



NYSAC
— NEW YORK STATE —
ASSOCIATION OF COUNTIES

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LAW ENFORCEMENT, COUNTY GOVERNMENT AND PUBLIC HEALTH LEADERS UNITE TO STOP ABUSE OF PANDEMIC RESPONSE WORKERS

PUBLIC HEALTH STAFF AND OFFICIALS IN MANY AREAS OF THE STATE HAVE BEEN HARASSED AND THREATENED FOR FULFILLING THEIR CRITICAL ROLE IN STEMMING COVID-19

ALBANY, NY - Leaders from statewide law enforcement, county government and public health associations stood united today to condemn a small but growing wave of threats, harassment and intimidation targeting public health workers and officials who are responding to the COVID-19 pandemic.

Joining together to denounce the unlawful abuse of public health workers are leaders of the New York State Association of County Health Officials (NYSACHO), New York State Sheriff's Association (NYSSA), and the New York State Association of Counties (NYSAC). The leaders are responding to a rash of incidents in numerous parts of state where local public health workers and officials have been subject to unlawful abuse, harassment and threats of violence from citizens who are angry about COVID-19 policies and restrictions.

While not exclusively, these incidents have been most frequently associated with school re-opening activities, which are primarily established not by local health departments but by local school districts that are working hard to follow constantly evolving directives issued by the federal and state governments. Notwithstanding, angry reactions, including threats of violence and intimidation, have been directed at local public health officials.

David Bartlett, NYSSA President and Columbia County Sheriff, said: "While we may be seeing the light at the end of the tunnel when it comes to defeating COVID, we must still be vigilant. Our local public health officials are following state and federal guidance, and doing what they think is best for the health and safety of their communities, consistent with the laws and regulations governing this issue. It is never acceptable to threaten a public servant with violence, and we will aggressively pursue those who violate the law by threatening or harassing our public health workers."

Hon. Jack Marren, NYSAC President and Chairman of the Ontario County Board of Supervisors, said: “We continue to celebrate the tireless work of our public health heroes. Let us not forget that this is the largest and most costly public health emergency in over 100 years. More than 50,000 New Yorkers—our friends, neighbors, and family members—died at the hands of this virus. Our public health leaders were on the front lines doing everything they could to curtail the spread of the virus, and their actions saved lives. Even if some people may have disagreed with their decisions, we need to defend and protect these critical public servants.”

Recent incidents that have taken place in New York include the following (which have been de-identified due to open and ongoing investigations):

- County health officials have received letters from the public with threats that are graphic and violent in nature, indicating intention to conduct bodily harm to them.
- They have received in the mail cut up and degraded photos of themselves (taken from the local newspapers) coupled with intended threats of violence.
- Picketers have stationed themselves in the front yards of private residences of county health officials.
- Letters received have mentioned intended physical harm toward the family members and children of county health officials.

Kevin D. Watkins, MD, President of NYSACHO said: “Our local public health workers have literally put their lives on the line to protect their communities, especially early in the pandemic when the risk factors were not well understood. Facing that great unknown, local public health workers raced into the pandemic to establish life-saving prevention and response actions. Now, as many citizens have grown weary of restrictions that remain vital to mitigating COVID-19, some are acting out by harassing and threatening these same public health workers.”

Dr. Watkins added: “Citizens have the unquestioned right to responsibly speak out on any issue. Our shared concern is not acts of lawful expression, but rather those individuals who cross the line into criminal conduct with harassing and threatening behaviors. These actions are unconscionable, irresponsible and reckless, and cannot be tolerated. We are grateful by this strong show of support from our colleagues in county government and local law enforcement who understand better than most what it means to serve their communities.”

The issue of COVID related restrictions has been a challenge for both public health and law enforcement officials for many reasons. According to NYSSA, during the COVID

pandemic, several sheriff's offices have addressed numerous complaints related to perceived public health violations and other behaviors that could potentially put the public at risk. In addressing these complaints, sheriffs have remained cognizant of the individual freedoms guaranteed to each citizen and have endeavored to respect those freedoms and the privacy of all persons even though in some cases necessary restrictions may subordinate these rights to the greater public good. Only in cases where enforceable laws or regulations were violated has a Sheriff's Office taken action.

"We continue to seek the public's cooperation in complying with precautionary measures in hopes of reducing the spread of the virus and returning our community to our pre-COVID way of life," Sheriff Bartlett said.

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