

Testimony

of

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Before the

**New York City Council
Committees on Health and Mental Health, Disabilities and Addiction**

on

Fiscal Year 2025 Preliminary Budget

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Good morning, Speaker Adams, Chairs Schulman, and Lee, and members of the committees. I am Dr. Ashwin Vasan, Commissioner of the New York City Department of Health and Mental Hygiene.

I am joined today by our Chief Financial Officer, Aaron Anderson, and members of the senior leadership team. Thank you for the opportunity to testify today on the Department's Preliminary Budget for fiscal year 2025 (FY25). I want to start by acknowledging the Speaker's State of the City address last week. We are grateful to have a Speaker and a Council focused on areas that are important to New Yorkers' health and well-being like youth mental health, maternal health, and chronic disease prevention.

It has been a busy year. The Health Department continued to manage COVID-19 through the end of the federal public health emergency, while defining a new strategy and ambitious goals for healthier, longer lives. Last November, we launched HealthyNYC, an ambitious citywide strategy to improve and extend the lifespan of all New Yorkers by addressing the leading causes of death and premature death in New York City.

We know COVID-19 took a major toll on this city. In 2020, the city saw the biggest and fastest drop in lifespan in a century, dropping 4.6 years to just 78 years. This was the largest drop in New York City history, and the largest drop anywhere in the U.S. or the world. In encouraging news, the city gained back 2.7 years in 2021. However, aside from COVID, the leading causes of death of New Yorkers, are all moving in the wrong direction.

And, like in so many issues, the decreases in life expectancy have not been experienced equally. The largest decreases were among Black and Latino New Yorkers, with the disproportionate burden of premature death – death before the age of 65 – falling on these communities. These are also the deaths that contribute most to our declines in life expectancy.

To address these declines, the Health Department, and this Administration have advanced the implementation of HealthyNYC, to increase the life expectancy of New Yorkers to its highest-ever level -

83 years -- by 2030, with equity at the center of all our work. To achieve this goal, we have set very specific targets to reduce mortality from the leading issues killing New Yorkers: chronic and diet-related diseases such as diabetes and heart disease; screenable cancers; mental health, including overdoses and suicides; and violence including gun violence. HealthyNYC also sets targets to address COVID-19-related deaths and the unacceptable disparities in Black maternal mortality, while addressing cross-cutting issues including access to health care, and the impacts of climate change on health

If the city is successful in reaching each of these targets, we will not only achieve a life expectancy in New York City of 83 years or more, we also estimate that we will stop well over 7,000 preventable deaths. That's 7,000 mothers, fathers, siblings, friends, and loved ones who would otherwise be taken from us too soon.

Ultimately, HealthyNYC is an organizing principle toward a future where New York City is the healthiest big city in the nation and the world. Too often in government, we are afraid to set big, tangible, measurable goals, and to hold ourselves accountable to them. Instead we set smaller ones, maybe ones that are easier to achieve in a few months, or a few years. But complex, long-term challenges – like improving health in our city – requires long-term vision, and near-term action toward that vision. And it requires everyone pulling in a common direction, not one agency alone, but one City. We will get there by investing more in prevention and upstream care, earlier intervention and support, and ensuring access to services meet New Yorkers' health and social needs. And we get there by responding with intentional action and planning, and repeating this, year after year.

HealthyNYC is the first-of-its-kind agenda in the city and the nation. I am grateful to the Mayor for his support and proud of my team for building out this campaign and working to organize our city around these goals. I'm grateful to my fellow commissioners and city leaders who continue to endorse and embrace this agenda, and to our partners in the nonprofit, private, and philanthropic sectors who

continue to engage with us. I also want to thank the NYC Council, particularly the Speaker and Chair Schulman, for enshrining in local law the requirement for the city to ensure that this work will endure for decades to come, and not subject to the whims of electoral cycles and political winds. The health of New Yorkers is foundational to New York City and our world. There is no wealth, no prosperity, no equity, and no safety, without health at the core.

The Health Department also remains focused on addressing the second pandemic of mental health. As we would say in medicine, this crisis is “acute-on-chronic”. We had growing mental health needs long before COVID-19. Mental health systems were chronically underinvested in, and the pandemic was an acute stressor that made everything worse. Last year we announced a comprehensive mental health plan to alleviate and prevent emotional suffering, and to save lives. This plan will continue to guide the city’s future actions to improve mental health.

The Health Department has executed on several commitments in our plan in the last year. We transitioned NYC Well to 988 to ensure that these three digits become the go-to resource for all New Yorkers for mental health concerns and crisis response. We launched NYCTeenSpace—the city’s pioneering no-cost digital mental health service available on mobile devices to all New York City teenagers between the ages of 13 and 17. I am pleased to report that after just five months, we have seen **thousands** of teens sign up. Moreover, this fiscal year we distributed more than 280,000 naloxone kits, expanded our emergency room peer-led overdose response program, supported syringe service providers in all five boroughs, increased access to buprenorphine in primary care, emergency departments, harm reduction, and homeless outreach settings, and much more.

Finally, in early 2024, the Health Department and the Mayor made two key announcements that will have important impacts on thousands of New Yorkers.

First, we will invest \$18 million over three years to relieve over \$2 billion in medical debt for hundreds of thousands of working-class New Yorkers. Throughout my career as a doctor, I have seen first-hand how high health care costs and medical debt can force patients to make impossible choices. And as we all know too well, medical debt is the number one cause of bankruptcy in the United States, and disproportionately affects uninsured, under-insured, and low-income households. The city's program will wipe out medical debt for up to 500,000 working class New Yorkers.

Second, the city set out to address the mental health impacts of unregulated social media on our youth. This included a Commissioner's Advisory declaring social media an environmental toxin and a historic lawsuit against four of the largest social media platforms. As a parent, I want to keep my children safe, and that includes the use of and interaction with social media. This Administration and this Health Department are committed to leading on this issue.

And there is so much more. As New Yorkers, we know that everyone deserves the right to make their own health care decisions and to control their own bodies. New York City has continued to lead, ensuring that our city is a safe haven for reproductive health care and abortion access. Over the past year and a half, the Health Department has expanded medication abortion access in our public health clinics, and have strengthened the Abortion Access Hub, which ensures anyone, from anywhere in the city or country, can access reproductive health care when they need it.

We've also strengthened the Department's internal capabilities, including our data systems, by building the new Center for Population Health Data Science to bring together health and social services data into a single view to enable citywide planning for New Yorker's health to ensure resources and services are getting to the communities who need it most. The Department has started a Response Readiness initiative to ensure we're better prepared for the next health emergency – whatever or whenever it might be. And the Department has invested in our staff by expanding our Worksite Wellness

programs and centering mental health in the process. Our most recent workforce survey shows that more than 75% of Health Department staff are satisfied with their work at the agency, a significant increase from past years when morale was low in the face of crisis and constant attacks on their work.

Before I talk about our budget, I want to take a moment to thank my team. That includes those with me here today, my senior leadership team and the staff who helped prepare for this hearing. It also includes those back at our offices and those on the ground running everything from public health clinics to health inspections, community health work, and disease investigations. My colleagues make me proud to come to work every day. We continue to do this work because we are here to save lives, to prevent suffering, and to ensure that every New Yorker can live a *healthy* life. Public health is often an invisible shield, stopping bad things from happening before they occur, and responding when they do. But even if our work is invisible to some, every, single employee at the Department of Health deserves recognition and thanks for a job well fought.

City

Now, I will take a few moments to speak to our Preliminary Budget. The Department has approximately 7,000 employees and an operating budget of \$2 billion for fiscal year 2025, of which approximately \$1 billion is City Tax Levy (CTL). Over half our budget is comprised of Federal, State, and private funding.

We are pleased that our preliminary budget continues funding for many of the agency's priorities and allows us to execute on activities to address the goals we have laid out in HealthyNYC. We look forward to answering your questions on our preliminary budget.

State

Now I'll turn to the State budget. The Governor's fiscal year 2025 Executive Budget proposes significant investments in mental health, maternal health, and the wellbeing of children and families. These investments all align with the city's HealthyNYC goals.

On mental health, the Executive Budget seeks to improve access to mental health services by raising the minimum reimbursement rate for commercial providers. I am pleased to see the Senate has included this in their one house budget, and urge the Assembly to accept this policy. The Executive Budget includes the Stop Addictive Feeds Exploitation (SAFE) for Kids Act, which is an ambitious first step in regulating social media companies and compliments the city's work on to address public health threats posed by social media. Unfortunately, the state legislature rejected this language. I urge them to pass this as part of the final budget.

The Department supports other actions the Executive Budget takes to support maternal health. Governor Hochul included language establishing paid pre-natal leave for medical appointments. The Senate and the Assembly have versions of this in their budgets, and we hope they can resolve their differences. The budget also establishes a state-wide policy, which will allow all birthing people access to doulas, as well as includes language providing for breast milk expression breaks. Unfortunately, the Assembly omitted these items from their bill—the Department strongly urges them to reconsider. We also firmly support investments in child and family health by establishing continuous Medicaid enrollment for children from birth to age 6. We are pleased both houses have included this vital policy.

Governor's budget demonstrates a commitment to public health and health equity. However, the budget fails to address a key issue which undermines New Yorkers' health, gains in health equity, and our public health infrastructure.

It's not acceptable that New York City continues to be denied its fair share of public health resources from the state. Five years ago, New York State cut Article 6 public health funding to New York

City from a 36% match on the dollar to 20%. This cut was to New York City only. At the time, the justification was that the city receives funding directly from the federal government, but these federal funds are for specific issue areas, not for general public health support. If parity was restored for Article 6 funding, we project the city would receive an additional \$90 million of support for critical public health services. These are funds that can be used to address the rising rates of vaccine-preventable diseases, sexually transmitted illnesses and TB - many diseases that we thought we had relegated to the past – as well as the growing crises in overdose rates and Black maternal health. These, among other essential and mandated public health activities.

New York State has an obligation to support the health of **all** New Yorkers — including those who live downstate, in the five boroughs. At least 50% of Medicaid recipients live in New York City, and most of the people of color and low-income people in the state call New York City home. This is a health issue, it is an equity and racial justice issue, and it is an issue of basic fairness and good governance. This means that New York City must be funded at the same rate as **every other county** in this state.

Today, I am asking all of you to urge your state colleagues to reinstate New York City's Article 6 reimbursement in the State's adopted budget.

Federal

Finally, I'll make a few comments on the federal budget. We thank President Biden, Leaders Schumer and Jeffries, the New York Congressional Delegation, and Health and Human Services Secretary Becerra, for their consistent support. We are, however, concerned with budget cuts for critical, federally-supported public health services and infrastructure. Federal funding makes up almost 20% of the Health Department's budget.

The Health Department has long expressed concern about the federal government's continued cuts to the Prevention and Public Health Fund (PPHF), and Federal Public Health Emergency Preparedness

(PHEP) and Hospital Preparedness Programs (HPP) grants. It's essential for the federal government to focus the necessary attention and resources to ensure the country has a robust health security infrastructure that can meet the scale and scope of threats we face in our rapidly changing world. Additionally - while we are grateful COVID-19 is no longer an all-hands-on-deck emergency, the federal funding that boosted so much of the response expired with the end of the federal emergency. This loss of supplemental funding is impacting our disease surveillance and response infrastructures beyond COVID-19 work.

We are in a critical moment with federal and state investment in public health. As I previously mentioned, over half of the Department's budget is from state, federal and private funding. We must learn from the lessons of the last 4 years and ensure that there is strong investment in public health infrastructure by our state and federal colleagues. We invite the Council's partnership in advocating for more state and federal investment in public health. I know many of us are fatigued of thinking about the public health emergency, but ignoring and disinvesting in public health only makes us all more vulnerable to the next threat.

As I wrap up, I want to thank the Health Department staff once again for their steadfast commitment to the health of this city. I look forward to continuing to work arm-in-arm with them to improve life-expectancy through HealthyNYC and face our public health challenges head on.

I thank Mayor Adams for the resources dedicated to the Department in his Preliminary Budget.

Thank you to the Speaker, Chairs, and members of the committees for your partnership and dedication to the health and wellbeing of all New Yorkers.

I am happy to take your questions.