



COMMONWEALTH OF PENNSYLVANIA
OFFICE OF THE SECRETARY OF HEALTH

House Appropriations Committee
Department of Health Budget Hearing

Testimony of
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Good afternoon, Chairman Harris, Chairman Struzzi, and members of the House Appropriations Committee. I am joined today by Executive Deputy Secretary Kristen Rodack and am grateful for the opportunity to appear before the committee to discuss Governor Shapiro's proposed 2025-2026 Fiscal Year budget for the Department of Health.

Governor Shapiro's 2025-26 budget proposal continues to support the Department in its mission to promote healthy behaviors, prevent injury and disease, and to assure access to quality health care for all Pennsylvanians. This budget moves Pennsylvania forward by investing in quality improvement in our long-term care facilities, funding initiatives to improve maternal health outcomes, and financing efforts to reduce the spread of infectious diseases. This budget is also squarely focused on investing in Pennsylvania's workforce across vital sectors, and addresses the significant staffing shortages in health care by investing in efforts to increase our behavioral health and rural health care workforce. In short, this budget makes great strides to care for all residents, from the youngest to the oldest Pennsylvanians.

Before we discuss the proposed budget, I would like to share a few examples of the Department's accomplishments over the past year:

- Supported Regional Maternal Health Coalitions working at the local level to improve outcomes for mothers and babies, a \$1.8 million investment.
- Invested \$3 million in schools to ensure students have access to free menstrual hygiene products so they can focus on learning.
- Certified more than 1,000 new EMS providers and funded three summer camps for more than 50 high school students to explore EMS careers and build a clear path to becoming a first responder.
- Created and distributed 50,000 xylazine wound care kits to organizations working directly with Pennsylvanians impacted by the ongoing overdose epidemic.
- Continued to provide naloxone leave-behind kits – 27,000 since the Governor took office.
- Partnered with the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs to distribute more than 3,500 free gun locks at community events and State Health Centers to reduce firearm-related injuries and fatalities, including suicides.

The proposed 2025-26 budget will allow the Department to continue focusing on improvements in many areas of public health and safety including:

Improving Maternal Health, Focusing on Postpartum Depression

As a pediatrician and mother, the health and well-being of Pennsylvania's children and families remains one of my top priorities. We will continue to build on the foundation laid over the past two years to improve health outcomes for mothers, babies and families. We are working with health care providers and local stakeholders to promote maternal health education, enhance prenatal care, address racial and geographic disparities in maternal care, and strengthen support systems to help ensure that every pregnant woman has a safe and healthy pregnancy, birth, and postpartum period. Our work will include doing more to help women affected by pregnancy related depression and anxiety by working with health care providers to implement universal mood and depression screenings during and after pregnancy and enhancing access to mental health providers and resources.

Enhancing Care for Older Pennsylvanians

Using federal funds that have now expired, the Long-Term Care Transformation Office supported nearly a hundred facilities in implementing quality improvement initiatives. Over the past two years, this investment led directly to major improvements in participating long-term care facilities such as a 27% reduction in staff vacancies, a 35% decrease in the average number of residents evaluated at medical facilities, and a 56% decrease in skilled nursing home health citations. The Governor's proposed budget this year builds on this success by proposing \$7.5 million for the office, so it can continue to support more quality improvement projects at long-term care facilities across Pennsylvania. We will continue to work with several state agencies and stakeholders to help ensure older adults residing in long-term care facilities receive the best care possible.

Strengthening the Health Care Workforce, Especially in Rural Areas

One of the top concerns we continue to hear from health care providers is the difficulty recruiting and retaining skilled professionals. This budget incentivizes Pennsylvanians to work in critical, in-demand health care positions, focusing on nurses, physicians, and behavioral health professions, which are often hard to recruit, especially in rural communities.

Specifically, this budget invests \$10 million to expand the Department's Primary Care Loan Repayment Program, broadening the geographic eligibility requirements and supporting behavioral health care workers in all regions of Pennsylvania. There is also a \$5 million investment to specifically recruit health care professionals in rural areas.

Leading the Charge on Neurodegenerative Research

Last year, the Commonwealth took an important step to raise awareness of neurodegenerative diseases by creating the first Alzheimer's Disease and Related Disorders Division at the Department of Aging. We continue to work closely with our partners at the Department of Aging on this issue because we know how hard it is when our loved ones are diagnosed with neurodegenerative disorders, and the stress it places on families and caregivers. With

Pennsylvania being home to some of the top research institutions in the world, we can become a leader in neurodegenerative research right here in the Commonwealth. That is why this budget proposes a \$5 million investment for grants to qualifying institutions performing research on neurodegenerative diseases. This investment continues to build on the progress we started by providing necessary resources to better understand neurodegenerative diseases and supporting Pennsylvania researchers to find cures for diseases like Alzheimer's, Parkinson's, and ALS.

Reforming the Way Private Equity Tactics Impact Health Care

Earlier this month during the Governor's budget address, he spoke firmly about his commitment to reform private equity's role in Pennsylvania's health care industry. You've all seen the headlines of private equity-owned hospitals or nursing homes closing or filing for bankruptcy in every corner of the Commonwealth. We owe it to those we serve, to stand up and do something about it. The Governor made a strong call to reform harmful practices which strip money and resources from community hospitals and nursing homes, leaving entire regions without the care and services they need. While we as the regulator of these facilities must and will treat every current operator with fairness and objectivity, we stand ready to work with you to put in place real safeguards against private equity tactics that harm communities.

I look forward to working with all of you to help implement this sound budget proposal that would enhance the health and well-being of all Pennsylvanians.

Thank you for the opportunity to be here today to discuss the Governor's proposed budget for the Department of Health. I am happy to answer any questions you may have.