

NEW YORK STATE ASSEMBLY & SENATE JOINT PUBLIC HEARING on COVID-19 IMPACTS ON  
MINORITY COMMUNITIES

May 18, 2020

Good morning, chairs and members of the Assembly and Senate committees conducting this vitally important hearing (Senate: Cities, Health, Labor, Local Government and Women's Issues. Assembly: Cities, Health, Labor, Local Governments and the Black, Puerto Rican, Hispanic and Asian Legislative Caucus, the Task Force on Asian Pacific Americans, the Task Force on Puerto Rican/Hispanic Americans and the Task Force on Women's Issues.)

I want to thank you for inviting me to testify today at this public hearing to solicit recommendations on how to approach and mitigate systemic inequalities impacting minority communities that are disproportionately and intensified by COVID-19.

I am Cecilia Gentili, a Latina transgender activist who has fought long and hard for the rights of Transgender, Non-Conforming, Non-Binary (TCNCNB) people, those who are undocumented, sex workers and people using drugs. As principal at Transgender Equity Consulting, I currently serve as co-chair of The NEW Pride Agenda (NPA), an organization launched in 2019 to advance the needs and rights of those in our community who experience discrimination not only because they are lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender (LGBT), but also because they are people of color, immigrants, elderly, living in poverty, or living at the intersections of these identities.

Today,

I'd like to address the intersectionality of these issues as they affect my community.

### **Health Disparities**

As Assemblymember Linda Rosenthal precisely put it in her online April newsletter: "the virus has already exposed the many holes in the social safety net that is supposed to keep the most vulnerable from falling through the cracks". Protecting the most vulnerable New Yorkers demands that government at all levels continue funding critical social services that support the elderly, the young, people with disabilities, the unstably housed or homeless, the undocumented as well as those suffering from domestic violence, substance use disorder and the incarcerated.

Discrimination and high rates of poverty have created long-standing barriers to accessing quality, affordable health care for communities of color. Deep distrust of the health care system has led to widespread chronic health conditions like diabetes, hypertension, heart disease and

HIV. These health disparities leave communities of color at higher risk for COVID-19. These chronic conditions are widespread in LGBTQ communities of color as well.

On Saturday Politico reported that New York's safety-net hospitals that are primarily located in low-income neighborhoods and treat the most vulnerable populations deeply affected by health disparities – low-income and minority - are facing financial ruin after being on the front lines in the fight against the coronavirus. Facing impending Medicaid cuts, these hospitals are in precarious condition even with additional federal support.

### **HIV/AIDS & Safety-Net Providers**

Within the LGBTQ people of color communities, individuals who have been hit particularly hard are the immune-suppressed, transgender, elderly and the young. The End AIDS New York Community Coalition, comprising over 90 organizations from across the state, is committed to getting into care of people living with HIV and preventing new HIV infections. The coalition also works to address the underlying social and economic factors that put New Yorkers at elevated risk for acquiring HIV. New York's community-based health care providers, Designated AIDS Center and Ryan White-funded entities serve neighborhoods and communities that experience the worst health inequities. Fighting HIV/AIDS, Hepatitis C and the opioid epidemic have put Community Health Centers and other safety-net providers under severe financial strain as they struggle to serve vulnerable communities during the COVID-19 pandemic. These community-based organizations will continue to be critical to expanding testing and eventually ensuring equitable access to COVID-19 treatments and vaccines when they are developed.

### **Transgender, Senior & Youth**

Many of the most vulnerable members of our community – transgender, the elderly, youth and people of color – have seen the frayed safety net up close long before COVID-19 became a pandemic. There is not sufficient time to thank all the legislators who have worked long and hard to pass legislation and provide funding focused on patching the holes in the safety. But, I want to thank Senator Hoylman and Assemblymember Simotas for introducing the LGBT Long-Term Care Facility Bill of Rights; call out the LGBT Runaway and Homeless Youth Act (Hoylman/Ortiz) that became Chapter 361 of the Laws of 2019; and acknowledge Assembly Member Rozic and Senator Sepulveda for introducing a bill that allows the placement and treatment in inmates in correctional facilities in a manner consistent with their gender identity. We are also indebted to Assembly Member Harry Bronson for his attention to the needs of our LGBTQ elders and Assembly Member Deborah Glick and Danny O'Donnell for advocating for funding for transgender civil legal services.

## **People of Color as Essential Workers**

As chronicled in numerous articles and publications, Black, Hispanic, and Asian New Yorkers make up more than 70% of the city's essential workers, which includes transit, childcare, health care, cleaning service, and postal employees. Moreover, more than 40% of transit workers are black and 60% of frontline cleaning workers are Hispanic, according to a report released in March by New York City Comptroller Scott Stringer. These individuals have not only not had the luxury and privilege of working from home, but without them, the city would not be able to function as it does. These are the individuals who leave their families behind on a daily basis, thinking if today is the day they will contract something while working and unwittingly bring it back to their loved ones. The anxiety and stress these individuals have been enduring must not go unnoticed and should be repaid somehow. It is not enough to simply call these folks heroes, we need to act and treat them as such by compensating them for their heroism and selflessness.

## **The Cost of COVID-19 Care**

Even as the numbers of cases and deaths start to take a turn for the better, many New Yorkers are still worried about the cost of COVID-19 care and whether or not they will be able to get out of this financial whole. Over 1 million New Yorkers are uninsured, many of whom are people of color and essential workers. Even for those who are not essential workers, with unemployment at record highs, how can we expect these New Yorkers to cover the potential costs of COVID-19 care? The answer is we shouldn't. No one should be leaving this pandemic with even more debt than they entered it. Even with the gaping hole in Medicare funding, and the reality that many hospitals in communities of color are on their last dollar, we should not place the burden of covering these costs on the individuals who fall sick. We must figure out a way to forgive such expenses.

## **Conclusion**

In a joint press release issued last month by C. Virginia Fields of the National Black Leadership Commission on Health, Doug Wirth of Amida Care who is also my co-chair said: "Let's stand together, stay strong, and do all we can to break down barriers and fight for health care access, social justice, and equity for communities of color."

Now more than ever we need to come together to build a more equitable health care system that prioritizes COVID-19 testing in neighborhoods where people of color live and work and make sure that critical supplies and equipment get to hospitals serving our communities.

At the same time, we need to make sure that additional federal stimulus funds do not short-change safety-net hospitals and community-based safety net providers and instead are targeted to serving low-income and communities of color.

And, we understand that the federal stimulus bill passed by the House of Representatives Friday night contains an important non-discrimination provision that would ensure that funds in the bill do not allow for discrimination including against LGBTQ people. Together, we all need to make sure that the final bill includes these protections for all of us.

Thank you.