



Testimony

of

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**New York City Department of Health and Mental Hygiene**

before the

**New York City Council Committee on Health**

on

**FY 2017 Preliminary Budget**

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Council Chambers, City Hall  
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Good afternoon, Chairman Johnson 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 Sandy Rozza, Deputy Commissioner for Finance. Thank you for the opportunity to testify on the Department's Preliminary Budget for Fiscal Year 2017.

The Department continues its focus on strengthening the health of our neighborhoods, because in this city, our health status should not be determined by our zip code. In the past year, the Department has released Community Health Profiles for each of the 59 community districts—from Canarsie to Chelsea—to expand information available about the health of our neighborhoods. We have launched Take Care New York 2020, our blueprint for a healthier life for every New Yorker, which we are taking directly to community members. In consultations across the city, residents have been identifying the health issues that matter most to them. And later this year, three Neighborhood Health Action Centers will open in parts of the city with disproportionately high rates of chronic disease and premature death. Located in previously under-utilized District Health Center buildings, these new Action Centers will provide coordinated, community-based programming and health service delivery. We have also begun to implement ThriveNYC, which outlines 54 initiatives to support New Yorkers' mental well-being. And we are making real on our promise to end the epidemic of HIV/AIDS. All told, in initiatives large and small in scale, we are targeting the Department's resources to further health equity.

### **City Budget**

The Department has approximately 6,000 employees and an operating budget of \$1.4 billion, of which \$485 million is City Tax Levy. The remainder is federal, State and private dollars. I am pleased that the Mayor increased the Department's City Tax Levy budget from \$485 million in Fiscal Year 2016 to \$558 million in Fiscal Year 2017. This increase includes \$42 million for ThriveNYC, \$15 million to institute recommendations of the "Ending the Epidemic" Task Force and \$2.4 million for a comprehensive effort to register and oversee the maintenance of all New York City cooling towers and monitor them for Legionella, the bacteria responsible for Legionnaires' disease. These funding increases will help the Department better protect New Yorkers; I thank the Mayor and the Council for their support.

I am thrilled that this budget reinforces our commitment to supporting the statewide effort to bring the number of new HIV infections in New York State to below 750 per year by 2020. For New York City, the national epicenter of the epidemic, this means a target of 600 new cases per year. We will add 143 new staff in the next two fiscal years, as we continue to implement the City's plan to end the AIDS epidemic. Our vision—which draws upon recommendations made by the Governor's Task Force, including representatives from the Department—enhances awareness of and improves access to sexual health services, connects people to medications that prevent and treat HIV, and uses science to improve HIV prevention efforts. This increased funding will build upon the Department's current activities, including extensive education and outreach on pre-exposure prophylaxis or PrEP. We also have launched the innovative "PlaySure" citywide media campaign. As part of the campaign, we have recently created the PlaySure kit, which includes condoms, lubricant and the prevention pill of a person's choice, whether birth control or PrEP. Key barriers to successful HIV treatment are mental illness, substance use and the lack of stable housing. Our ability to meet this ambitious plan to end the epidemic depends on adequately addressing these issues as well as access to medical care. The Mayor's financial commitment in the FY 2017 budget reflects the City's national and international leadership on this issue. I also want to thank *you*, Chairman Johnson, for your leadership in this area.

I am also pleased that this budget includes funding to inspect cooling towers across New York City. As I am sure you all remember, this past summer we were confronted with 138 cases and 16 deaths from Legionnaires' disease in the South Bronx. The Department's disease detectives quickly identified the potential sources and brought to light the need to more effectively regulate the city's cooling towers. The Administration and Council worked together to quickly pass legislation that allows us to do just that. The City's registration of cooling towers will permit us to more quickly identify the potential source of Legionella in a future outbreak, and ultimately—we hope—will reduce the incidence of this disease. New York City now has the most rigorous cooling tower oversight in the nation and, to my knowledge, the world.

### **State Budget**

Before a final State budget is adopted, I want to bring some portions of it to your attention. I have also expressed my concerns to legislators in Albany.

One of my primary concerns is the fiscal uncertainty for School-Based Health Centers, which provide comprehensive primary medical care, dental, vision and mental health services at no out-of-pocket cost to the City's students. These facilities are overseen by the Health Department, the Department of Education and community providers. They increase access to health care for youth in our public schools, students whose families live in our most deprived communities. The clinics help reduce emergency room visits, prevent unnecessary hospitalizations and lower New York City's total annual Medicaid expenditures. We have successfully expanded the activities and the number of these clinics. However, the push to fold these vital programs into the State's Medicaid Managed Care program would result in a substantial financial loss, programmatic and administrative challenges and the closure of some locations. I want to thank the Senate and Assembly for proposing a one year delay in the carve-in to Medicaid Managed Care for School Based Health Centers in their recently released "one-house" budget bills; the Department will continue to advocate for a permanent carve-out, to enable School-Based Health Centers to continue to bill Medicaid directly. We want to streamline the budget process for these sites across our city and reinforce their financial footing.

We are appreciative that the proposed state budget again includes funding for the Nurse-Family Partnership program. This program has demonstrated success in improving health outcomes for low-income, first-time mothers and their babies. It saves New York City an average of more than \$20,000 per child by the time the child turns 18. For this reason, we believe funding should be increased from the proposed \$3 million in the Executive Budget to at least \$5 million. I want to thank Senator Squadron for championing this program in Albany, and we are grateful for Speaker Mark-Viverito's commitment to this program in the City. Investments in early childhood reverberate across a lifetime. Support to the Nurse-Family Partnership program underscores the City's commitment to early childhood development.

### **Federal Budget**

As we advocate for changes in the City and State budgets, the Department also monitors the work of Congress to protect New Yorkers. Public health emergency preparedness funding is our foremost concern in Washington, D.C., as we are charged with protecting New Yorkers from existing and emerging public health threats. The city faced the novel H1N1 flu virus in 2009, Superstorm Sandy in 2012, Ebola in 2014, Legionella in 2015 and now in 2016, the Zika virus. In my tenure as Commissioner, we have activated our emergency response structures

nine times. For the first time in our history, we were activated for three separate public health threats at the same time. Federal emergency preparedness funding, via the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention Public Health Emergency Preparedness Program (PHEP) and the Assistant Secretary for Preparedness and Response Hospital Preparedness Program (HPP) cooperative agreements, has enabled the Department to make vital investments to increase our overall capacity to respond to public health emergencies. This is evidenced by the current response to Zika: our staff is diligently preparing to interrupt transmission by conducting surveillance on and taking steps to control the local mosquito population. Yet, as the City's HPP funding is down 38 percent since Fiscal Year 2004, and PHEP funding is down 35 percent from Fiscal Year 2005, we are concerned about sustained funding for our work. I am pleased that the Mayor testified before the House Homeland Security Committee to emphasize how disastrous it will be to cut preparedness grants. I want to echo his remarks and urge Congress to make funding allocations in a manner that reflects the scale of the response and the magnitude of illness and death faced in high-threat, high-density urban areas.

### **Programmatic Initiatives**

The Department remains an innovator and leader in public health nationwide and internationally; we are in constant consultation with the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, other health departments and local community-based organizations to share our technical expertise. I always take pride in discussing the work of this Agency, and I want to highlight a few of our initiatives.

In our Bureau of Chronic Disease Prevention and Tobacco Control, we continue to confront New York City's profound disparities in rates of hypertension and premature mortality. The City's Sodium Warning Rule, passed by the Board of Health last September, identifies high-sodium menu items in chain restaurants and provides a health warning on the risk of consuming these products. I am thrilled that the State Supreme Court upheld this rule. It is a win for the health of every New York City resident. The warning gives New Yorkers the information necessary to make informed decisions about their diets and their health. Although the New York State Appellate Division has granted an interim stay of enforcement, we are confident that this court, too, will uphold the rule. This policy, along with the efforts this Bureau has undertaken to increase access to healthy foods and reduce tobacco use, makes us a healthier city.

In our Bureau of Primary Care Access and Planning, we are working to launch ActionHealthNYC, formerly referred to as “Direct Access”, a program to provide health care to uninsured immigrants, in partnership with the Mayor’s Office of Immigrant Affairs. This comprehensive non-insurance program will begin this spring, serving 1,200 New York City residents in the first year. It will use IDNYC as its enrollment card and will include a dedicated network of providers. The program will offer affordable fees for participants and will include coordinated access to primary and specialty care. The Department is leading a comprehensive evaluation of this demonstration program. We are gratified to be working with Health + Hospitals and our city’s Federally Qualified Health Centers as we build a new health care access program for those who remain ineligible for insurance options through the New York State Health Insurance Marketplace.

In our Bureau of Veterinary and Pest Control Services, we continue to coordinate rat control efforts citywide. The Mayor’s Rodent Task Force focuses on City-owned properties. Our Rat Academy trains and promotes best practices for all City agencies, community board and neighborhood associations and professional pest control companies. Our Rat Reservoir initiative is fully active in 25 neighborhoods; in some areas of the city, we have seen reductions in signs of rats between 60 and 100 percent. And I am proud that we are also participating in joint rodent inspections of the City’s shelters; we have performed over 400 inspections since the beginning of Fiscal Year 2016, and we will conduct inspections at nearly 650 sites by July 1, to improve conditions in shelters.

### **Concluding Thoughts**

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. I would like to acknowledge my leadership team. They bring excellence and dedication to our work every day. I thank the Council and this Committee for your tremendous work to improve the health of New Yorkers. We are happy to answer your questions.