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 2020 Preliminary Budget

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Good afternoon, Chair Ayala 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 and Dr. Hillary Kunins, Acting Executive Deputy Commissioner for Mental Hygiene. 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 address a stark reality: For far too long, zip codes have determined how long or how well individuals have lived. I know all too well the outsized role that the social determinants of health—such as housing, education and socioeconomic status—can play in an individual’s and a community’s health. I also know first-hand the effects that mental illness can have on individuals, family, friends and the community. As Health Commissioner, I am squarely focused on putting communities, and particularly immigrants, at the heart of our work. This is critical to tackling our biggest challenges, from the opioid overdose epidemic and mental illness, to chronic diseases and HIV/AIDS. Integrating mental and physical health approaches, along with bridging public health and healthcare delivery, will be pivotal strategies in closing the gap of racial 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.

The work the Health Department undertakes around mental health is vast and varied. Broadly, we are focused on three areas: Prevention – raising awareness, reducing stigma and creating more supportive environments to prevent mental health crises before they begin; treatment – providing opportunities to connect people with care and enhancing the existing mental health care delivery system; and support – so that those who are living with mental illness and development disabilities can do so to their fullest potential. The Health Department does not do this work alone. I want to thank the community based organizations, service providers, my fellow Commissioners and their staff and many others who are working tirelessly every day. I also want to thank Speaker Johnson, Chair Ayala and others in the Council for their leadership on these efforts.

I want to start by highlighting a few areas of focus in the past year. In 2018, we focused significant resources on addressing the opioid overdose epidemic through HealingNYC. Launched in 2017, HealingNYC’s $60 million a year investment increased the City’s capacity to respond to the crisis in partnership with communities, and health care and social service providers. Last year, we expanded our public messaging campaigns through “Living Proof”, a citywide media awareness campaign that features New Yorkers who are receiving medications for addiction treatment. These ads highlight that effective treatment for opioid use disorder is available, and challenge the stigma around addiction and medications for addiction treatment. I want to thank the brave New Yorkers who shared their stories for this campaign in order to bring addiction out of the shadows and encourage others to seek effective treatment.

Although we are making progress, the opioid overdose epidemic continues to claim too many lives, and certain neighborhoods are disproportionately affected. In November, the Administration announced $8 million to the Bronx Action Plan, which recognizes the South Bronx’s outsized burden of fatal drug overdose and dedicates additional HealingNYC resources
in these neighborhoods. Through this plan, we are educating Bronxites on the dangers of fentanyl, and engaging people who use drugs and connecting them to care and other services. We also empower community organizations to help their neighbors. I want to thank Chair Ayala and Council Member Salamanca for their steadfast focus on the opioid overdose crisis in their communities and for bringing attention to the specific needs of the Bronx in this epidemic.

We have also deepened our partnership with the NYPD and FDNY, putting public health approaches at the forefront of the City’s response for individuals in crisis. In 2018, we launched Health Engagement and Assessment Teams, or HEAT. These teams, comprised of mental health professionals and peer workers, provide health-focused support and resources to people referred by public safety agencies and through targeted canvassing. Five HEAT teams operate 16 hours a day throughout New York City. In addition, we expanded the Co-Response model from 8 to 16 hours a day. Three Co-Response Teams, comprised of two NYPD officers and a DOHMH mental health clinician, were deployed almost 1,800 times last year to provide a public health response to individuals in crisis. Additionally, we made progress towards opening up two Health Diversion Centers in the Bronx and East Harlem. The centers will open in the fall and will provide the NYPD with an alternative for arrest or hospitalization for individuals with mental health, substance use, and other social service needs. The Health Diversion Centers will offer short-term stabilizing services and referrals to long term care.

Finally, through ThriveNYC, the City is enhancing mental health services and behavioral support programs in every school. Using a three-tiered model of universal, selective, and targeted services, we have implemented intensive training for school staff, enhanced group services for students at risk, and provided new individual services for students with identified mental health needs. When I started at the Health Department in 2003, there was only one staff person overseeing school mental health services for the Department of Education. Today, through the investments of ThriveNYC, 134 Health Department staff support the mental health expansion across the education system, and every public school now has access to mental health services.

CITY BUDGET

I will now turn to the preliminary budget. I am pleased to report that Mental Hygiene and Early Intervention have approximately 900 employees and an operating budget of $816 million, of which $369 million is City Tax Levy. The remainder is Federal and State dollars.

Under the de Blasio Administration, City Tax Levy funding for Mental Hygiene services has grown by 167 percent, from $138 million in fiscal year 2014 to over $369 million in this year’s preliminary plan. This represents an unprecedented commitment to strengthening the mental health care system in New York City and addressing the opioid overdose epidemic. Most of the funding increase is due to the investments under ThriveNYC and HealingNYC, which allowed us to implement new public health approaches to mental health as well as expand existing programming. ThriveNYC started a long needed conversation about mental health and its role in individual and community health. However, it does not stand alone. It is integrated into the longstanding work of the Health Department, complements the existing mental health care delivery system and builds on the great work that community based organizations have been doing for years. I am grateful to
this Administration and the First Lady’s leadership for bringing mental wellness to the forefront of our conversation about health.

The preliminary fiscal year 2020 budget allocates approximately $1.3 million to expand two key projects, including $500,000 and four new staff to improve the experience New Yorkers have when they contact NYC Well. New Yorkers have continued to contact NYC Well for 24/7 crisis counseling, peer support, and information about and referral to behavioral health services. In 2018, NYC Well answered nearly 260,000 calls, texts and chats and made over 49,000 referrals to behavioral health services and supports. The new funds will ensure that New Yorkers receive the best possible crisis intervention, counseling and support from NYC Well.

The preliminary budget also adds $792,000 to enhance the capacity of four Syringe Service Programs in the South Bronx and Washington Heights. This funding will support expanded outreach and engagement with people who use drugs, and delivery of harm reduction services in parks and areas with public drug use.

**FEDERAL**

The City’s actions to address mental wellness and opioids are unprecedented. However, more could be done with support from Washington. I want to highlight one key item that I recently spoke about with our representatives on Capitol Hill.

Today, every physician in New York City can write a prescription for an opioid, but only a fraction can prescribe medication for the treatment of addiction. That isn’t right. It shouldn’t be easier to write a prescription for an opioid than it is to write a prescription for medication to treat addiction. The Department has trained more than 1,500 physicians to prescribe buprenorphine since 2016, and there were a total of 2,358 physicians in New York City who prescribed the medication in 2018. But in the midst of a crisis, we need to eliminate structural barriers to treatment. Every physician should be equipped to treat their patients. Congress should act immediately to eliminate regulatory barriers that prevent physicians from providing methadone and buprenorphine to individuals in need. I urged our representatives in Washington to look into this issue further and I would appreciate your voices on this important matter as well.

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

Thank you. I am happy to take questions.