

The breadth of our responsibility to protect health

Testimony by Naomi Zewde, PhD Assistant Professor at the Graduate School of Public Health and Health Policy, City University of New York.

This virus should be able to infect anyone. Yet, as the epidemiologists and the state health department tell us, we see substantial disparities in contraction and deaths by zip code, by race, and largely as a function of underlying economic and socially-constructed vulnerabilities.

We all have a responsibility to harness the considerable power of this state in the interest of its residents' health. I'd like to give an overview of some of the threats individuals are facing that make some communities vulnerable to contracting this virus.

The mission is critical. One out of four COVID deaths nationwide is in NY state, and nearly one in three deaths (30%) worldwide was in the US. By addressing our vulnerabilities as a state, we can stem the death count of this crisis. We have a very real responsibility to act at this moment.

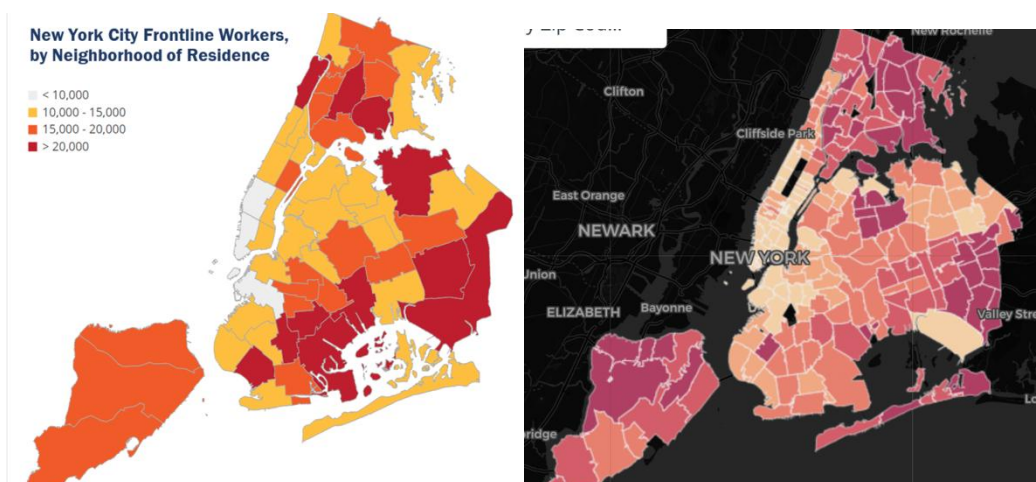
Frontline workers Give every frontline worker (as defined by the comptroller) unemployment compensation, whether or not they decide to continue working.

Many frontline workers don't quit (although it might be financially rational to collect unemployment) because they are passionate about their jobs and because it will be difficult to find another job in the looming recessionary environment. Even if they or a family member is sick or at risk, they continue to show up for what is often low wages, with the fear of joblessness outweighing their fear for their own health.

They have to pay rent ([nearly half](#) of state residents are rent-burdened, far more for lower-income retail employees).

Make essential work a more rewarding choice and less an exploitation of survivalist fears about the future. Then, maybe we can alleviate some of the COVID discrepancies

And your constituents want this. They clap every day at 7 pm. Sharp!



Cancel rent: Rent is the single biggest bill that many state residents face. Canceling rent for just two months will reduce people's need to go outside and to engage in labor and trade. Canceling rent will stem exploitive work arrangements. Cancelling rent for just two months will give us enough time to shelter in place and reduce transmission rates caused by work activities.

Rent is a burden! Now more than ever. Pre-virus, 20% of adults in homeless families in NYC shelters have at least one member of the family [employed full time](#).

Voting: Mail everyone a ballot for June and for November.

In the state of CO, 97.5% of eligible voters voted by mail in this year's primary.

NY doesn't get that much participation through in-person or mail in. Contrary to popular beliefs about expanding the vote, Republicans still win in CO. This is not partisan.

We should expect disparities in people's ability to request an absentee ballot on time and to select "temporary illness" as the reason. Cases, and disparities, will spike as people go out of their way to make sure that legislators can keep their jobs.

We still need in-person voting for people with housing instability and disabilities but the bulk can be done by mail.

Care packages: South Korea sent every adult a care package with enough to survive without going outside for two weeks, including:

- Toothbrushes/ paste
- Masks/ gloves
- Noodles/ soy sauce/ rice/ canned fish and meats
- 30 eggs per person
- More

Arrests and prisons: Immediately intervene to stop all distancing arrests, release pre-trial detainees and aging persons in prison

We will not arrest and detain our way out of this contagious viral disease.

- Friendly police officers hand out masks at Central Park and Hudson River Park but arrest and detain Black, LatinX, and poor and segregated persons around the city.
- Thousands of Kalief Browders are living out pre-trial death sentences all over the state.
- Distancing arrests are oxymoronic, and harmful to health of state residents.

Stress: Harmful. The goal, broadly, is to alleviate.

The medical and economics literature has been clear for decades: stress is a vulnerability, and is shouldered by people in poverty.

- Any of the 80% of adults who suffer from cold sores will know that sores appear during times of stress because the immune system cannot keep the virus at bay.
- The state must alleviate, not impose, stress

The health benefits of economic stability, and the corollary, heighten the imperative act.

People-centric policies

This legislature has voted to give the governor power over our public resources. These resources are being taken from our hospitals and given to billionaires to solve our problems.

Governments frequently fall prey to privatization in the aftermath of crisis. (Naomi Klein's Shock Doctrine)

We have highly credentialed teachers all over this state whose lives have been dedicated to advancing their students wellbeing. Why, then, would we give all the power to west-coasters who have amassed billions by building computers and selling advertising data from a search algorithm?

New Orleans now has only 4 public schools.

Instead, enact these measures that put the health and wellbeing of your constituents and our essential workers first and foremost, you too will be heroes. Every day matters.

1. Unemployment payments for all frontline workers
2. Rent abatement
3. Mail in ballots
4. Care packages
5. Immediate stop to distancing arrests, release pre-trial and aging incarcerated people
6. Human centric policies that meet our needs and alleviate our stressors