



Testimony

of

**Hillary Kunins, MD, MPH, MS  
Executive Deputy Commissioner  
Division of Mental Hygiene  
New York City Department of Health and Mental Hygiene**

before the

**New York Senate Standing Committees on Health, Aging, and Investigations and  
Government Operations**

**AND**

**New York Assembly Standing Committees on Health, Aging, and Oversight, Analysis and  
Investigations**

on

**Residential health care facilities and COVID-19 New York City, Long Island and  
Westchester**

August 3rd, 2020

Good morning, I'm Dr. Hillary Kunins, Executive Deputy Commissioner of Mental Hygiene at the New York City Department of Health and Mental Hygiene (NYC Health Department).

The NYC Health Department is tasked with protecting the health and safety of all New Yorkers, and we have worked tirelessly through this public health emergency to do just that. During this unprecedented crisis, nursing homes have been particularly affected, and many lives were tragically lost. These facilities care for an extremely vulnerable population of older adults and have been especially hard-hit by the spread of COVID-19. Among the 169 nursing homes in NYC, New York State Department of Health reports 1,393 COVID-confirmed deaths and 1925 COVID-presumed deaths in nursing homes as of July 28th, 2020.

While the State Health Department has full regulatory and enforcement authority over nursing homes, the City is doing everything possible to provide guidance and support where we can. In May, Mayor de Blasio introduced a four-part plan to better protect seniors in nursing homes by providing additional, sustained support for this population.

As the first prong of this plan, the City committed to working closely with the State to support COVID-19 testing in nursing homes. In coordination with the State Health Department, we are working to support nursing homes to implement the Centers for Disease and Control's testing recommendation for this setting, which entails testing residents once a week to identify cases of COVID-19 and respond appropriately. The State Health Department conducted an initial round of testing in all NYC nursing homes to establish baseline prevalence of the virus, and the City Health Department followed up to offer continued weekly testing of residents. This program includes access to COVID-19 diagnostic testing supplies and no-cost testing with one of the City's partner labs.

In the event of new COVID cases in a nursing home, the City Health Department will work closely with the State Health Department with our teams of epidemiologists and infection control specialists to respond and control the spread of infection. These teams are assigned to nursing homes and other congregate settings to specifically support these facilities to control the transmission of COVID-19 in their settings.

In addition, we are connecting facilities to additional personnel to supplement staffing levels impacted by employees who may be out sick with symptoms or recovering from COVID-19. To date, we have already placed over 540 staff in nursing homes citywide.

The last prong of the Mayor's plan is to support home-based care for seniors as a feasible option for New Yorkers instead of relying on congregate settings, which are high-risk environments for the spread of viral respiratory diseases. This shift would help limit the spread of future outbreaks. Further, it would allow seniors to receive supportive services in the comfort and familiarity of their own homes and with more connection to their communities and families.

The City continues our efforts on the four parts of this plan: on-site repeat testing for residents, response teams, staffing support, and shifting to home care. We additionally supported nursing homes during the peak of COVID-19 transmission with weekly deliveries of Personal

Protective Equipment or PPE. Even as the City experiences this period of lower COVID-19 transmission, there is more work to be done to prepare for a potential resurgence of the virus this Fall.

We are committed to protecting the health and safety of New Yorkers who are residents of nursing homes. Thank you for the opportunity to testify.