



Testimony

of

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New York City Department of Health and Mental Hygiene

before the

**New York City Council Committee on Health
Jointly with the Committee on Finance and the
Committee on Mental Health, Developmental Disability, Alcoholism,
Substance Abuse & Disability Services**

on the

FY 2016 Executive Budget

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Good morning Chairpersons Johnson, Ferreras, Cohen and members of the committees. I am Dr. Mary Bassett, Commissioner of the New York City Department of Health and Mental Hygiene. I am joined today by First Deputy Commissioner Dr. Oxiris Barbot and Sandy Rozza, the Deputy Commissioner for Finance at the Department. Thank you for the opportunity to testify on our Executive Budget for fiscal year 2016.

This Administration, which places social justice at the heart of its agenda, has worked assiduously to protect and promote the physical and mental health of all New Yorkers. Our commitment to addressing gaps in mortality and health status has been a core focus during our first 17 months. The Mayor has articulated this vision through the OneNYC plan, and specifically, the goal of reducing premature mortality by 25 percent by 2040, while reducing racial and ethnic disparities. This is the frame through which the Department's work will be seen; whether it is by monitoring air quality to inform how we can control emissions, facilitating better stairway access to encourage physical activity, or requiring multi-unit housing locations to create and inform tenants of their policy on smoking.

This work begins with our youngest and most vulnerable New Yorkers. We must promote the healthy development of children through a multi-disciplinary and inter-agency approach. The Department's work, led by Deputy Commissioner George Askew, considers how we can take a holistic approach that targets communities and recognizes that a child's well-being is closely tied to his or her environment. We must align neighborhood institutions, services and residents to ensure that all children are healthy and safe.

It was in this context that we recently launched the "Talk to Your Baby" campaign. This initiative highlights the everyday moments – such as grocery shopping, bath time or preparing dinner – that provide wonderful opportunities to talk, read and sing to young children. We hope to empower all parents with the knowledge that simple things, like pointing to and identifying an orange in a grocery store, can have powerful effects on their child's developing brain. This campaign was developed in collaboration with the New York City Children's Cabinet, a group of commissioners and directors from 20 different City agencies and offices. It recognizes that by age three, children from low-income families have heard *more than 30 million* fewer words than children from high-income families. We can, and we must, reduce this disparity, to promote and protect the wonder of childhood to create a better future for all New Yorkers.

Budget Highlights

Let me now turn to the fiscal year 2016 budget for the Department of Health and Mental Hygiene. The Department's current operating budget is \$1.4 billion, of which \$644 million is City Tax Levy and the remainder is federal, state and private dollars. This reflects a net increase

in spending of \$52 million from City Tax Levy from fiscal year 2015. I am also pleased to report that our agency, at the Mayor's request, has found \$7.5 million in programmatic and contractual savings that will have no impact on services. These efficiencies will be achieved by reducing spending on areas such as consultants and temporary staff, re-negotiating service contracts with our maintenance and information technology providers, and reducing contractual spending by bringing some services "in-house."

The fiscal year 2016 Executive Budget reflects our City's pressing health needs. For example, rising homelessness remains a profound barrier to mother and child health and safety. Nearly 23,000 children are in a New York City shelter on any given night, and the average stay for families with children lasted 427 days. It is so important that the Department received \$1.5 million to offer home visiting services to all mothers of infants who reside in Department of Homeless Services' shelters. This initiative will reach 1,800 new mothers; we will be able to educate them on breastfeeding and infant safety, and link them to supportive services.

Our inter-agency collaboration also extends to mental health care, where the Department has looked across disciplines to address the full need for prevention, treatment, and system reform. The budget adds \$1.7 million in fiscal year 2016 and \$3.7 million in fiscal year 2017 and beyond for crucial mental health services in our correctional health system. This funding will provide for psychiatric assessments and after-school therapeutic arts programming for all youth under 21 at Rikers Island, along with substance abuse programming for 16 to 21-year-olds in our correctional system. Separate funding is also allocated for relationship counseling for all foster care teens, geriatric mental health in senior centers, and a significant expansion of mental health services in schools and all contracted family shelters. I want to thank the First Lady and Executive Deputy Commissioner Dr. Gary Belkin for their leadership and advocacy on this broad range of mental health issues. As the First Lady has so eloquently said, we need to make a communitywide commitment to speaking our pain about mental health. In this way, we shatter the stigma and take that critical first step toward healing.

As we launch this broad undertaking to improve mental health outcomes, we also need to renew our effort to reduce tobacco use, which remains the leading cause of premature, preventable death in New York City. As many as 12,000 New Yorkers die every year from tobacco-related illnesses, and smoking is much more common among those with poor mental health. Thousands of New Yorkers live with painful and debilitating disease caused by smoking and exposure to secondhand smoke, including heart disease, stroke, diabetes, many cancers and emphysema. In the past three years, there has been a statistically significant increase in the number of New York City adults who smoke. For the first time since 2007, the number of smokers in the City rose above one million. These setbacks coincide with a more than 45

percent reduction in funding for tobacco control. As such, the Department has decided to dedicate \$1.28 million in additional funding to its tobacco control initiatives. We will continue our landmark advertising campaigns and seek innovative ways to reverse this troubling trend.

Our budget also allows the Department to dramatically expand our work to reduce rats and improve communities. We will add 50 staff members, at a cost of \$2.1 million in City Tax Levy for fiscal year 2016, to aggressively combat rat reservoirs. These reservoirs are environments that offer ideal conditions for large numbers of rats to live and breed. They typically exist over areas that may include parks, sewers, street medians, compromised sidewalks and subways. We anticipate that targeting rat reservoirs will benefit the immediate area by reducing the rat population, protecting infrastructure and contributing to cleanliness and hygiene.

The budget also reflects the Administration's commitment to building full-service animal shelters in every borough. We will spend \$1.2 million to hire two new staff, to manage our search for sites in the Bronx and Queens. I know how much we all care for animals – including your beloved Mousse, Chair Johnson – and I am thrilled to move forward on this initiative.

Program Updates

I want to now update you on some of the programs that my staff and I have been working on. The Center for Health Equity continues its innovative work to decrease health disparities, and in the coming year, will move to fully establish its Office of Faith Based Initiatives. This includes the hiring of three community coordinators and allows us to develop a strategic plan for addressing chronic disease-related health disparities. I am also pleased that the Executive Budget includes funding for the Center's Neighborhood Health Hubs initiative. New funding will result in a re-imagining of District Health Center sites, in East Harlem and Bedford-Stuyvesant, for multi-sector community health planning programs. These Hubs will bolster our District Public Health Office engagement in neighborhoods that experience a disproportionate share of the disease burden, and enhance regular coordination and collaboration with community organizations, institutions, and residents. In East Harlem, they will operate in concert with our Community Health Workers who link structural and neighborhood-level interventions to clinical care, to reduce the drivers of disparity in our City.

The Department also remains concerned about drug use in our communities; in particular, we are closely monitoring synthetic marijuana use, following a spike in early April, when we tracked 120 emergency department visits from the drug. Synthetic marijuana is a mixture of herbs, which many people inaccurately believe is safe. It often contains dried, shredded plant material onto which chemicals are sprayed. Smoking the substance can create dangerous effects including anxiety, paranoia, rapid heart rate and vomiting. I want to thank Speaker Mark-

Viverito for highlighting this problem in East Harlem and across the City. We urge New Yorkers who see this drug for sale to report it to 311. It is important for all New Yorkers to understand that, despite what the package may say, there is no way of knowing exactly what synthetic marijuana users are putting into their bodies. I am also pleased that the budget contains \$1.25 million for naloxone and buprenorphine, to reduce death and other health consequences of opioid misuse and addiction. The Department, facing an average of 700 unintentional overdose deaths per year, continues to take a multi-pronged approach toward drug-use prevention.

Emergency preparedness is another important priority for the Department. This investment in preparedness has not only been critical for our successful response to small and large emergencies, most recently Ebola, but has also supported public health activities and increased our community resiliency and engagement work. In late April, Deputy Commissioner Marisa Raphael testified before the United States House of Representatives Committee on Homeland Security regarding ‘Strategic Perspectives on the Bioterrorism Threat.’ Marisa spoke on the need for continued investment in public health preparedness and our response to emergencies. Federal Public Health Emergency Preparedness funding for New York City has decreased 35 percent from its peak in FY 2005, which has led to a 47 percent reduction in our public health preparedness and response workforce. This shortsightedness is a mistake; there must be a sustained commitment to major urban centers, such as New York City, so we can be prepared, prevent, and respond to what comes next.

Legislative Updates

In addition to its programmatic agenda, the Department continues to pursue its priorities legislatively. One critically important issue is the ability of pharmacists to administer vaccinations for different diseases. Currently, 47 states, including the District of Columbia and Puerto Rico, allow pharmacists to administer all of the vaccinations endorsed by the Advisory Committee on Immunization Practices. New York, sadly, lags on this issue; pharmacists’ authority to vaccinate – which is set to sunset in 2015 - only allows them to administer influenza, pneumococcal zoster and meningococcal vaccinations to adults aged 18 and older. It means that, in neighborhoods where New Yorkers cannot easily travel to or make time to see their doctors, we limit their access to getting the vaccines they need. Pharmacists, who are regulated by the State Department of Education, offer vaccination in safe environments. We encourage people to visit their doctors; pharmacists are a complement, and not a substitute, for seeing a primary care provider. Yet when it comes to preventing harmful diseases, ready access is crucial. Since the State first authorized pharmacists to offer adult influenza vaccinations, the coverage rate has jumped from 53 to 67 percent citywide. Following this policy change, we have seen significant improvement in vaccination rates among Blacks, and a narrowed gap in vaccination rates between Black and White New Yorkers. We look forward to working together on this issue.

I want to lastly touch on an important question. As we say in our dog-licensing media campaign: “Is your dog is a real New Yorker?” A lost pet can be reunited with its owner through the Department’s Dog eLocator system, and run off-leash in City dog runs, only if it has a City license. And funds from this state-mandated program support free and low-cost spay and neuter programs for dogs and cats, promoting responsible pet ownership. I am pleased to report that, with thanks to Assembly Member Kavanaugh and Senator Serrano, the Governor signed legislation last year to allow the City to set its own dog licensing fee. I look forward to working with the Council on legislation, so we can act quickly to make licensing better.

I believe that the City’s budget – by addressing income inequality, improving affordable housing, and reducing the number of low wage jobs in our City – will improve public health in our five boroughs. Thank you again for the opportunity to testify, and your support for the Department’s work. Dr. Barbot, Ms. Rozza and I would be pleased to answer any questions.