Testimony of Oxiris Barbot, MD Commissioner New York City Department of Health and Mental Hygiene before the New York City Council Committee on Health on FY 2020 Preliminary Budget

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Good morning, Chair Levine and members of the Committee. I am Dr. Oxiris Barbot, Commissioner of the New York City Department of Health and Mental Hygiene. I am joined by Sandy Rozza, Deputy Commissioner for Finance. Thank you for the opportunity to testify on the Department’s preliminary budget for fiscal year 2020.

Medicine and public health have been my battle grounds for social justice. Throughout my career, I have sought to combat a stark reality: For far too long, zip codes have determined how long or how well individuals lived. I know all too well the outsized role that the social determinants of health, things like housing, education and socioeconomic status, can play in an individuals’ and a community’s health. As Health Commissioner, I am squarely focused on centering communities, and particularly immigrants, at the heart of our work. This is critical to tackling our biggest challenges, from the opioid epidemic, to chronic diseases and HIV/AIDS. Bridging public health and healthcare delivery, along with integrating mental and physical health approaches will be pivotal strategies in closing the gap of racially-based health inequities. I am proud and excited to lead the Health Department to make New York City not only the strongest and healthiest city in the United States, but a more just and equitable city, where everyone can realize their full health potential.

I want to start by highlighting the achievements we have made with Council in the last year to improve the lives of New Yorkers. Together, we made New York birth certificates more inclusive to all gender identities by allowing people to submit their own affidavit to change their gender marker to male, female, or “X.” We are also closer to fulfilling our shared goal of operating animal shelters in every borough with Council’s approval of the ULURP application to construct a full-service animal shelter in the Bronx. And most recently, the Health Department was thrilled to strongly support the Council’s package of bills that would ban all flavored tobacco and e-cigarette products, including menthol cigarettes. Banning these products is one of the most important things we can do to protect the long-term health of New York City’s youth. I want to thank Speaker Johnson, Chair Levine and Councilmember Cabrera and others in the Council for their leadership on these efforts.

In addition to these efforts, the Department had a busy 2018. We expanded hours and services at the Corona Sexual Health clinic and launched “¡Listos!”, a sex-positive marketing campaign that encourages Latinos to consider using pre-exposure prophylaxis (PrEP) as part of their sexual health plan. This was the Health Department’s first awareness campaign to be conceived of and largely released in Spanish, something we plan to do more of in the future. As part of our ongoing work to eliminate racially based inequities in birth outcomes, we also developed the New York City Standards for Respectful Care at Birth, which outline rights individuals have during and after childbirth. They are an integral component of our work with the healthcare delivery system to reduce structural racism and unconscious provider bias that affect some of our most concerning health outcomes. And building off of the successful work to reduce sodium in our food supply, we announced the National Salt and Sugar Reduction Initiative. This partnership of over 100 local, city and state health departments, associations, and health organizations across the country is calling on companies to reduce added sugar in packaged foods by 20 percent and in sugary drinks by 40 percent by 2025. Finally, in response to an increase in tuberculosis cases, we moved quickly to expand our services to address this uptick. I want to thank you, Chair Levine, for sharing our commitment on this issue. I am happy to report that there was
an eight percent decrease in TB cases in 2018. Today, as we celebrate World TB Day, this is very welcome news.

**CITY BUDGET**

I will now turn to the preliminary budget. The Department currently has approximately 6,500 employees and an operating budget of $1.6 billion dollars for fiscal year 2020, of which $760 million dollars is City Tax Levy. The remainder is federal, State and private dollars. In the fiscal year 2020 preliminary plan, the Department received $3.8 million dollars for new activities, including $271,000 dollars to continue our implementation of the Neighborhood Rat Reduction Plan, which will allow us to expand coverage to 50 NYCHA properties in the Bronx, Brooklyn, and Manhattan.

The Department has also received $6.7 million dollars since the fiscal year 2019 adopted budget to address elevated blood lead levels, including $2.3 million dollars in the preliminary budget. The majority of these funds - $6 million dollars - is directed to the implementation of the new policy to lower the elevated blood lead level for home investigation to 5 mcg/dL. This includes 74 new positions for health inspectors and public health nurses. In addition, we received $245,000 dollars to conduct outreach encouraging lead testing. We are now matching birth records with blood lead testing records and sending letters to families of children who have missed their 1 year old or 2 year old blood lead test, encouraging them to see their pediatrician. The new funding for lead in the preliminary budget will be used to enhance the Citywide Immunization Registry in order improve blood lead level tests notifications to parents and healthcare providers, similar to the notifications for vaccinations. Based on preliminary 2018 data, elevated blood lead levels continue to drop among New York City youth. In the first three quarters of 2018, we have seen a nine percent decline for children under 18 years old with a blood lead level at or above 5 mcg/dL associated with private housing and a 12 percent decline for children associated with NYCHA compared to the same period in 2017. More work needs to be done to eliminate lead exposures and I am proud of the work this Department, the Administration and Council has taken in the last nine months to address this issue.

Though we have a separate budget hearing on this next week, I want to acknowledge our ongoing work to address mental health and substance misuse. We are now in the fourth year of the City’s ThriveNYC initiative and beginning the third year of HealingNYC. The preliminary budget includes $500,000 for the NYC Well program, and $792,000 to enhance the Syringe Service Program. We look forward to discussing these issues with Chair Ayala and the committee.

**STATE AND FEDERAL**

As the Governor and Legislature finalize the State’s fiscal year 2020 budget this month, I would like to flag for you an area of significant concern for the Department. I have also expressed my concerns to legislators in Albany.

The Governor’s executive budget includes a cut in State aid provided to the Department under Article 6. As you know, Article 6 funding provides partial reimbursement to every county in the State to support local public health activities and services. The proposed cut, which would only affect New York City, would reduce our reimbursement from 36 percent to 20 percent. This would translate into a loss of $59 million for fiscal year 2020. If the cut stands, we will not be able
to spare New Yorkers from the impact. The Department will be forced to reduce the number of inspections of cooling towers to prevent the spread of environmental Legionella, decrease operating funds for School-Based Health Centers, distribute fewer naloxone kits and clean syringes and close two of our eight Sexual Health clinics. In addition, our ongoing efforts to stem the current measles outbreak could be affected. The Governor’s main rationale for singling out New York City is that we have greater access to federal funding than other counties. But the federal funding we receive is earmarked for specific programs and cannot be used for the activities that would be affected by cuts to Article 6.

Additionally, funding for School-Based Health Centers continues to decline. There are 164 health centers serving 440 schools in New York City, providing students with access to comprehensive primary medical care, dental care and mental health services at no out-of-pocket cost. The funding cuts in the State fiscal year 2018 budget were restored by the legislature last year with one-time funds of $3.8 million dollars. Unfortunately, the Executive fiscal year 2020 budget did not baseline these dollars or fully restore the statewide cut. If the budget is not increased substantially, School-Based Health Centers may be forced to close their doors at the end of the current school year. Given the uncertainty at the federal level, now is not the time to cut health care services provided by these safety net institutions. We are grateful that both the Assembly and Senate rejected the Article 6 cut and added funding for School-Based Health Centers in their one-house budget bills. We will continue to closely monitor as negotiations in Albany progress.

Finally, I’ll turn to what’s happening in Washington, DC. We are optimistic that the shift of power in Congress will prevent future legislative damage to public health priorities like the Affordable Care Act. However, under the current Administration we have already seen traumatic damage done to longstanding public health priorities, including federal rules that would allow health care workers to discriminate against and deny patients access to health care under the veil of conscience protection and religious freedom. We also face significant cuts to reproductive health funding, due to the recently announced Title X gag rule that would eliminate funding to any organization that provides or refers for abortion services, including Planned Parenthood. The de Blasio Administration will do everything in its power to fight the gag rule and protect the fundamental right of women to control their reproductive health, including comprehensive sexual health education, contraception, cancer screenings, STI testing and treatment and access to safe abortions.

Despite the very real challenges we face in Albany and Washington, I am grateful for a City budget that supports the Department’s work and advances our goals to protect New Yorkers, preserve communities and make our City healthier. Before closing, I want to acknowledge my excellent leadership team, who are here with me today, and the Department’s staff for continuing to achieve so much on behalf of all New Yorkers. For me, public health is a team sport. As I’ve said before, they represent the very best in their fields and bring expertise and passion to our work every day. Thank you, I am happy to answer your questions.