



**Testimony of Mary T. Bassett, MD, MPH
Commissioner of Health**

**Joint Legislative Public Hearing
on the State Fiscal Year 2022-2023 Executive Budget Proposal**

February 8, 2022

Good morning, Chairpersons Krueger, Rivera, Weinstein and Gottfried, and members of the New York State Senate and Assembly. My name is Dr. Mary Bassett. Thank you for the opportunity to testify on Governor Hochul's Executive Budget for Fiscal Year 2023 as it relates to the health and wellbeing of New Yorkers. Joining me is Brett Friedman, the State Medicaid Director.

I began my tenure here at the Department just about two months ago, the day before we first learned of a case of the Omicron variant here in New York State. A record-setting winter surge in new COVID-19 cases quickly followed. The rising cases required us to bring forth all the resources we had to shore up our public health and healthcare infrastructure; mobilize all available state and federal resources; increase our testing capacity to meet increasing demand; and double down on our efforts to get New Yorkers vaccinated and boosted against COVID-19. This strategy is working, as evidenced by the rapidly declining number of cases and hospitalizations we are now seeing.

Ending the COVID-19 pandemic has been - and will remain - our Department's top priority. We also must restore our public health institutions and workforce to help New Yorkers live healthier lives after the pandemic ends. And we must strengthen trust in science and public health.

The consequences of this pandemic extend beyond its dreadful toll in lives lost. Our lives have been upended, and we know that some of us will live with the effects of COVID-19 for a long time. The impact extends even further. For example, use of preventive care has fallen, affecting services from medication access to cancer screening. We see troubling increases in sexually transmitted infections, and a worsening opioid epidemic, with a tragic rise in the number of drug overdoses.

Governor Hochul's Executive Budget for Fiscal Year 2023 meets these needs and puts us on a path to a stronger Health Department and a healthier New York.

The Governor's vision prioritizes openness and transparency. In medicine, and in public service, we owe it to our patients and our constituents to tell them what they *need* to hear -- not just what they *want* to hear. It is the public's right to expect -- and our obligation to deliver -- recommendations based on sound science and public health expertise.

This vision also prioritizes racial equity and social justice. COVID-19 may have been caused by a new virus, but the societal conditions that made certain groups more vulnerable to COVID were not new. Indeed, COVID found its way through our collective failure to ensure safe workplaces, affordable homes, living wages and access to healthcare for all. And it highlighted how deep racial and

ethnic inequities continue to frame life chances. Even during this most recent Omicron wave, the COVID hospitalization rate for Black New Yorkers rose to two times that of white New Yorkers.

Such racial disparities are not due to biological differences. But the data clearly show that a person's race/ethnicity is a risk factor for severe illness and hospitalization. Considerations like age, co-morbidities and pre-existing medical conditions, and yes, race/ethnicity, should be considered in weighing whether some individuals are more likely than others to become severely ill from COVID.

Root causes of such disparities include racism. Last December, Governor Hochul signed a package of legislation that included declaring racism a public health crisis – taking numerous meaningful steps and signaling this Administration's commitment to righting the wrongs of systemic racism and injustice.

This year's Executive Budget is the best budget that the Department of Health has seen in a long time, providing an unprecedented investment in our health care system, Medicaid, public health programs and our own Department's work force. Governor Hochul understands that without a health workforce, there can be no pandemic response, and no significant progress in making our communities healthier.

The budget includes a multi-year investment of \$10 billion, with the goal of growing the healthcare workforce by 20 percent over the next five years. There is \$1.2 billion for healthcare and mental hygiene worker retention, including bonuses for full-time health workers. There is also \$500 million for wage increases through cost-of living adjustments.

And there is funding for the Health Department to hire a much needed 560 additional staff across the agency.

But a workforce alone does not give New Yorkers good healthcare. All New Yorkers must also have the means to access healthcare services. This budget updates the Medicaid Global Cap to make necessary investments in our Medicaid program – improving public health programs and programs serving older adults and enhancing critical health and social services – all while achieving savings through reforms and cost control efforts.

It restores the 1.5 percent reduction from the Fiscal Year 2021 budget and increases Medicaid rates across the board by an additional one percent.

The budget invests \$2.8 billion in payments directed to “safety net” hospitals that serve communities and care for patients hit hardest by COVID.

And it makes overdue investments in long-term care. Nursing homes are among the facilities that will benefit from a \$1.6 billion capital program to fund

much needed improvements. Additional dollars are also allocated to long-term care facilities to help them meet minimum staffing requirements.

Improving health and safety in our state's long-term care facilities extends far beyond COVID-19. Staff of these facilities must be adequately trained, supported, and equipped to provide the best possible care to their residents. Among the many initiatives related to healthcare worker education is a new "Nurses Across New York" program that provides loan forgiveness for nurses who spend three years working in an underserved community.

The Executive Budget also makes substantial investment in countless other areas of public health.

The Department's Wadsworth Center has been a beacon of science throughout this pandemic – from establishing the first diagnostic test for COVID-19 outside of the CDC to managing the regulatory process for labs across the state that conduct testing and screening for variants like Omicron. This budget includes \$2.4 billion to support capital infrastructure in healthcare and enhanced laboratory capacity, including \$750 million to build a new Wadsworth facility on one campus.

This Budget also utilizes more than \$100 million collected from pharmaceutical companies responsible for the opioid crisis to make unprecedented investments in addiction services.

The budget continues to support the Department's efforts to end the AIDS epidemic, and includes enhanced support to fund health services, education and training, and capacity building in support of New York's LGBTQ+ community.

We are also addressing gun violence in our state – an epidemic that has claimed far too many lives and has irreversibly affected the lives of countless others across every part of the state. The Department's new Office of Gun Violence Prevention will take a public health-driven approach to preventing gun violence and will deploy resources to those areas that need it most.

This budget invests \$20 million over two years in local health departments that have been at the forefront of this pandemic and countless other threats to health through the General Public Health Works, also known as Article 6. Further, an additional \$60 million will assist local health departments in the hiring and retention of county public health staff.

In closing, Governor Hochul's FY23 Executive Budget supports this Department's efforts to do what is necessary to protect New Yorkers throughout

this pandemic, and will enable all of us to live safe, healthy, and fulfilling lives in the years to come.

I want to thank Governor Hochul for investing in public health, and in our future. And I thank you, members of the Legislature, for the opportunity to address you today and work with you in the coming months and years. I look forward to answering your questions.