



## Department of Health

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Governor

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Executive Deputy Commissioner

December 2019

Dear Colleagues:

As we close out both a year and a decade that have been filled with complex and often unprecedented public health challenges in New York State, I want to take stock of the Department of Health's responses and new initiatives and what we have learned from protecting the health of nearly 20 million residents.

**Measles.** The historic measles outbreak we encountered in 2018-2019 infected 406 people with measles in Rockland, Orange, Sullivan, and Westchester counties. A concurrent outbreak in New York City infected 654 individuals. With local partners, we administered nearly 85,000 MMR vaccinations in those four counties. In June, Governor Cuomo signed legislation to improve New York's already high immunization rates by eliminating all nonmedical exemptions for childhood vaccinations required for public, private, and parochial school attendance. In October, the Department marked the passage of two incubation periods without any new cases of measles reported in Sullivan and Orange counties since the outbreak began in October 2018. Rockland County passed that threshold in September. This declaration meant that the United States has maintained its measles elimination status of 20 years.

**Teen Vaping Epidemic and Vaping-Related Pulmonary Illness.** This year the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) reported that the number of teen tobacco users in the United States increased by 1.3 million from 2017 to 2018, essentially wiping out recent progress in declining youth tobacco use. At the beginning of 2019, Governor Cuomo worked with the Legislature to pass legislation raising the minimum sales age for tobacco and e-cigarette products to 21. The law went into effect on November 13.

This summer brought a new health crisis to the forefront: a severe pulmonary illness associated with the use of e-cigarette or vaping products. New York has had two confirmed vaping-related deaths to date and over 200 cases of vaping related illness. The State's decision to ban the sale of flavored e-cigarettes in September was a response to a growing threat: the vaping industry is using flavored e-cigarettes to get young people hooked on potentially dangerous and deadly products. The CDC recently confirmed initial findings by the Department's Wadsworth Center about the role that vitamin E acetate may possibly play in vaping-related illnesses. New York is taking every step and exploring all options to combat these growing crises on the state level, but we have been strongly asserting that the federal government needs to take action now.

**Safer Drinking Water.** For several years, the Department has tested drinking water across the State for dangerous per- and polyfluoroalkyl substances (PFAS). This past summer, I accepted the New York State Drinking Water Quality Council's recommendations to establish maximum contaminant levels—known as MCLs—in drinking water for PFOA, PFOS, and 1,4-dioxane. These are the nation's most protective MCLs for PFOA and PFOS and the nation's first MCLs for 1,4-dioxane. Governor Cuomo has just announced more than \$416 million in grant funding through the Water Infrastructure Improvement Act and the Intermunicipal Water

Infrastructure Grant Program for infrastructure projects that protect public health or improve water quality. The awards include more than \$120 million for 37 projects to address emerging contaminants on Long Island.

The Governor also announced that \$10 million will be awarded to 18 municipalities to continue the State's initiative to replace residential drinking water lead service lines through the Department's Lead Service Line Replacement Program. In addition, the Department worked with the Department of Environmental Conservation and the Office of Information Technology Services in 2019 to launch Know Your NY Water, a new map-based website providing information about the State's public drinking water and the health of its lakes, rivers, streams, and other waters used for recreation and habitat protection.

**Maternal Mortality Review Board.** Addressing racial disparities in health outcomes is a Department priority, and one of the most devastating outcomes we face is maternal mortality. In 2018, Governor Cuomo launched the Taskforce on Maternal Mortality and Disparate Racial Outcomes to provide expert policy advice on improving maternal outcomes, addressing racial and economic disparities, and reducing the frequency of maternal mortality and morbidity. The Department and the Taskforce visited seven cities statewide in 2018 to hear what 244 mothers, mothers-to-be, and their partners/relatives had to say about their pregnancy and childbirth experiences. In 2019, we reported on the Taskforce's findings, and in August Governor Cuomo signed legislation to create a Maternal Mortality Review Board charged with reviewing the cause of each maternal death in New York State. Board members were announced in October.

**Containing Superbugs.** *Candida auris*, a frequently medication resistant fungal infection that is part of class of pathogens that the CDC refers to as "superbugs," received much public attention in 2019. The Department has worked extensively with hospitals, nursing homes, and healthcare leaders in New York City and surrounding areas to respond to *C. auris*. In 2019, the Department developed a first-in-the-nation PCR test for *C. auris*, and the CDC and several other state health departments are using or preparing to use our test.

**Leading National Push to Expand Access to Medication Assisted Treatment for Opioid Use Disorder.** In 2019, the Department released [revised clinical guidelines](#) on the use of the three effective medication treatment options—buprenorphine, methadone, and naltrexone—for opioid use disorder (OUD). The Department also mobilized a coalition of 24 states and territories to urge the U.S. Health and Human Services Secretary to modify antiquated policy restricting a healthcare provider's ability to prescribe buprenorphine to treat OUD. The coalition is recommending federal legislation that eliminates the current waiver and training requirement so that all healthcare providers registered to prescribe controlled substances (such as opioids) are permitted to prescribe buprenorphine for treatment of OUD. Doing so will save lives and eliminate unnecessary barriers that prevent people with OUD from having access to treatment in office. Our case for [eliminating the waiver](#)<sup>1</sup> was published in the *American Journal of Public Health* in November.

**Ending the Epidemic.** As New York State celebrated World AIDS Day the first week of December, the Department and our AIDS Institute reconfirmed our pledge to end the AIDS epidemic by the end of 2020. As I noted in the discussion of PrEP medication in my October letter, newly released data show that 2018 had the largest decrease in new HIV diagnoses in

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<sup>1</sup>Standliff S, Greene D, Zucker HA. "Why 24 State and Territorial Health Officials Support Buprenorphine Deregulation", *American Journal of Public Health* 109, no. 12 (December 1, 2019): pp. 1678-1679.

New York State since the launch of the Ending the Epidemic initiative in 2014, and we are on track to end the AIDS epidemic by the end of 2020. New diagnoses for 2018 reached an all-time low of 2,481—an 11% percent drop from 2017 and a 28% drop since 2014. HIV incidence has declined each year since the start of ETE, with a 40% decrease over that time frame. In 2018, HIV incidence fell to an all-time low of 2,019 cases. In addition, New York leads the nation with the largest percent of individuals on PrEP medication: in 2018, over 32,000 New Yorkers took PrEP—an increase of 32% from 2017. This month, Governor Cuomo called on Facebook to remove deceptive ads questioning the safety and effectiveness of Truvada.

**Steady Decline in New York’s Uninsured Population.** In 2018, New York was one of only three states nationwide to see a decrease in its uninsured population. Since 2010, the number of uninsured individuals in New York has declined by 1.2 million, including 1 million since the NY State of Health Marketplace opened in 2013. During the annual Open Enrollment Period that ended January 31, 2019, a record 4.8 million New Yorkers signed up for health coverage through NY State of Health.

**New York’s Age-Friendly Future.** In the fall of 2018, Governor Cuomo directed all State agencies to adopt and implement the principles of age-friendly, livable communities and preventative public health into all relevant programs, policies, and funding. The Department updated and expanded our 2019–2024 Prevention Agenda to incorporate the Governor’s vision for healthy aging. We pledged to ensure that all New Yorkers are able to age in place healthily and happily in communities of their own choosing. In 2019, we saw our efforts recognized when the National Network of Public Health Institutes named New York’s Health Across All Policies/Age-Friendly NY Initiative as the winner of its 2019 Public Health Innovation Award.

**Reminder about Hepatitis A.** Finally, I want to tell you about the importance of hepatitis A vaccination for at-risk individuals. New York State has had a 235% increase in hepatitis A virus cases outside New York City in 2019 as compared to the same time period in 2016-2018, while nationally there has been a person-to-person multi-state outbreak with nearly 29,000 cases in 30 states since 2016. While increases have been seen in all regions of the State, Dutchess, Erie, Jefferson, Niagara, Onondaga, Oswego, and Suffolk counties have been particularly impacted. The Department recommends that healthcare providers, healthcare facilities, and community partners and programs providing services to at-risk populations promote hepatitis A vaccination according to the [recommendations of the Advisory Committee on Immunization Practices \(ACIP\)](#). At-risk populations include people who use drugs (non-injection and injection), men who have sex with men, individuals experiencing homelessness or unstable housing, or people who are incarcerated or recently released. People who have pre-existing liver disease, including hepatitis B or C, are at risk of severe outcomes and should also get vaccinated.

New York State and the Department would be unable to continually improve access to quality healthcare without the exceptional primary care that all of you provide to your fellow New Yorkers. Your commitment makes public health work for everyone in New York. All best wishes for a joyful season of festivity and safe travels wherever your celebrations take you!

Sincerely,



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