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NYSACHO TESTIFIES TO ASSEMBLY LABOR, HEALTH AND HIGHER EDUCATION COMMITTEES: PUBLIC HEALTH SYSTEM IS IN CRISIS

Staff Vacancies, COVID and Other Mission Expansion, and a Decade of State Disinvestments Are Overwhelming Local Health Departments

State Must Act Now To Provide Adequate Support

(Albany, New York) The New York State Association of County Health Officials (NYSACHO) submitted testimony today detailing the deleterious impact COVID-19 and other challenges have had on the state's 58 local health departments (LHD), and calling for immediate state investment to stabilize a public health system that is "in crisis."

The testimony by NYSACHO Executive Director Sarah Ravenhall was submitted to a joint hearing of the Assembly Labor, Health and Higher Education Committees convened today to study the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on health care delivery.

"The public health system in New York State is in crisis," Ms. Ravenhall stated in her testimony. "Numerous elements have intersected to weaken our public health response infrastructure to a point of unprecedented fragility: ten consecutive years of disinvestment by the state (totaling more than \$150 million in cuts); an ongoing loss of public health workers; a demoralized public health system diminished by inadequately supported workload demands; the ongoing response to the covid pandemic; and the specter of an anticipated wave of public health staff retirements that will further diminish our public health response and prevention capabilities.

"We are at what is perhaps the most meaningful public health inflection point in our lifetime," Ms. Ravenhall said. "Only sound policy and resource decisions will steer us back to a path that will ensure our public health system is prepared for even greater challenges that we know will come.

“For the first time in decades we fully comprehend the value and the needs of our public health system, and at the same time the state possesses the financial means and has the public support to effectively address these needs,” Ms. Ravenhall said.

“These factors align to beg a simple question: If not now, then when? The answer is clear. It must be now.”

According to data from the New York State Department of Health, the number of full time LHD staff working on core services declined by 7% between 2015 and 2020. During this same period, the population of the state increased by 3%.

Ms. Ravenhall testified that 90% of New York’s LHDs do not have enough staff to adequately provide basic foundational public health services to their communities. In total, she said, over 1,000 additional full time staff are needed to provide an adequate infrastructure and a minimum package of public health services.

Additionally, Ms. Ravenhall shared results from a NYSACHO survey of its members that found that attrition and retirement will further reduce an already stretched and overburdened workforce. Specifically, the survey found that 42 LHD respondents reported a total of 1,257 LHD employees statewide were eligible to retire. In addition, since the start of the COVID-19 pandemic, New York has seen 14 out of 58 local health leaders leave office, nine of whom retired and five left for other/unidentified reasons.

The full testimony can be found at: <https://www.nysacho.org/topic/testimony/>

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