

RE: Testimony to the Joint New York State Senate and Assembly

Budget Hearing — Health (scheduled for 2/28/2023)

Good day and thank you for the opportunity to offer this testimony! My name is Kathleen Nolan: I am a pediatrician and public health researcher, and I am speaking to you today as a representative of Physicians for Social Responsibility – New York, a not-for-profit group of New York State physicians, public health experts, and other allied health professionals. Among other things, we work to recognize the harmful health consequences of climate change, particularly those related to the combustion of fossil fuels. Our role is to alert physicians, the public, and policy makers to such consequences. We strongly support the continuation and expansion of state legislation and funding to accelerate our transition to renewable, sustainable, and health-promoting sources of electricity, heat, and power in New York.

PSR-NY stands united with residents of New York State in seeking the cleanest, safest, and most affordable ways to transport ourselves and to heat and light our homes and businesses. We also place emphasis on environmentally just practices that protect all communities in New York — now and into future generations.

Based on improving health for millions of New Yorkers, PSR-NY supports the initiatives and legislative agenda of Renewable Heat Now and Better Buildings New York. In particular, we endorse the Home Energy Affordable Transition Act (NY HEAT) (S2016 of 2023), the All-Electric Building Act (S562A, A920A of 2023), the Energy Efficiency, Equity, and Jobs Act (S3126CIA3996C of 2022), and Automatic Data Matching (S8362A, A9099A of 2022), along with Modifications to the Home Energy Assistance Program (“HEAP”) (S2496 of 2023) and Emergency HEAP (S4556 of 2023), as well as the creation of a Green Affordable Pre-Electrification (GAP) Fund for Low-to-Moderate Income households, coupled with increased funding for NYSERDA’s Regional Clean Energy Hubs.

While we are considering legislative initiatives that I believe will save money for New York State in their overall impact, my primary motivation in speaking today is to highlight my personal experience in growing up in an all-electric home and in caring for children with asthma during my training as a pediatrician.

My childhood home in Tennessee was heated with electricity, and I largely took for granted that clean, quiet, safe, affordable home environment until I entered homes, like most of those in New York, that are heated by noisy, smelly, expensive, and potentially explosive fossil-fuel sources. My dismay about children and families being forced to use such heating sources is compounded by the knowledge that heating and cooking with fossil fuels also makes children sick. Research suggests that in New York indoor combustion cooking likely accounts for over one in five cases of childhood asthma.

Asthma is the most common chronic disease in children, and while not usually fatal, asthma significantly impairs healthy activities and learning for thousands of children in New York, while frequently sending children and families to emergency rooms with wrenching symptoms requiring complex and expensive treatments. Increased rates and severity of asthma are also

associated with non-electric transportation sources of pollution. In New York, approximately one and a half million children and adults suffer in this way in an ongoing basis.

While the choice of home heating sources (and transportation modalities) are of course the prerogative of individuals, New York State can and should make policy and funding choices that encourage healthier alternatives, both as an investment to prevent ongoing and rising health care costs and climate-related expenditures but also as a way to lift up children and families who are suffering due to societal approaches over which individuals have little to no control. It is unconscionable that anyone — but especially children of color and children of lower economic status — should suffer increased rates and severity of asthma due to preventable sources of contamination. New York State should immediately cease all practices that serve as subsidies for the expansion of combustion-based home heating, while expanding opportunities for the rapid transition of homes to safe, renewable, and healthier sources of electricity and heat.

We can all breathe more easily when we head in this direction!

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