



Testimony

of

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Commissioner

New York City Department of Health and Mental Hygiene

before the

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

on

FY 2019 Preliminary Budget

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Committee Room, City Hall
New York, NY

Good afternoon Chair Ayala and members of the Committee. I am Dr. Mary Bassett, Commissioner of the New York City Department of Health and Mental Hygiene. I am joined by Dr. Gary Belkin, Executive Deputy Commissioner for Mental Hygiene, and Sandy Rozza, Deputy Commissioner for Finance. Thank you for the opportunity to testify today on the Department's preliminary budget for fiscal year 2019.

The Department's mental hygiene portfolio is substantial, and we are grateful for the ongoing support from the Council, which enables us to continue our critical work addressing mental health issues for New Yorkers. Thanks to the support and leadership from the Mayor and the First Lady, the Department has had a busy year.

UPDATES

We recently started the third year of ThriveNYC, the City's comprehensive plan to better serve the mental health needs of New Yorkers. At the outset, ThriveNYC adopted six guiding principles: change the culture, act early, close treatment gaps, collaborate with communities, use data better, and strengthen government's ability to lead. Many agencies have incorporated ThriveNYC initiatives and approaches, but this Department has a key role in implementation, and is where the majority of the 54 ThriveNYC initiatives are housed.

One of the highlights from the past year is the continued success of NYC Well, a call/chat/text line that creates a universal point of entry to New York City's behavioral health system. Through NYC Well, New Yorkers can access counseling, peer support, information and referrals to behavioral health services via text, chat and phone. Since its launch in 2016, NYC Well has fielded more than 380,000 calls, texts and chats; has provided over 36,000 crisis interventions; has made over 70,000 referrals and has directly connected over 5,000 callers to behavioral health services. We will continue to promote NYC Well and look forward to connecting more New Yorkers to mental health care. As a reminder, New Yorkers who need help should call 888-NYC-WELL.

NYC Well's success speaks to the significant need for expanding mental health care in New York City. We are working to address issues of access through the Mental Health Service Corps – social workers, psychologists, psychiatrists and addiction medicine specialists trained to provide mental health and substance misuse services in communities with the highest need. Currently, clinicians are deployed to practices throughout the five boroughs. The Department aims to hire Corps members that reflect the diverse communities they'll serve, and nearly half speak a second language. In fiscal year 2019, we plan to continue recruitment of Corps members for additional placement citywide.

During the last year, we have also focused significant resources on addressing the opioid epidemic. I want to thank you, Chair Ayala, for holding your first hearing on this important topic. Reversing this epidemic requires the Administration, City Council and our community partners to work together. That is why last spring, the Mayor announced HealingNYC, the City's wide-ranging effort to reduce opioid overdose deaths by 35 percent over 5 years. Built off the key principles of Thrive NYC, this effort works collaboratively with our sister agencies across four goals: to prevent opioid overdose deaths, to prevent opioid misuse and addiction, to protect New Yorkers with effective drug treatment and to protect New Yorkers by reducing the supply

of dangerous opioids. In 2016, there were 1,374 confirmed overdose deaths in New York City, up from 937 deaths in 2015. More than 80 percent of those deaths involved opioids. The increase is driven primarily by fentanyl, an opioid 50 to 100 times more potent than morphine. Fentanyl is present in the New York City drug supply; found in heroin, cocaine and pills; and often without knowledge of the person using the drug or the person selling the drug. Provisional 2017 data show that the number of overdose deaths remain at epidemic levels, however the data also suggest that overdose deaths are leveling off.

CITY BUDGET

Turning now to our budget. I am pleased to report that the agency's mental hygiene preliminary budget for fiscal year 2019 has a net increase of approximately \$17 million. This includes \$4.6 million in new funding, including a \$1.1 million annual investment for the Comprehensive Drug and Alcohol Misuse Prevention Program as part of the First Lady's Unity Project. The Unity Project is a comprehensive approach that will help support LGBTQ youth with care and services specially tailored to them. This program will award funding to seven community-based coalitions to address underage and excessive drinking and substance misuse among youth. In particular, these coalitions will focus on gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgender youth, among whom rates of alcohol and drug use are higher.

Just yesterday the Mayor and First Lady announced an additional \$22 million annual investment to expand HealingNYC to address the opioid epidemic. Of this amount, the Department will receive \$10 million per year. This funding allows us to expand the Relay peer intervention program from 10 to 15 private hospitals by June 2020 and to launch the End Overdose Training Institute to train 25,000 New Yorkers each year, including front line city workers, on how to administer and distribute naloxone. This new investment also expands funding allocated in the preliminary plan to create new Health Engagement and Assessment Teams – or HEAT. This work is an expansion of our partnership with NYPD on co-response teams, which intervene early to address emergency crises. The new HEAT initiative will provide health-focused support and resources to people referred by NYPD, EMS or FDNY.

FEDERAL

I am confident that New York City is moving in the right direction to address mental health and substance misuse issues. The same cannot be said for Washington. The President's declaration of the opioid epidemic as a public health emergency in 2017 was long overdue, but did not come with a commitment to funding. Families have long been suffering from the consequences of Washington's inaction. For the second year in a row, we have not seen the national life expectancy increase. We have heard repeated promises from our federal leaders regarding this deadly epidemic, but thus far, these have been empty promises. The goal is to save lives and create a pathway to treatment. This requires a long term, sustained funding commitment from the federal government and a commitment to evidence-based approaches. The repeated attacks on Medicaid are further proof that those in leadership in the federal government have no intention to take the actions needed to stop this deadly epidemic.

It is clear that the Administration and City Council are committed to addressing the mental health needs of the city. I look forward to the next four years of partnership. With your help, we will work tirelessly to reverse the toll of opioids, enhance prevention and treatment of mental illness and ensure that all New Yorkers – regardless of race/ethnicity, gender, or immigration status – have an equal chance to enjoy fulfilling, successful and healthy lives.

Thank you. I am happy to take questions.