



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

of

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before the

New York City Council
Committee on Health and Subcommittee on COVID & Infectious Diseases

on

Addressing the Decline in Childhood Vaccination Rates

February 29, 2024
New York, NY

Good afternoon, Chairs Schulman and Moya, and members of the Committee on Health and the Subcommittee on COVID & Infectious Diseases. My name is Dr. Celia Quinn and I am the Deputy Commissioner for Disease Control at the New York City Department of Health and Mental Hygiene (the Health Department). I am pleased to be here to discuss the important topic of childhood vaccination. As a pediatrician and parent of school-age children myself, I have special appreciation for the critical role of vaccination to childhood, family, and community health.

Today we will be discussing a number of vaccines, all of which are safe and effective. In the United States, vaccine recommendations are driven by the Advisory Committee on Immunization Practices (ACIP)—a committee of medical and public health experts charged with providing guidance on vaccination for the country. There are more than ten different types of vaccines recommended for children in their first two years of life, most of which require a series of two or more doses to provide complete protection. This includes vaccinations that protect against hepatitis B, rotavirus, diphtheria, tetanus, pertussis, polio, measles, mumps, rubella, *Haemophilus influenzae* type b, varicella, and pneumococcal infection. It is important for children to get these vaccines according to the ACIP-recommended schedule so they start building protection when they are young and most vulnerable. As kids grow older, additional vaccines are recommended, including vaccinations that protect against meningococcal infection and human papillomavirus, or HPV. In addition, all children 6 months or older should get their annual flu shot and any updated COVID-19 vaccine recommended by ACIP.

The Health Department has robust vaccination programming to help children get the vaccinations they need to stay healthy and prevent or limit the spread of infectious diseases in our communities. Our work focuses in four areas: reporting and surveillance, education and outreach, vaccine access, and compliance with school and child care vaccination requirements.

Reporting and surveillance allow us to identify populations at higher risk for vaccine-preventable disease and guide our education, outreach, and vaccine access programming. Required disease reporting by laboratories and health care providers enables us to quickly identify and respond to cases or outbreaks of vaccine-preventable disease and reduce the risk of spread. We use surveillance data in a variety of programming, including our perinatal hepatitis B program, which provides case management for pregnant and post-partum people with hepatitis B to ensure that their exposed newborns get appropriate vaccinations and other follow-up care.

Providers in NYC are required to report all vaccines administered to children 18 years of age and younger to the Health Department's Citywide Immunization Registry, or CIR. With their consent, immunizations administered to adults may be reported as well. The CIR is central to almost all of our vaccination programming. Reporting enables us to estimate vaccination coverage within different groups; we use characteristics such as age, race and ethnicity, and neighborhood of residence to identify coverage gaps and address inequities through targeted outreach and improving vaccine access.

The CIR also provides real-time clinical decision support to providers so they know when a child is due for a vaccine, which is important given the complexity of the childhood vaccination schedule. Providers can also pull vaccination coverage reports for their practice, and use CIR

tools to send text messages to patients. The CIR further serves as a platform for providers who participate in our vaccine access programs to order vaccines and monitor their stock. Finally, the CIR enables people to access their and their minor children's vaccination records through the city's My Vaccine Records website.

The Health Department works hard to educate New Yorkers on the importance of vaccination. For example, we run an annual Back to School multi-media campaign, highlighting the safety of vaccines and reminding parents of school vaccination requirements. The Fall 2023 campaign "I Vax, We Vax, Get Vaxxed" urged all New Yorkers, including children, to get their updated COVID-19 and flu vaccines by sharing reasons why these vaccines are so important. This campaign ran on television, radio, digital channels, newspapers, subway digital liveboards, and the Staten Island Ferry. We also work with NYC public schools on letters to parents about vaccination recommendations and requirements. To quickly reach a large number of New Yorkers, we send text message blasts, such as when COVID-19 vaccines became available to children and to remind people when they or their child may be due for another dose.

While these efforts are important, we recognize that health care providers are the best and most trusted vaccine messengers. A provider recommendation is the single most important factor in vaccination decisions. For this reason, we have extensive provider education programming, including webinars, monthly provider office hours, dear colleague letters, and guidance documents. The topics we cover are diverse, from vaccine ordering and administration to building vaccine confidence. Since the fall of 2023, we have been working hard to ensure providers are aware of the new RSV vaccine for pregnant people and a new monoclonal antibody, both of which protect infants against RSV.

Another area of focus is HPV. We are proud of our HPV provider toolkit, launched in 2017 and updated last year. The toolkit includes online education and webinar trainings, information on how to talk to parents about the HPV vaccine, and patient handouts. We also visit individual provider practices to develop customized strategies that address gaps in their HPV vaccination coverage. I want to take this opportunity to remind New Yorkers that the HPV vaccine is life-saving and every child should get all recommended doses of the vaccine, which has been shown to be highly effective at protecting against cancers caused by HPV, including cervical cancer. Unfortunately, HPV immunization rates have plateaued, and more than half of New York City adolescents are not fully protected against HPV by the age of 13, as recommended by ACIP. Council Members, I would like to enlist your support in driving up our HPV vaccination coverage rates so that we can eliminate HPV-causing cancers as a public health threat.

The Health Department works to ensure that everyone in our city has access to vaccines. For children in particular, the best place to get vaccinated is with their primary care provider. Having regular check-ups with a pediatrician in the first few years of life is vital for children's overall health and wellbeing. For this reason, the Vaccines for Children program is central to our childhood vaccination efforts. The Health Department administers this federally-funded program, which provides vaccines to pediatric and family practices at no cost for eligible children. The approximately 1,300 participating providers across the city administer millions of free vaccines to children every year. Vaccines are also available at the city's school-based health centers, NYC Health + Hospitals sites, and at the Health Department's Immunization Clinic in

Brooklyn, regardless of immigration status or ability to pay. People needing help finding a vaccination site for their child can call 311 and, for COVID-19 and flu, visit the city's Vaccine Finder website.

Finally, the Health Department works with parents, providers, and NYC schools on compliance with child care and school immunization requirements. This includes conducting audits of immunization records at a sample of schools, encouraging schools to complete the New York State immunization compliance survey, providing guidance to school staff on requirements, and tracking compliance and sharing data. Health Department physicians also review every immunization medical exemption request. Religious exemptions are not allowed in New York State. Currently, 95% of students attending public and charter schools in grades Pre-K through 12 are in compliance with immunization requirements. We are working closely with NYC public schools, providers, and parents to bring up that number to ensure our students and schools remain safe.

Despite all of this work, we have still not returned to pre-pandemic levels of vaccination coverage in children. Vaccination rates declined during the pandemic as people put off routine and preventative health care visits, students were disconnected from school-based health centers, and schools switched to remote learning. Vaccine hesitance, vaccine fatigue, and misinformation about vaccines have also been associated with the pandemic. These declines in vaccination rates have been observed throughout the United States. While vaccination rates have mostly recovered from that initial drop, we still see the effects of the pandemic today. Vaccination rates are down approximately 2 to 16 percentage points compared with 2019 depending on vaccine and age group. We continue to see concerning delays in vaccination, with parents waiting until children enter day care, school, or camp to get their children vaccinated. While we are concerned by these decreases, we are confident the city can return to high levels of vaccine coverage through our extensive vaccination programming and with the support of City Council and other community leaders. We urge parents to check in with their child's health care provider to make sure kids are up to date on their vaccines to protect their and their family's health and the health of their community.

Thank you for the opportunity to discuss the important topic of childhood vaccination. I look forward to answering your questions.