



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

Ashwin Vasani, MD, PhD
Commissioner

Testimony

of

**Ashwin Vasani, MD, PhD
Commissioner**

New York City Department of Health and Mental Hygiene

Before the

New York City Council

Committees on Finance, Health and Mental Health, Disabilities and Addiction

on

Fiscal Year 2024 Executive Budget

May 15, 2023
New York, NY

Good afternoon, Chairs Brannan, 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 my senior leadership team. Thank you for the opportunity to testify today on the Department's Executive Budget for fiscal year 2024 (FY24).

Before I turn to the Department's FY'24 Executive Budget, I want to acknowledge that last week marked the end of the federal Public Health Emergency for COVID-19. Despite the end of the emergency declaration, COVID-19 is here to stay. I want to ask for your help in ensuring that your communities know how to continue to access the tools that will keep us out of the hospital and safe from severe COVID-19 complications and outcomes. These include how to get tested and access treatment if you test positive, when to wear a mask and where to get vaccinated so you can stay up to date with the best protection from COVID-19 available. My team will be sharing a social media toolkit with your offices in the coming days, and I would greatly appreciate your support in amplifying these messages to New Yorkers.

The end of the Public Health Emergency also highlights the lack of sustained, stable resources for public health infrastructure. Over the last three years, the city received billions of dollars from the Federal Emergency Management Agency, and through supplemental grant funding from the Centers for Disease Control to the Health Department. This money enabled the City to set up public health clinics in all five boroughs, establish the largest contact tracing program in the country, and enhance our disease surveillance system, including establishing a

wastewater surveillance program and provide vaccination and other support to congregate settings, including nursing homes. Some of the funding streams to support this work have already ended, and the remainder will expire over the next two years. We are assessing the implications this will have on services New Yorkers have come to expect from the Health Department and our city. And we will continue to advocate for the federal government to invest in the public health infrastructure of this country, including localities to meet these elevated expectations. Moving forward, we must give local health departments like ours our first lines of defense, everything they need to protect and care for people so that our city is a healthier place for all and more resilient for future public health emergencies. And in the absence of additional federal support approved by Congress, the expiration of emergency support raises the questions of what states and cities will do to continue to support core public health infrastructure for the next health emergency.

The end of the Public Health Emergency also does not mean that we are returning to the status quo of prior to COVID-19. The pandemic only exacerbated existing health inequalities, and we are seeing a very concerning drop in life expectancy in New York City, not only because of COVID-19. The Health Department is leading the City's response by developing evidence-based strategies and directing resources to equitably address health challenges that are leading to shorter, lower quality lives, and deeper health inequities.

City

Turning to the Department's FY'24 Executive Budget. The Department has approximately 7,000 employees and an operating budget of \$2 billion for fiscal year 2024, of

which \$933 million is City Tax Levy (CTL). The Executive Budget added about \$21 million CTL to the Department's FY'24 budget for new needs. The Department also recognized \$29 million CTL in savings in the Executive Budget, through revenue maximization and PS and OTPS efficiencies.

With this executive budget, important investments have been made in the City's Mental Health plan, access to safe and legal abortions, a personal protective equipment (PPE) stockpile and the Department's Summer 2022 mpox response.

For the City's Mental Health plan, a total of \$12 million was added in FY'24, which will grow to more than \$20 million in FY'25 and out years to the Health Department alone. This funding reflects a shared commitment in city's mental health system and will leverage important investments made by the State in its FY'24 budget, as well as mental health investments made across other City agencies and our public hospital system. With the Executive Budget we are creating a new front-door to the system for young people, through a digital mental health program for NYC teens to access mental health services more easily and quickly, and that links to site-based care in schools and in the community, as needed, as part of a continuum of services. Since we launched the mental health plan in March, we have consulted with teenagers, community providers and other stakeholders to ensure that we are creating a digital mental health model that will best serve New York City teens. This service will be universally accessible and offer our young people a lower barrier option to quickly connect with a mental health professional when they need support. This service will not be a replacement for therapy should someone need a higher level of support – an important request that was raised by the teenagers we consulted. We are underway in identifying a service provider and on track to roll out this program next school year.

Additionally, for the Mental Health plan, new investments are being made to support New Yorkers with serious mental illness. In coordination with the State Office of Mental Health we are developing an Access Hub, which will breakdown – in plain language – the array of mental health support options and referral sources for people with serious mental illness and their families. We are also expanding the capacity of our clubhouses—our one-stop facilities for rehabilitation, treatment, and other services—to provide safe and supportive communities for people with SMI that can reduce hospitalizations, homelessness and criminal legal system contact, while expanding employment and educational opportunities and improving health and wellness. During fiscal years 2022 and 2023, NYC clubhouses have enrolled more than 1,000 new members, and this ongoing growth demonstrates a clear demand for these services as a key pillar of our community mental health system for people with SMI.

And finally, as part of the new investments in mental health, the Department will be developing a new initiative to address maternal mental health during pregnancy and after childbirth for residents in the City’s Taskforce for Racial Inclusion and Equity neighborhoods. This important investment focuses on two of the Department’s key priorities: Black maternal mortality and mental health.

The Executive Budget also allocates \$4.2 million to continue the Health Department’s work in ensuring access to safe and legal abortion care for New Yorkers and anyone else who needs access to this vital reproductive healthcare. With this funding we will continue to provide medication abortions at the Department’s Sexual Health Clinics and operate the New York City Abortion Access Hub, which provide confidential help in finding an abortion provider,

scheduling an appointment, getting financial assistance, and finding transportation and lodging and marketing these services in New York City and other jurisdictions.

And as we transition out of the emergency phase of the COVID-19 pandemic, the Health Department is focused on ensuring that we are response ready for whatever may come next, whether it be responding to an isolated outbreak or a larger citywide incident. This means ensuring that the City maintains rapid, unfettered access to ventilators and critical, hard to source PPE for our healthcare partners in times of emergency, and reducing our overall dependency on external partners, who were unable to provide the resources New York City needed in the early weeks of the COVID-19 pandemic. Included in this broad effort is purchasing medications for first responders in the event of a bioterrorist attack and increasing the City's capacity to receive and distribute medical supplies from our State and federal partners. The Executive Budget invests \$2.4 million in FY'24 for the creation of this program and \$1.5 million in out years to maintain it into the future.

Finally, the Executive Budget allocates \$33 million to reimburse the Health Department for the costs that were incurred during the 2022 mpox outbreak response.

State

Moving to the State FY'24 enacted budget. I am extremely frustrated and disappointed that the Governor and State legislature did not restore the State's contribution to public health funding in New York City, also known as Article 6. As discussed at our Preliminary Budget hearing, this is a loss of \$90 million in State revenue that would directly benefit the health of New York City residents. It continues to trouble me that at a time when we should be investing

more not less in our public health infrastructure that the State has chosen not to give back tens of millions of dollars in support to New York City's communities that would make our city a healthier place to live for all of us. The State has an obligation to support the health of **all** New Yorkers — including those who live in the five boroughs. I will continue to make this argument in Albany and I hope that you all will use your platforms to do the same.

As I wrap up, I want to thank the staff at the Health Department for their steadfast commitment to the health of this city. I am confident that we have the team and the tenacity to make this city healthier.

I thank Mayor Adams for the resources dedicated to the Department in his Executive Budget, and for his continued commitment to public health.

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.