



Department of Health

ANDREW M. CUOMO
Governor

HOWARD A. ZUCKER, M.D., J.D.
Commissioner

SALLY DRESLIN, M.S., R.N.
Executive Deputy Commissioner

January 2019

Dear Colleagues:

It is always a pleasure to address the state of public health in New York. In January, a month when many Americans push the reset button and commit to better health for themselves and their families. It seems everyone is ready for a fresh start.

As Governor Cuomo stressed in his recent State of the State and Budget address, 2019 will be an historic year for New York across a spectrum of issues, but especially in regard to public health and wellness. Critical initiatives have already been signed into law. The New York State Department of Health (Department) stands ready to deliver on the Governor's promise to make all New Yorkers and their communities healthier, safer, and more resilient in a changing world.

I would like to take this opportunity to highlight some of the Department's accomplishments during 2018.

The influenza virus has been geographically widespread in New York State since early December and is again prominent on our radar. As of January 24, we've had 21,252 laboratory-confirmed cases reported and 4,480 people hospitalized. Sadly, one influenza-associated pediatric death has also been reported. Because influenza can pose such a serious public health threat, the Department wants to keep flu activity on the public radar as well. In 2018, we launched the "New York State Flu Tracker," a dashboard on the New York State Health Connector [website](#), that keeps the public informed about rates of influenza in their county. Updated weekly during flu season, the dashboard displays the number of laboratory-confirmed influenza cases by date, county, and type for both the current and three previous seasons. Anyone using our Flu Tracker will know that flu season is far from over, and it is not too late for vaccinations. There are ample amounts of vaccine available.

You may be aware that New York is experiencing one of its largest measles outbreaks in decades, concentrated among Orthodox Jewish communities in the Lower Hudson region and within Brooklyn. The cases have been traced to international travelers returning from Israel and Europe, which have seen a recent surge in measles cases. The 211 reported cases in New York State to date include ongoing outbreaks in Rockland County (128 cases), Orange County (10 cases), and Kings County/Brooklyn (66 cases) within Orthodox Jewish communities, and seven cases (six in Monroe and one in Erie counties) that are unrelated to those in the Lower Hudson. When the Rockland County cases were first reported last fall, the Department rapidly mobilized to help prevent secondary cases. We have been working with county health officials to identify those potentially exposed, test samples at our Wadsworth Laboratories in Albany, assist with community outreach and contact investigations, provide information on the importance of vaccination, and provide MMR vaccine.

Drinking water safety also remained a high priority for the Department in 2018. Given the lack of federal leadership on this important public health concern nationwide, the Governor's FY18 Budget established the New York State Drinking Water Quality Council to identify strategies to protect the quality of New York's drinking water. I was proud to chair the Council and am pleased to report its recommendation that New York adopt the nation's most protective maximum contaminant levels (MCLs) for PFOA, PFOS, and 1,4-dioxane (the nation's first identified MCL). These three contaminants have been detected in drinking water systems across the country but are unregulated by the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency.

Ensuring equal access to healthy lifestyles for all New Yorkers has always been high on my agenda as Commissioner of Health. We moved ahead on this goal in 2018 with the roll-out of eWIC, an electronic benefits transfer card that eliminates paper checks and provides a more convenient way for families in the Women, Infants, and Children (WIC) Supplemental Nutrition program to gain access to the nutritious foods that keep us healthy. We successfully piloted eWIC in Albany, Schenectady, and Rensselaer counties in the spring, and later expanded the technology to the remainder of the Capital Region, before rolling it out in the to the majority of the upstate counties. During the first quarter of 2019, we will complete the eWIC roll-out downstate.

We are also constantly working to address racial disparities in health outcomes and one of the most devastating outcomes we want to reduce is maternal mortality. Last year we expanded community outreach and took new actions to increase access to prenatal and perinatal care, including establishing a pilot expansion of Medicaid coverage for doulas. With Lieutenant Governor Kathy Hochul, I helped launch and guide the Task Force on Maternal Mortality and Disparate Racial Outcomes. Now I am pleased to report that the Governor's health agenda for 2019 includes initiatives based on our Maternal Mortality Task Force recommendations, such as establishing a statewide Maternal Mortality Review Board, expanding Community Health Worker programs, creating a data warehouse to provide near real-time information on maternal mortality and morbidity, convening an Expert Workgroup on Postpartum Care, and developing implicit bias training to be used in health care facilities.

The opioid epidemic is still devastating our communities and causing pain and suffering for our families. In 2017, 3,224 New Yorkers died as a result of an overdose involving opioids—a 200% increase in opioid overdose deaths since 2010. The Governor's Budget increases access to Medication Assisted Treatment or, as it is starting to be called, Medication for Addiction Treatment (MAT), the gold standard for treating Opioid Use Disorder. I am especially excited about the provision to aggressively expand access to buprenorphine—an important advance in MAT—both by increasing the number of medical professionals who are designated to prescribe it and by expanding the number of settings in which it is prescribed.

As I noted at the start of this letter, 2019 stands to be a landmark year in public health for New York. On January 24—46 years and a day after the landmark decision of *Roe v. Wade*—we enshrined that now-vulnerable Supreme Court decision into the New York State Constitution when Governor Cuomo signed the Reproductive Health Act. He also signed the Comprehensive Contraceptive Coverage Act, laying a strong foundation for women's reproductive health and affirming New York's commitment to these fundamental rights.

Protecting the right to quality health care for all New Yorkers is critical, particularly with the shift in health care funding priorities that we are seeing in Washington, D.C. Governor Cuomo is committed to passing legislation in 2019 to codify key provisions of the federal Affordable Care Act into state law and enhance state regulatory protections. Other Budget

provisions will protect New Yorkers from exposure to toxic chemicals, control health threats from tobacco, reduce childhood lead exposure, strengthen suicide prevention, and expand community-based supports for seniors and services for New Yorkers with asthma and autism.

I look forward to updating you on these and other Department initiatives as the year unfolds. In the meantime, my best wishes for a happy and healthy new year to all.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in blue ink that reads "Howard". The signature is written in a cursive, slightly stylized font.

Howard A. Zucker, M.D., J.D.