



**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, Mental Health, Disabilities and Addiction, and Subcommittee on
COVID Recovery and Resiliency**

on

Fiscal Year 2023 Executive Budget

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Good afternoon, Chairs Brannan, Schulman, Lee, and Moya, 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 Dr. Torian Easterling, First Deputy Commissioner, Mr. Sami Jarrah, Deputy Commissioner for Finance and Chief Financial Officer, Dr. Michael McRae, Acting Executive Deputy Commissioner for Mental Hygiene, and Ms. Corinne Schiff, Deputy Commissioner for Environmental Health. Thank you for the opportunity to testify today on the Department's Executive Budget for fiscal year 2023 (FY23).

I'd like to start by taking a moment to introduce myself to those of you I have not met and give an overview of my priorities as New York City's Health Commissioner. I am a primary care physician, epidemiologist, and public health practitioner, and I have dedicated my career to improving the physical and mental health and social welfare of New Yorkers. I am a father of three young children and bring my experience as a parent to this work, especially now as all of our children, including mine, have had their wellbeing and mental health impacted by the COVID-19 pandemic. I am also the loved one of people who have lost their lives to and continue to live with addiction and serious mental illness, and these experiences have impacted me deeply, especially coming from an immigrant culture where mental health is so deeply stigmatized, pushed under the rug, and into the shadows.

Since stepping into this role two months ago, I have been so impressed by the dedicated and life-saving work of Health Department staff, particularly during the COVID-19 pandemic. As you may have seen in our Executive Budget narrative, Health Department staff is estimated to have worked an additional 3.5 million hours on top of their normal responsibilities, since March 2020. They are heroes, deserving of our thanks and celebration.

As I look to the future, and as the City transitions out of its emergency response to the pandemic, I look forward to refocusing our work on the other new and long-standing health challenges this city is facing. This means re-organizing and strengthening our public health infrastructure and operating model; doubling down on the Department's commitment to centering equity as a guiding principle for all of our work; and revitalizing our storied expertise in chronic disease prevention, policy, and programs, and beginning to tackle the health effects of a changing climate and environmental injustice, on already vulnerable communities in our city.

And this especially means grappling with the "second pandemic" of mental health needs which continue to grow in our city, and our nation. We have had a long-standing mental health crisis, with deaths from suicide, overdose, and alcoholism – otherwise referred to as "deaths of despair" – rising steadily for the last 20 years. But what was present before the pandemic and has exploded over past two years, especially impacting our young people, with rising rates of depression, anxiety, and suicidality amongst youth and teens, especially BIPOC youth and LGBTQIA youth. It is seen in the impacts on people living with serious mental illness, already isolated due to their disease and associated stigma, now thrust into further isolation and marginalization due to the pandemic, and with serious mental illness being the second leading risk factor for death from COVID-19 itself. It is seen in the mental health and traumatic effects of the epidemic of hate, racism, and violence towards Asian and Pacific Islander neighbors. And it is seen in our overdose crisis, which is taking the life of one New Yorker every four hours, with 2020 setting a record for overdose deaths, and 2021 likely to do the same.

Mental health IS the public health issue of our era – one that we will be addressing for years to come - and demands both upstream and downstream approaches to respond, and requires that we not only build new programs and projects, but that we fundamentally redesign our systems to serve all New Yorkers, in the most culturally diverse city in the world.

I want to thank Mayor Adams for his continued commitment to public health, and I look forward to partnering with Council and sharing more about the Health Department’s work with you in the coming months.

Though the City is moving away from an acute, all-encompassing emergency pandemic response, COVID-19 is still a top priority for the Health Department and is integrated into our work across the agency. New York City is currently at a High COVID-19 Alert Level. This means all New Yorkers are urged to take the following actions: get vaccinated and boosted; wear a face mask in ALL public indoor settings, especially if you are unvaccinated and/or from a high-risk group; get tested frequently after gathering and travel, and especially if you’re not feeling well; and stay home if you are sick. If you do test positive, isolate immediately, and talk to your doctor about whether you’re eligible for the available treatment options. If you don’t have a doctor, call the City’s COVID hotline at 212-COVID19. I will note that New York City has made immense progress in our fight against COVID-19, over 6.5 million New Yorkers are fully vaccinated – that’s nearly 88% of adults and 59% of eligible children – and testing and treatment remains free and widely available. But as we face a recent increase in cases and hospitalizations, we want New Yorkers to know that there is still work to be done, and we can’t call it quits on the fight against COVID-19 just yet.

In our approach to the continued response and recovery from COVID-19, equity and a focus on community-based organizations remain key tenets of the Health Department’s work. There is no better example of this than our new Public Health Corps, through which community health workers are actively working to build healthier neighborhoods across New York City. Public Health Corps on-the-ground outreach has led to increases in COVID-19 vaccination uptake and expanded community partnerships to build trusted messengers for public health information.

I will now turn to a brief update on the Department’s FY23 Executive Budget before turning to the State and federal budgets.

The Health Department currently has approximately 7,500 employees and an operating budget of \$2.1B for FY23, of which \$1B is City Tax Levy (CTL). The Executive Budget added \$59M CTL to the Department’s FY23 budget.

The additional funding for the Health Department in the Executive Budget will allow the department to expand and continue several areas of critical public health work. This includes \$2.7M for neighborhood response units, comprised of clinicians and people with lived experience to prevent and address the emergence of mental health and substance use challenges in neighborhoods that have the poorest health and social outcomes and other high priority spaces in the city, including the subways. These neighborhood response units are part of the Mayor’s Subway Safety Plan. The budget also funds \$12.5M in CTL annually for FY23 and FY24 for the Public Health Corps, bringing the total funding to more than

\$53M, so they can continue their critical COVID-19 recovery work in the neighborhoods hardest hit by the pandemic. Additional funding includes \$1.6M for mobile food vending permit processing, and \$19.5M for school health, to address a gap in State funding due to Article 6 ineligibility, which I will discuss in a moment.

Moving on to the State FY23 enacted budget. There were important investments and policies to advance public health, including additional investments in early intervention, supportive housing, and Article 6 public health funding, which help to support critical health and mental health services in NYC.

Further, reforms to expand Medicaid eligibility to undocumented immigrants 65 years of age and older, extend Medicaid coverage post-pregnancy, and establish telehealth reimbursement parity will improve access to healthcare services for many New Yorkers.

But more support is needed: this is a pivotal time for public health, and the State continues to fund NYC's Article 6 reimbursement at a lower rate than the rest of the counties in this State. We continue to urge the State to reinstate the 36% Article 6 reimbursement rate and invest in vital public health infrastructure for New Yorkers.

At the federal level, we remain very concerned about Congress not properly funding ongoing COVID-19 response and recovery efforts. We appreciate the leadership of our NYC congressional delegation and the Biden-Harris Administration which has been demanding these funds. Without an emergency supplemental appropriation from Congress, the fight against COVID-19 will be critically impacted.

We are already seeing private providers charging uninsured people for testing, or stopping testing operations altogether, and the White House has advised that the federal supply of vaccines and treatment will decrease in the near future. The impact of this will be felt disproportionately by uninsured and under-insured New Yorkers, many of whom are low-income, people of color, and immigrants, and by trusted community-based providers who will no longer receive reimbursement for testing and vaccination services.

Without a robust federal supply or response effort, many New Yorkers will have trouble accessing treatment and vaccines in the future putting the entire city at risk of losing ground in this battle. I encourage immediate Congressional action to appropriate emergency funding to ensure continued progress in the city and the country's recovery.

I thank Mayor Adams for the resources dedicated to the Department in the Executive Plan, 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.