

Building Health Equity: Reflections, Initiatives, and Challenges in NYC

New York City Department of Health and Mental Hygiene

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By Robert Malinn

## ***Introduction:***

Good morning, everyone.

I am [Speaker's Name] from New York City's Department of Health and Mental Hygiene, and it's my honor to welcome you today.

Over the past decade, we've seen profound shifts in the public health landscape of our city, from the battles against infectious diseases to the fight for health equity.

We're here not just to reflect on these transformative years but to forge ahead with resilience, informed by lessons from the past and a deepened understanding of our public health ecosystem.

Our agency wants to hold a candid conversation about the current health of all New Yorkers, the strides we're making with proactive measures, and the emerging challenges that lie ahead.

In the spirit of transparency and collaboration, we're here to share that journey, celebrate our progress, and listen to community voices such as all of yours for feedback.

Together, we can recommit to enhancing the health and vitality of every New Yorker. Our collective dedication to public health is the keystone of our success, and I extend my gratitude for your continued partnership and support.

## ***Current State of Public Health in NYC:***

As it stands, the landscape of public health in New York City is shaped by our communities' efforts and the challenges that remain.

With a population exceeding 8 million, our city's health dynamics are as diverse as its residents, necessitating responsive and innovative public health strategies.

Recent data from the NYC Community Health Survey provide us with a detailed picture of our successes and ongoing struggles.

Notably, we have seen a significant decline in adult smoking rates, now at 12%, down from 14% three years ago—a testament to the effectiveness of our robust anti-smoking campaigns and regulations.

However, challenges such as obesity and diabetes continue to affect our communities, with approximately 24% of adult New Yorkers reporting obesity and 11% living with diabetes.

In our fight against communicable diseases, particularly COVID-19, our efforts have been marked by success due to widespread vaccination campaigns and public compliance with health advisories.

Over 75% of eligible New Yorkers are now fully vaccinated, positioning us as a leader among major cities in vaccination efforts nationwide.

This achievement not only demonstrates our community's resilience but also our capacity to mobilize quickly in response to health crises.

The impact of these vaccination efforts is evident in our decreased hospitalization and mortality rates from COVID-19, providing a clearer pathway toward recovery and normalization of city life.

Yet, the emergence of new variants poses a constant reminder of the need for vigilance and preparedness, which our health departments continue to prioritize.

On the front of mental health, the pandemic has underscored an urgent need for expanded services.

Reports indicate a noticeable increase in anxiety and depression across all demographics, with a significant spike noted among young adults.

In response, we have launched several targeted initiatives, including the expansion of our mental health hotline services and increased funding for community-based mental health programs, which have provided crucial support to those in need.

Our environmental health efforts have also seen substantial advancements.

Recent initiatives aimed at reducing air pollution have contributed to a measurable improvement in air quality across several boroughs, directly benefiting respiratory health city-wide.

As we reflect on these points, it's clear that each statistic and each story is a snapshot of lives that are intimately affected by our policies and initiatives.

It is our duty and privilege to use this data not just to inform but to spur action that makes meaningful differences in the lives of all New Yorkers.

We are committed to not just continuing these efforts but enhancing them, ensuring that every resident benefit from the best public health practices available.

### **Ongoing Initiatives:**

Our commitment to advancing public health in New York City is demonstrated through a series of robust, ongoing initiatives that address both emergent and persistent health challenges.

These initiatives reflect our adaptive strategies to meet the diverse needs of our communities.

Amidst the ongoing global pandemic, our efforts have intensified around combating communicable diseases, with a strong focus on COVID-19.

Building on our successful vaccination campaign, we are enhancing our disease surveillance systems to swiftly identify and mitigate the spread of infectious diseases.

This system now seamlessly integrates data from multiple health networks, allowing for real-time monitoring and rapid response.

Additionally, we continue our flu vaccination efforts, which have seen increased community participation, reflecting heightened public health awareness.

Our "ThriveNYC" initiative has been pivotal in expanding mental health services, particularly in underserved communities.

This expansion includes the introduction of mobile treatment units and the broadening of telehealth services, which have significantly increased accessibility.

We are also launching targeted mental health awareness campaigns that focus on reducing stigma and encouraging more New Yorkers to seek help when needed.

"Healthy Communities" continues to be a cornerstone of our approach to chronic disease prevention.

This initiative has been strengthened with new partnerships with local food banks and community gardens to improve access to healthy food options.

Additionally, we have increased our investment in public health education, focusing on lifestyle changes that prevent diseases like diabetes and heart disease.

Our fitness programs in public parks have also been expanded, offering free classes that encourage physical activity among residents of all ages.

In response to concerns about environmental health, particularly air quality, we have implemented stricter emissions standards and expanded our network of air quality monitors throughout the city.

These measures are supported by new city ordinances that promote greener construction practices and the gradual transition of public transport to electric vehicles.

Addressing the opioid epidemic remains a high priority. Our multifaceted approach includes not only the widespread distribution of naloxone but also the operation of recovery centers and support services that are tailored to the needs of various communities.

These services are designed to be culturally sensitive and accessible, ensuring that recovery is a realistic goal for all affected New Yorkers.

A key aspect of all our health initiatives is the commitment to equity.

We are actively working to dismantle systemic barriers in health services through targeted programs that address the needs of marginalized populations.

This includes translation services, culturally tailored health education, and the recruitment of healthcare providers from within these communities.

Each initiative is an integral part of our comprehensive strategy to enhance public health in New York City. They are not isolated efforts but are interconnected components of our overall health policy.

As we move forward, the continued support and involvement of all stakeholders are crucial to our success.

Together, we can sustain and build upon these efforts to ensure a healthier future for every New Yorker.

### ***Future Strategies:***

As we look to the future of public health in New York City, our blueprint is not only visionary but also crucial.

We stand on the cusp of deploying a suite of strategic initiatives that will extend and amplify our ongoing efforts, while also infusing novel methodologies for advancing health promotion and curtailing disease progression.

Our strategy envisions a sweeping inclusion of digital health technologies, extending beyond the pivotal role telehealth played during the pandemic.

Our planned expansion is supported by pilot programs which demonstrated substantial improvements in patient self-management and health monitoring.

By expanding the accessibility of these digital tools, we aim to bolster New York resident's ability to oversee their health more efficiently.

Expect a surge in our capabilities to track health metrics and deliver timely interventions, ensuring our pulse on the city's wellbeing is ever vigilant.

Our commitment to fostering healthy living is enshrined in our infrastructure expansion plans. This involves expanding access to greenspace, cultivating pedestrian-friendly zones, and enhancing public transport options to cut back emissions and promote healthier lifestyles.

We intend for these modifications have a sweeping impact on mental and physical health, reinforcing our environmental stewardship and commitment to urban livability.

We are poised to unveil a series of impact-driven health education and outreach initiatives, zeroing in on academic institutions and marginalized populations.

Anchored in evidence-based practices and successful precedents, these programs will tackle a spectrum of issues, from dietary literacy to reproductive health and substance misuse.

Through these educational initiatives, we aim to improve community health literacy, empowering New Yorkers to make informed wellness decisions.

Intensifying our community health frameworks remains a pivotal focus, setting the stage for a robust ecosystem of localized health delivery.

Collaborations with civic entities, medical professionals, and local visionaries will amplify the reach and efficacy of health services.

We envision a future where access to health resources is not just a privilege but a pervasive reality for every community.

In our legislative corridors, we champion policy reforms that will reshape the city's health paradigm.

From advocating nutritional transparency in processed foods to instigating mental health-friendly workplaces, these reforms are designed to foster a preventive health atmosphere.

Upcoming city-wide campaigns, such as the “NYC Healthy Habits Week,” will exemplify our policy direction and spur public participation in our health revolution.

In our journey towards a healthier New York City, we are resolute in our commitment. It's a commitment to not only envision but also realize a landscape where every New Yorker is endowed with the means to a healthier quality of life.

This quest demands bold steps and committed partnership across all across our city. We eagerly anticipate forging a supportive community network to bring these visions to fruition, laying down the groundwork for a thriving and equitable future.

### ***Challenges and Calls to Action:***

In our pursuit of a robust public health framework for New York City, we'll encounter many challenges. Addressing these obstacles requires a dynamic, inventive, and collaborative approach.

We acknowledge that stark health disparities, deeply rooted in socioeconomic conditions, cultural barriers, and language obstacles, persistently afflict our communities.

To dismantle these barriers, our efforts must be laser-focused on identifying and addressing the underlying social determinants of health.

This involves deploying resources to areas with socioeconomic disadvantages, providing culturally responsive care, and removing language barriers to ensure equitable access to health services.

The quest for financial sustainability in public health is an enduring one. Initiatives must be underpinned by reliable funding.

As we pioneer new programs and scale existing ones, it is critical to forge fiscal partnerships with government entities and the private sector.

These alliances will ensure that our endeavors not only take flight but also achieve longevity and scalability.

The swift current of technological innovation carries the promise of enhanced health services and the challenge of keeping pace.

We commit to bridging the digital divide by providing ongoing education and support, ensuring all New Yorkers can benefit from and contribute to our increasingly connected health ecosystem.

The impact of environmental changes on public health is undeniable.

Tackling these impacts demands a unified front that spans from local efforts to global collaborations, integrating environmental health into all facets of our policy-making and community action.

In the face of these challenges, our community must come together.

**To our Lawmakers** – We implore you to champion funding strategies and policies that not only address immediate health concerns but also lay the groundwork for lasting health equity.

This includes crafting policies that mitigate socioeconomic barriers and support multi-lingual health communication.

**To our Community Leaders** – Rally your communities around upcoming health initiatives like the “Healthy Futures Fair” and actively participate in shaping intervention programs that are sensitive to the unique needs of your constituents.

**To our Health Professionals** – You are the frontline ambassadors of health—continue to integrate evidence-based interventions with community insights.

Your expertise is crucial in crafting messages that resonate across cultural and linguistic divides.

**To New Yorkers** – You hold the power to ignite change within your networks. Get involved in upcoming city health campaigns, such as “NYC Moves”, to promote active living.

Embrace your role as health advocates in your neighborhoods, schools, and workplaces.

As we navigate these complexities, let’s also recognize the expansive opportunities for ingenuity, collaboration, and progress.

Together, with your active participation and support, we can transcend these barriers and forge an inclusive path towards a healthier New York City, leaving no one behind in our collective stride forward.

### ***Conclusion and Opening for Questions***

As we draw this briefing to a close, I want to thank you all for being here and for your commitment to the health and well-being of our city. Your presence here today is a testament to New York City’s dedication and willingness to look out for its communities.

Our dialogue today will serve the larger, global conversation on public health—a conversation made all the more crucial by recent global health crises that have underscored the inextricable link between local actions and global trends.

Our collective resolve to cultivate a healthier, more resilient New York City has never been more critical. Inspired by the global community’s dedication to overcoming health adversities, we stand united in our belief in the power of collaboration and innovation to transform our public health landscape.

I thank you, once again, for the invaluable support and collaborative spirit you bring to this mission. We are poised to listen, to learn, and to act—together.

And now, I’d like to open it up for questions.

Thank you.