s. The dramatic gains in life expectancy experienced in the first decade of this century are in part due to the introduction of antiretroviral therapy. I began my career working to ensure access to HIV treatment around the world to address this leading cause of preventable death. And so I am very glad as well, and I want to thank Chair Schulman, for also providing an opportunity to testify today on HealthyNYC, the City's campaign to improve life expectancy and create a healthier city for all.

The health of New Yorkers is at a major inflection point. As we emerge from the COVID-19 pandemic, New Yorkers are, on average, sicker and dying too soon. Life expectancy — the average number of years a person can expect to live from the time of their birth — dropped more than four-and-a-half years, from 82.6 years in 2019, its highest point ever, to 78 years in 2020. Underneath these overall data, we also see stunning inequities, reflecting that our health challenges are not experienced equally. Black New Yorkers, starting from the lowest baseline life expectancy in 2019 of 77 years, lost 5.5 years in 2020, and Latino New Yorkers, 6 years. This represents the biggest and fastest drop in lifespan in a century.

In 2021, life expectancy rebounded slightly to 80.7 years, accounting for the lessening impact of COVID-19 due to advances in treatment and our vaccination and prevention efforts. However, we are still two years behind in lifespan from where we were in 2019. And there should be no expectation that we will return to our previous baseline or meet our common expectation of healthier, longer lives, without intentional action.

Two weeks ago, Chair Schulman joined myself and the Mayor as we launched HealthyNYC, the City's population health agenda to improve life expectancy and create a healthier city for all. HealthyNYC sets, as a matter of civic planning and civic expectation, that all New Yorkers, year after year, should expect to live healthier and longer in our great city. And it is a plan that demonstrates how the City of New York is stepping up to meet this challenge, along with partners across sectors. We know health is a choice, but it's not just an individual choice; it's an institutional choice and a democratic choice. And that's why we have government, to tackle the problems too big or too complex for us to address on our own.

HealthyNYC sets clear mortality reduction goals to reduce the greatest drivers of overall risk and death: premature death below age 65, which predominantly impacts Black and Latino New Yorkers; excess deaths, which predominantly impact vulnerable groups like older New Yorkers,

disabled people, and people with underlying health conditions or living in vulnerable settings; and the most extreme racial inequities, including unacceptable rates of Black maternal mortality.

The HealthyNYC goals set numeric targets for reducing deaths from chronic and diet-related diseases, screen-able cancers, overdose, suicide, Black maternal mortality, violence, and COVID-19. By 2030, if we are successful in achieving these disease targets, we will reach the highest ever life expectancy recorded in New York City, 83 years.

We want New Yorkers to experience more birthdays, weddings and graduations, more holidays and holy days, more life lived. To do so is an all-hands-on deck moment. It is a civic responsibility, and we will need to engage all parts of our civic infrastructure to achieve. Government, through HealthyNYC, can set the guideposts and goals, and will play a big part in achieving these goals. But we will need nonprofits, community organizations, the private sector, and everyday New Yorkers, to align around these goals. HealthyNYC is how we ensure everyone, across sectors, consider health in every institutional and individual decision they take. It's how we link all these decisions to perhaps the most important single metric we have for our society and our democracy – how well and how long we live.

I am happy that we have the support and partnership of City Council in this campaign. The Health Department proudly supports Introduction 1248, which will require our agency to lead the development of a citywide population health agenda that focuses on improving life expectancy. As well as report on progress towards achieving the goals set in that agenda, and update the agenda every five years, setting new goals to achieve new life expectancy targets, as needed. Under the legislation, the Health Department will consult with stakeholders and provide regular updates to the City Council on progress made.

This bill ensures that planning around health, and life expectancy as the key measure of our collective health, will be a permanent feature in New York City government. One that lasts from mayor to mayor and administration to administration. Because we know that this is long work, and it is hard work, and it is bigger than the ability of any one institution, or any one branch of government, or any one community, to achieve on their own.

Improving life expectancy will require collaboration, energy, and focus from many partners, across the five boroughs. HealthyNYC will not only be a model for civic planning for health for our city, but for our nation, showing once again that New York City is a leader and innovator in public health. Thanks to the Council, the Speaker, and specifically Chair Schulman, HealthyNYC will be an organizing force in government for years to come.

Thank you once again for the opportunity to be here today. I look forward to answering your questions on HealthyNYC and Intro 1248. I will then turn things over to Dr. Quinn.