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## **NYSACHO PARTNERS WITH COLUMBIA UNIVERSITY TO CONDUCT STUDY OF COUNTY HEALTH DEPARTMENTS' PREPAREDNESS FOR AND RESPONSE TO INITIAL SURGE OF COVID-19**

### **Study Focuses on Critical Initial Period of Pandemic**

### **Report Highlights Innovative Response Actions But Reveals a Dangerously Underfunded Public Health Infrastructure**

(Albany, New York) The New York State Association of County Health Officials (NYSACHO) today released the findings of a study concerning county health departments' preparedness for and response to the initial surge of COVID-19 in New York State. The study, funded by a federal Health Resources and Services Administration grant and produced with the support of the Region 2 Public Health Training Center at Columbia University, focuses on the initial response to COVID-19 from January to July 2020.

The report highlights actions by New York's 57 local health departments (LHDs), outside of New York City, to prevent transmission of COVID-19 in their communities and provide support to those under quarantine or isolation. The findings indicate favorable outcomes as a result of both state and local actions, but also underscore the fragile nature of a public health infrastructure in New York State that has been underfunded for more than a decade.

The report details the context, process, and findings of an in-progress review of LHDs' preparedness for, and response to, the COVID-19 pandemic in during its early and apex stages, across New York State as a whole and by region.

Among the report's findings:

- The current level of state investment in LHDs for pandemic response is not sufficient to sustain response activities due to depletion of already scarce resources.
- A multi-year stagnation of state funding has strained LHDs' capacity to deliver core public health services, especially during the pandemic.
- Flexible and unrestricted funding sources expand LHDs' response efforts during a public health crisis.
- Public health preparedness drills are effective in enhancing LHDs' emergency response capabilities.

- LHDs, especially those designated as partial service, need additional resources to effectively enforce state executive orders.
- Building relationships with a broad range of community organizations improves LHDs' capacity for outbreak response.
- Implementation of new statewide contact tracing software in the midst of a pandemic presented both challenges and benefits for LHDs.
- LHDs benefit from a proactive and coordinated approach to communicating with the public during a public health emergency.
- Messaging via social media is a double-edged sword; the platform has wide reach but is subject to distortion and misinformation.

To achieve review aims, a two-phase, mixed-methods, institutional review board-approved study was developed and conducted in partnership by NYSACHO. LHD leaders participated in an online survey and focus groups, answering questions in four topic areas: administrative preparedness, public health preparedness systems, epidemiology, and communications.

“This report documents areas where creative thinking, quick and strong actions, and a variety of conventional and non-conventional partnerships combined to augment LHD’s collective response capabilities,” said NYSACHO President, Dr. Kevin Watkins. “However, these elements are tempered by findings concerning our overall public health infrastructure. The study makes it clear that without new and flexible funding from the state we cannot sustain our current public health activities, and we will not be properly prepared to respond to the next public health emergency.

“We can’t be in denial and pretend it won’t happen again,” Watkins said. “We must prepare for the next threat because it will come, and we need new and increased, flexible state funding to establish the appropriate level of preparedness. We’re asking the Governor and the Legislature to maintain a state of battle readiness and put in place the necessary resources for public health agencies, including LHDs, to be better prepared for future pandemics and a host of other routine and emerging public health threats.”

Marita K. Murrman, Ed.D., M.S., from Columbia University said: “This project has been an exemplary collaboration between academia and public health practice, which would not have been possible without the hard work of our partner, NYSACHO. We are grateful to have the opportunity during this pandemic to amplify the voices of the local health departments through research and hope to see this kind of work replicated across the U.S.”

The full report can be found here: <https://www.nysacho.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/03/IPR-report-FINAL.pdf>

### About NYSACHO

The New York State Association of County Health Officials is a non-profit membership organization that represents the collective voice of all 58 local health departments in New York State. NYSACHO supports, advocates for, and empowers local health departments in their work

to promote health and wellness, and to prevent disease, disability, and injury throughout New York State.

About the Region 2 Public Health Training Center

The Region 2 Public Health Training Center is a partnership between the Columbia University Mailman School of Public Health and Rutgers School of Public Health Office of Public Health practice, whose mission is to enhance the current and future public health workforce's ability to effectively deliver the Essential Public Health Services to the populations of New York, New Jersey, Puerto Rico, and the U.S. Virgin Islands.

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