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For More Information, Please Contact:

Sarah Ravenhall, MHA, CHES, Executive Director, NYSACHO

518-527-3547

THE POWER OF PUBLIC HEALTH DURING A GLOBAL PANDEMIC

Statement by NYSACHO Executive Director Sarah Ravenhall

Underfunded. Under siege. Undeterred. Local Public Health Departments are rising to the challenge of COVID-19. As we focus on providing the essential health care and other services our communities need during this pandemic, one category of essential workers that holds a special place in my heart is local health departments.

It is during times of uncertainty when the role of public health shines proudly on display. In the past month, I have witnessed experts from local health departments prepare for and engage in the battle against novel coronavirus (COVID-19) in New York State.

Emergency preparedness planning and response is not new to local health departments. Rather, it is a core function, one that local health departments provide and implement regularly. Whether H1N1; Ebola; Zika; Legionella; Measles; Influenza; SARS; West Nile and beyond, local health departments have confronted and mitigated a broad spectrum of communicable diseases.

Professionals employed by local health departments are on the front lines of this pandemic, working to protect communities from exposure to this relentless virus. What are local health departments doing to protect your community from COVID-19? These responsibilities include:

- Activating and mobilizing emergency preparedness plans during local emergency or outbreak response;
- Serving as communicable disease experts. During disease outbreaks, epidemiological experts conduct investigations, contact tracing, monitor suspected cases, enforce isolation and quarantine protocols and set up mass clinics;
- Assisting and connecting vulnerable or under resourced individuals to life-sustaining resources like housing, nutritious meals, utilities and health or mental health services;

- Supporting community partners and working hand in hand with the New York State Department of Health and the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. They also serve as a lynchpin for community partnerships with hospitals, clinicians, colleges, schools, businesses, community-based organizations and volunteer groups;
- Upholding state and local laws. Public Health law grants authority to local health officials to respond to disease threats. **New York's local health departments are the only boots-on-the-ground entities legally responsible for the control of communicable diseases;**
- Keeping community members informed by answering questions, providing up-to-date information about the outbreak and the local community impact, and recommendations for how best to protect your family from exposure.

As the membership association for local health departments, the New York State Association of County Health Officials (NYSACHO) has adapted swiftly to this emerging threat to public health. We have refocused our programmatic priorities to support COVID-19 mitigation and response efforts employed by our members. NYSACHO is closely monitoring community spread; maintaining constant communication with local health departments and state partners to ensure current, accurate information is being shared; identifying common barriers and needs of local health departments and addressing them with the State Department of Health and other state leaders; connecting our members with the resources they need to better assist communities statewide; and advocating for policies and funding that will allow local health departments to strengthen protection measures for community members across the state.

Thank you to the many essential workers across New York State serving on the front line to ensure communities continue to function during this public health crisis. We are all in this together and look forward to the day when novel coronavirus is a pandemic of the past. Public Health is undeterred!

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