



**NEW YORK CITY DEPARTMENT OF
HEALTH AND MENTAL HYGIENE**
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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 – COVID-19 in New York City: Evaluating the Present Challenges

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Good afternoon, Chairs Schulman, Narcisse and Moya, and members of the Health and Hospitals Committees and the Subcommittee on COVID Recovery and Resiliency, I am Dr. Ashwin Vasan, Commissioner of the New York City Department of Health and Mental Hygiene. 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.

On June 30, 2022, the Health Department deactivated its COVID-19 Incident Command Structure—833 days after it was initiated. This marked not the end of our COVID-19 work, but a new stage where COVID-19 programming would be folded into our regular agency functions. Doing so enabled us to better maintain routine operations—many of which were reduced or stopped entirely during the first two years of the pandemic. It also allowed us to respond to new challenges, such as poliovirus and MPV, and build programs and policies to help us emerge from the COVID-19 pandemic a stronger, healthier, more equitable city. This includes expanded work across our three mental health priorities: youth mental health, serious mental illness, and overdoses, as well as the City's strategic priorities, including work on birth equity, chronic disease prevention and lifestyle changes, and the impacts of climate change and environmental justice on health, just to name a few. Since I took office in March, and while combatting COVID-19 and other health emergencies—most recently the health needs of the tens of thousands of asylum seekers reaching our city—we have also undergone an extensive strategic planning process that seeks to make our organization more response ready; strengthen the bridge between healthcare and public health and, between prevention and care; and strengthen our data infrastructure, all with the goal of advancing our work as the City's health strategist, in service of the City's overall public health priorities as described above. This has been difficult, but necessary work, as we emerge from the worst of COVID-19 and create a stronger public health infrastructure in its wake.

As we look forward, it's also important to take stock and to reflect on some of what we, collectively, have achieved. New York City has one of the highest COVID-19 adult vaccination rates in the country—with an estimated 99% of adults receiving at least one dose and 89% having completed their primary series. The success of our COVID-19 vaccination program is due to bold policy decisions such as vaccine mandates and incentive programs, as well as a historic vaccination campaign that focused on reaching underserved populations working together with trusted messengers throughout New York City's diverse and dynamic communities. Over 18 million doses of COVID-19 vaccine have been administered in New York City, and we have significantly narrowed the gap in vaccination coverage by race. We have also made incredible 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.

We recognize there is more work to be done, including increasing vaccination coverage among children ages 12 and younger, and encouraging everyone ages 5 and older to receive a new bivalent booster dose. Improved COVID-19 vaccination coverage will be especially important as we head into the holiday season and winter months, which have previously seen a rise in COVID-19 transmission. This winter we face possible concurrent outbreaks, with early signs within and outside the United States pointing to a potentially high level of influenza and respiratory syncytial virus, or RSV. While most children will get RSV before the age of 2, and the vast majority will recover on their own, a small subset each year are hospitalized. Similarly, for most people who contract influenza, the flu is a self-limited condition for which they can recover at home. But each year, thousands of New Yorkers, and tens of thousands of Americans, do face complications and even death from flu and RSV, and although recent years have had lower than normal respiratory virus seasons because of the restricted movement and enhanced mitigation strategies, we anticipate that as we emerge from that period of time there will be unusually

high levels of these viruses. So, it's critical that I remind all New Yorkers to get their flu and COVID-19 vaccines NOW. Both vaccines are recommended for everyone ages 6 months and older, and the new bivalent COVID-19 boosters are recommended for everyone ages 5 and older. Many pharmacies and doctors' offices offer both the flu and COVID-19 vaccines, and it is safe to get them at the same time. So please get vaccinated—and get your children vaccinated—to help keep yourself and your family healthy this winter season. And for RSV, for which there isn't a vaccine, but also for all three of these viral respiratory conditions, it is essential that we practice good hand hygiene, that we stay away from others when sick, and that we wear masks around others if we're feeling unwell and have been amongst others, and when in crowded public settings.

As we look ahead, another very real challenge we are facing as a city is COVID fatigue. A survey by Kaiser Foundation in early 2022 found that over 70% of adults were “tired” or “frustrated” with the current state of the pandemic in the U.S. This sentiment is an understandable, a normal human response, after two and a half years of a pandemic that has unsettled and reshaped every facet of our lives. The CDC's relaxation of quarantine and masking recommendations, and similar steps taken by the City, is both a reflection of how far we have come in improving COVID-19 morbidity and mortality and a recognition of the palpable need to return to some sense of normalcy. COVID-19 is still here and is a part of our new reality, however, it is one for which we have strategies to manage.

Being exposed to COVID-19 no longer means missed work and school but can be managed instead with testing and mask use. Masks need not be an everyday, all the time measure for most New Yorkers, but worn where and when needed to protect oneself and others in times of increased transmission and where the likelihood of transmission is high. Wearing a mask *as necessary* should become routine. Getting a COVID-19 vaccine should be just one additional intervention received during a regular well-check exam or ordinary visit to the pharmacy. In this way COVID-19 prevention must be integrated into our everyday lives, rather than consuming our lives as it has for the last 2.5 years. What this means for the Health Department and the City is shifting toward a more focused, tailored approach targeting people at highest risk for severe COVID-19 due to age, underlying medical condition, or setting.

But as COVID has shown us, it is a nimble and tricky opponent, and we must be prepared to adapt quickly, as the situation changes. Indeed, this virus has continuously thrown us curveballs – new variants that may be more immune evasive or cause more severe illness remain a constant threat. The City, however, is poised to rapidly identify and respond to any increase in cases and hospitalizations. 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. We also have maintained heightened 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 a dedicated call line for school administrators. Even as at-home testing has increased, and become the go-to method of testing, we still have more than enough data for accurate surveillance and estimation of the state of COVID-19 transmission in our city.

Vaccination remains our number one weapon against COVID-19. It enabled us to reopen our City and high levels of vaccination—including booster doses—will be critical to our ongoing recovery. The Health Department has enrolled more than 3,500 providers in the COVID-19 Vaccination Program, thus integrating COVID-19 vaccination into our regular healthcare delivery system. We are conducting COVID-19 vaccination at community events, often alongside flu vaccine and other services. We continue widespread public messaging including ad campaigns, public service announcements, and social media

posts. It is hard to go a day without passing an image of our proud, vaccinated Lady Liberty high on a billboard or on the subway car wall. We will soon be launching our flu + COVID-19 booster campaign to remind all New Yorkers to roll up both sleeves and get both vaccines. This is complemented by text messages, emails, and other reminders. We are also urging all providers to encourage their patients, and to call their high risk patients and those above 65 years of age, to get vaccinated.

Testing also continues to be a central part of COVID-19 prevention. Every New Yorker should get tested right away if they have symptoms or were exposed to COVID-19 and before and after traveling or being in large gatherings—and separate from others if they test positive. To this end, the City has maintained diagnostic testing capacity through Health + Hospitals and Health Department facilities and at-home test kit giveaways at libraries, schools, and other venues, complimenting the many pharmacies, urgent care centers, federally qualified health centers, and individual providers that offer testing. To date, more than 62 million free, at-home tests have been distributed across the city.

Testing not only helps reduce transmission but is also the gateway to another tool in our arsenal—treatment. COVID-19 treatment, when begun early, can greatly reduce the risk of severe illness and hospitalization. People who test positive should contact their health care provider right away—any provider can prescribe treatment in New York City, and antiviral medicine currently remains free. People can also utilize Health + Hospitals mobile Test to Treat sites and the City’s 212-COVID-19 hotline, which enable New Yorkers most at risk of severe COVID-19 to immediately initiate treatment following a positive test result. As with their other services, Health + Hospitals offers treatment to all New Yorkers, regardless of immigration status or ability to pay. The COVID-19 hotline, along with the City’s covidtest and vaccinefinder websites, ensure New Yorkers know where they can access COVID-19 testing, vaccination, and care.

We continue to promote non-pharmacological prevention measures—such as wearing a mask in crowded, indoor settings especially this fall and winter when we know more COVID-19 virus will be spreading—and staying home when sick. These are steps every New Yorker can take to help keep our communities safe. And, importantly, we continue to work closely with our community-based organizations and leaders—trusted messengers who are crucial to reducing the inequities laid bare by the pandemic.

I want to close out by saying that while I am mindful of the challenges that lie ahead, I am also secure in the knowledge that we can and will rise to those challenges. The Health Department recently held a series of recognition and remembrance events to celebrate the extraordinary achievements of the over 4,400 Health Department staff who together worked over 3.5 million hours on the COVID-19 response over the last 2.5 years. While participating in these events, I was struck by the unwavering commitment of our staff—many of whom, like so many New Yorkers, were dealing with their own personal loss. They—alongside countless colleagues in other City agencies and the Administration—fought for the lives of every single New Yorker and continue to do so in their COVID-19 and other essential programming. I know we are in good hands.

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 the Administration, and the Health Department in particular, 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 hearing your questions and answering thoughtfully and to the best of my ability. Thank you once again for the opportunity to be here today.