

The Honorable Andrew M. Cuomo  
Governor of New York State  
NYS State Capitol Building  
Albany, NY 12224

Dear Governor Cuomo:

We, the undersigned, are writing to thank you for your administration's commitment to addressing hepatitis C as a leading health disparity in New York and outline recommendations for strengthening our state's response. We urge you to implement these recommendations and ensure all relevant state agencies take steps to address the rising level of morbidity, mortality and avoidable healthcare costs associated with the hepatitis C epidemic.

Approximately 4 million people in the U.S. are infected with chronic hepatitis C virus (HCV), with at least 17,000 new infections every year. More Americans now die from HCV than HIV/AIDS, and the cost burden of the disease will exceed over \$80 billion nationwide during the next ten years. The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) recently issued guidance urging baby boomers to get tested, which is the age group with 75% of infections.

The good news is that unlike HIV, most people with chronic hepatitis C infection can be cured with current treatments, which are expected to improve even more in the coming years. New rapid tests make it easier for people to know whether they have been infected by HCV and need additional diagnostic tests to determine whether they have a chronic infection and potential damage to their liver. And there are strong evidence-based interventions to prevent the spread of HCV, which is primarily spread by unsafe injection practices among people who use drugs. The availability of effective treatment, diagnostic and prevention tools provide a valuable opportunity for New York to scale up our response to the epidemic.

The New York State Department of Health's (DOH) Viral Hepatitis Program cosponsored a series of Community Stakeholder Meetings in Long Island, Syracuse and New York City to share the latest HCV information and foster open dialogue. These meetings surfaced a number of gaps and needs in hepatitis C services that formed the basis for the following recommendations.

- Ensure adequate funding for viral load tests and care coordination services in community-based organizations currently providing hepatitis C antibody rapid tests. This model is currently being utilized in the New York City Check Hep C pilot project.
- Evaluate and support peer-delivered hepatitis C services in community-based organizations, where peers already provide support recruiting for HCV-Ab testing, prevention and education, support groups and treatment adherence support.
- Require basic reporting on HCV prevalence, availability of services, linkage to care and number of persons receiving HCV treatment in opioid treatment programs and correctional settings, two of the highest prevalence venues in New York.
- Prevent new HCV infections by ending waiting lists and closing gaps in geographic coverage for methadone maintenance and buprenorphine treatment for opioid

dependence, especially in Upstate New York and Long Island. In addition, syringe access programs should be integrated into substance use programs and other healthcare and social services with which people who inject drugs interact.

- Issue new guidance from the New York State Department of Health encouraging medical providers to offer HCV screening to people who were born between 1945 and 1965 (i.e. baby boomers), have a history of injection drug use or who are formerly incarcerated.
- Development of a comprehensive and coordinated plan to eliminate resource gaps and policy barriers that interfere with New York State's capacity to effectively address this public health crisis that involves the New York State DOH, Office of Alcoholism and Substance Abuse Services (OASAS), Department of Corrections and Community Supervision (DOCCS) and other appropriate state agencies.
- Issue an Anti-Mandatory Mail Order or AMMO. Consumers enrolled in New York State Medicaid Managed care plans have been forced to use out of state mail order pharmacies in order to receive specialty medications when trying to access medications that have the potential to cure HCV. Chronically infected HCV patients have multiple challenges that inhibit accessing mail order medications, which can be dangerously detrimental to their health. AMMO will help to eliminate gaps when accessing life saving treatment and care.

Fortunately, New York State has already begun to lay a foundation for scaling up our response to the hepatitis C epidemic, including \$2.1 million in new funding available through the Medicaid Redesign Team's proposal to promote hepatitis C care and treatment through service integration. We encourage you to build on existing images by implementing the recommendations outlined above.

Respectfully,

*List in alphabetical order*

After Hours Project  
AIDS Community Resources  
Association of Substance Abuse Providers (ASAP)  
Catholic Charities of Albany  
Center for Community Alternatives  
Citiwide Harm Reduction  
Community Health Action of Staten Island (CHASI)  
Courtland Prevention Resources (CPR)  
Economic Opportunities Council of Suffolk County  
Evers Pharmacy  
Family Services Network of New York (FSNNY)  
Five Towns Community Center  
FROST'D  
Harlem United  
Harm Reduction Coalition

Housing Works  
Latino Commission on AIDS  
Legal Action Center  
Long Island Association of AIDS Care (LIAAC)  
Long Island Minority AIDS Coalition (LIMAC)  
Lower East Side Harm Reduction Center  
New York Harm Reduction Educators (NYHRE)  
Planned Parenthood of Nassau County  
PRAXIS Housing Initiative  
REACH CNY Inc.  
Safe Horizon Street Works  
St. Anne's Corner of Harm Reduction (SACHR)  
Southern Tier AIDS Program (STAP)  
Town Total Health Pharmacy  
Upstate Medical University  
Village Care  
VOCAL New York (Voices Of Community Activists and Leaders)  
Washington Heights Corner Project (WHCP)

Cc:

Commissioner Nirav Shah, Department of Health  
Commissioner Arlene Gonzalez-Sanchez, Office of Alcohol and Substance Abuse  
Commissioner Brian Fischer, Department of Corrections and Community Supervision  
Director Humberto Cruz, AIDS Institute  
Director Colleen Flanigan, Viral Hepatitis Section, AIDS Institute  
Commissioner Thomas Farley, Department of Health and Mental Hygiene  
Assembly Member Richard Gottfried, Health Chair  
Assembly Member Steven Cymbrowitz, Alcohol & Drug Abuse Chair  
Senator Kemp Hannon, Health Chair  
Senator Jeffrey Klein, Alcoholism and Drug Abuse Chair

