



COMMONWEALTH OF PENNSYLVANIA  
OFFICE OF THE SECRETARY OF HEALTH

House Appropriations Committee  
Department of Health Budget Hearing

Testimony of  
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Acting Secretary, Pennsylvania Department of Health

Good morning, Chairman Saylor, Chairman Bradford, and members of the House Appropriations Committee. I am Keara Klinepeter, Acting Secretary of the Department of Health. Joining me today are Physician General Dr. Denise Johnson, Executive Deputy Secretary Pete Blank, and Chief Financial Officer Andrea Race. Thank you for the opportunity to appear before the committee to discuss Governor Wolf's proposed budget for the Department of Health in the 2022-2023 Fiscal Year.

First, I want to start with a note of gratitude. This pandemic has tested our public health systems, our healthcare workers, our healthcare systems, and each and every Pennsylvanian. We are grateful to the millions of Pennsylvanians who got vaccinated and the Vaccine Task Force who helped inform a historic vaccine rollout that allowed us to go on offense against this virus. We are grateful to every Pennsylvanian who has persevered through this very difficult time. We are grateful for the recent historic investments made by the General Assembly, in partnership with the Wolf Administration, providing \$210 million in relief to our frontline healthcare workforce, \$15 million for additional student loan forgiveness for nurses, and \$25 million to our EMS system. We look forward to working together to chart a path forward that acknowledges the tools we have available to manage this virus.

The Governor's budget proposal highlighted a strong agenda to support public health for this upcoming fiscal year. We know that the pandemic has exposed stressors on our public health infrastructure nationally, and Pennsylvania has been no different. To rebuild a stronger foundation for the future, the Governor has proposed investments in several critical areas to ensure the Department has the tools needed to advance a healthy Pennsylvania for all.

The Governor proposed \$4 million to bolster the Department's staffing and public health infrastructure. This investment will continue to ensure the department has the staffing needed to offer the critical services Pennsylvanians deserve. This proposed budget also invests an additional \$7.2 million to support our local county and municipal health department partners, funding them to the maximum \$6 per capita grant amount provided for under current law. Our local public health partners in Allegheny, Bucks, Chester, Erie, Montgomery, and Philadelphia Counties and the cities of Allentown, Bethlehem, Wilkes-Barre and York have been just as impacted by the challenges faced since 2020 and are worthy of the resources needed to provide



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critical, locally based public health services their residents expect. Adding to those ranks this year is the newly minted Delaware County Health Department, which has completed the Department's thorough process for the creation of a new county or municipal health department and will begin providing public health services this spring. Also, this budget lays the groundwork for a forthcoming health department in Lackawanna County currently in the planning stages.

The Governor has proposed an increase in funding and staffing for our Quality Assurance staff in support of our mission to ensure Pennsylvanians are receiving adequate care under the licensed facilities and entities under the Department's oversight. This budget also proposes an investment in staff for our state laboratory, which has been a critical component of our COVID-19 response, but also serves numerous important public health missions every day. Lastly, the Governor proposed \$5 million for gene therapy research into immunotherapies which may improve targeted cancer therapies.

These investments are not only a show of support for the health of all Pennsylvanians but also for public health workers who have worked tirelessly to help protect Pennsylvanians through the global pandemic. Investments like this prove a commitment to continued readiness - ensuring that we are prepared for the public health threats of tomorrow and modernizing the way we receive, collect, analyze, and report public health data. However, these investments also allow the department to advance our broader missions such as ensuring the safety of residents in the facilities we license, have the staff needed to support the demand for Vital Records requests, along with many other key functions of the department that Pennsylvanians rely on every day.

Since our last appearance before the committee, through direct federal funding to the Department and by seeking and exhausting all appropriate federal disaster funding reimbursement, we have worked to continue our efforts to stabilize our healthcare systems as they manage this virus. Our Long-Term Care RISE program, the most recent evolution of the Regional Response Healthcare Collaborative Program created through Act 24 of 2020, continues to provide infection prevention and control practices, outbreak assistance, and other critical supports to our long-term care facilities. The Department has deployed strike teams of physicians, nurses, and respiratory therapists to assist hospitals in urgent and emergent staffing crisis funded through diligent efforts within the FEMA reimbursement process. We have worked to relieve pressure from hospitals by providing staffing and supports to long-term care facilities who could take on additional safe and clinically appropriate discharges. We have also worked to expand our regional, rotating free testing sites to any Pennsylvanian, which serves an added benefit of relieving pressures presented by COVID-19 testing on healthcare facilities. These lines of effort will continue as needed and as appropriate, based on the level of strain being faced in the healthcare community.



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In addition of our standing mission, the department is transitioning to the next phase of Pennsylvania's ongoing efforts to protect Pennsylvanians against COVID-19. We know we need to find ways to live with this virus, and recently the Department shared our strategy for what that means for Pennsylvanians. It is a three pillared strategy which empowers individuals, evaluates the virus, and enables care. We empower individuals through continuing to encourage vaccinations against COVID-19 to avoid preventable hospitalizations and deaths and by providing clear, timely public health guidance to Pennsylvanians to make informed choices about their personal health. We evaluate the virus by continuing to ensure access to testing with quick results, supporting our in-person learning at our schools by continuing to offer free testing to all schools interested in participating, and providing outbreak response to those in high-risk settings. We enable care by strengthening the long-term resiliency of our healthcare continuum, organizing support for hospitals and long-term care providers as needed, maintaining a stockpile of PPE and critical medical supplies, ensuring timely and equitable access to effective therapeutics, and working with our healthcare partners to understand the impacts of those with "long-COVID" – those with long-lasting COVID symptoms - and determining the best way to support those suffering from its chronic impacts. To achieve these ends we must invest in public health readiness and response capacity and invest in a more resilient health and healthcare delivery system.

Part of these efforts are materializing. Recognizing the need for flexibility for our healthcare systems and the challenges borne by this pandemic, the department is providing innovative guidance for hospitals, updating the department's interpretation of current hospital regulations. This guidance will allow hospitals the provide more nimble and flexible service delivery models. We believe that through these innovative concepts we can expand critically needed access to healthcare across the commonwealth in a more adaptable and scalable fashion. We also believe that these specific models will hold closely to the expectations of quality service delivery we expect from our hospital licensees for the benefit of the patients they serve. Additionally, transitioning into the next phase of this pandemic includes the continued prudent management of federal funds received to both maintain and advance our response to COVID-19.

We must also turn our footing forward to building a more resilient, more nimble Department of Health that is firmly prepared to meet the challenges posed to Pennsylvanians by the aftermath of this pandemic. Challenges such as increased mental health struggles borne out of trauma, the furthering divide of inequities in our communities, growing mistrust, and the ongoing opioid and overdose crisis will require action. Some can be met through strengthening and modernizing facility regulations such as those for nursing homes. Some can be met by a further spotlight on health equity or advancing telemedicine to lift up those in underserved communities. Some can be met through continued credible, evidence-based messaging that the department has endeavored to provide since the beginning of the pandemic. Some can be met by legislatively



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adding tools missing from our toolbox, such as allowing syringe services programs statewide and legalizing fentanyl test strips. Regardless of the problem or solution, the department stands ready to meet these challenges with all willing partners for the betterment of those we serve.

Thank you for the opportunity to join you here today. We are happy to take any questions you may have.