



COMMONWEALTH OF PENNSYLVANIA
OFFICE OF THE SECRETARY OF HEALTH

House Appropriations Committee
Department of Health Budget Hearing

Testimony of
Alison Beam
Acting Secretary, Pennsylvania Department of Health

Good morning Chairman Saylor, Chairman Bradford, and members of the House Appropriations Committee. I am Alison Beam, Acting Secretary of the Department of Health. Joining me here today are Executive Deputy Secretary Keara Klinepeter, Budget Director Lori Stubbs, Acting Physician General Dr. Wendy Braund and Director of Operational Excellence Brian Lentz. Thank you for the opportunity to appear before the committee to discuss Governor Wolf's proposed budget for the Department of Health in the 2021-2022 Fiscal Year.

While the manner in which the Governor presented his budget proposal before the General Assembly was different this year, the Governor laid out a strong agenda that will help advance our vision of a healthy Pennsylvania for all. That vision includes accelerating and improving our vaccine rollout and continuing our efforts to mitigate the COVID-19 pandemic, which has gripped the world, by bolstering our public health infrastructure and response capability in Pennsylvania.

As I have been leading the Department for only a short few weeks, I feel compelled to begin by acknowledging the tireless and dedicated staff of the Department of Health who have provided countless hours of work protecting Pennsylvania from this terrible virus. Department staff have performed thousands of COVID-19 case investigations, refined our preparedness countermeasures, managed distribution of our critical personal protective equipment (PPE) stockpile to our healthcare heroes in places like hospitals and long-term care facilities, triaged critical outbreaks, supported our emergency management services workers, provided critical testing in communities, enhanced convenience for WIC participants, and have continued our strong regulatory oversight in nursing homes to keep residents safe. This only acknowledges some of the work of our staff, but all staff and their hard work is appreciated and so critical to continuing the battle against COVID-19, and also keeping all of our other public health functions advancing forward to the benefit of the people we serve.

As part of that critical work, no mission right now is more important than the largest vaccination effort that has occurred in many of our lifetimes - the urgent rollout of COVID-19 vaccine in Pennsylvania. Thus far more than 2 million doses have been administered in Pennsylvania. Pennsylvania has delivered more vaccine to people than Ohio and New Jersey and 400% more than West Virginia. With that said, no one in the Department will say that this rollout has gone without challenges, and we can and are doing everything possible to improve our processes to help providers vaccinate quickly and efficiently.

In my short time at the Department, we have taken steps to improve vaccine rollout. As soon as the recent leadership transition at the Department began, we prudently oriented ourselves in the complexity of the crisis. We identified the need for more bench strength, increased controls, and stronger data reporting to inform decision making. Simultaneously, we executed a plan for more frequent and clear communication across the organization, and beyond the organization – with providers, stakeholders, and members of the legislature. The Governor created a legislative task force to increase opportunities for legislative perspective to guide our strategy. We also more clearly communicated our expectations of our provider partners: the Governor and the Department issued an Order to Vaccine Providers on February 12 to further this goal. At the core of this order is better accountability to ensure that vaccine doesn't sit on shelves. Broadly, the goal of the order is to accelerate first doses in arms by requiring providers to vaccinate more people quickly, reporting accurately, and prioritizing appropriately based on the phases of our Interim Vaccination Plan.

The order is a strong step, but one that must also be accompanied by public health messaging to ensure that we break through vaccine hesitancy not only for those who may be concerned about receiving the vaccine, but also for communities of color. Through federal investments for the vaccine rollout, we plan to enhance this public health messaging with trusted messengers in communities that may harbor distrust to ensure that Pennsylvanians feel comfortable taking this vaccine to help move us beyond this pandemic.

While we are laser focused on the vaccine rollout, we must also continue to remain vigilant against the ongoing threat of COVID-19. While cases appear to have plateaued recently, the evolving reports of new, more contagious variants are very concerning. This is a situation we will continue to monitor in Pennsylvania, but also nationally and globally. To help us continue this fight, we are grateful for recent federal investments to help the Department enhance our current staffing and resources to fight the pandemic. These funds will be crucial to help the Department in the vaccine rollout, while also enhancing testing and laboratory capacity, bolstering our stockpile of PPE, and strengthening our public health workforce.

In a global pandemic such as this, we know that we cannot fight alone. The Governor recognizes that local partners are critical to Pennsylvania's ability to move through this pandemic stronger. Accordingly, the Governor's proposed budget invests in our county and municipal health departments by providing the full \$6 per capita payment authorized under the Local Health Administration Law, Act 315 of 1951 for our local partners in the counties of Allegheny, Bucks, Chester, Erie, Montgomery and Philadelphia and the cities of Allentown, Bethlehem, Wilkes-Barre and York. In addition, this budget listens to the will of the people of Delaware County through their strong planning by investing in the creation of a new county health department. We value the insight and partnership of our county and municipal health departments and hope to see this proposed investment approved to provide the critical support they need to promote public health in the areas they serve. We look forward to the inclusion of Delaware County to this group, which will undoubtedly offer a strong public health voice for their residents. These types

of investments will help strengthen our public health infrastructure both in the near and long-term.

Partnerships have also benefitted the commonwealth's response in long-term care. Thankfully, due to the prudent action of the General Assembly and in partnership with the Department of Human Services (DHS), the Regional Response Healthcare Collaborative Program assisted with many critical long-term care outbreaks, which ultimately saved lives. This regional framework was built out by the commonwealth's expert medical institutions leveraging their expertise in infection control and other clinical interventions, but also providing a scalable and efficient deployable resource to help long-term care facilities with critical staffing issues, testing, cohorting, infection control, and other needed supports. Following the expiration of federal CARES Act funds, the Department again partnered with DHS to offer a streamlined resource for long-term care facilities, the Regional Congregate Care Assistance Teams, while still partnering with our expert institutions. These partners, along with assistance from the Pennsylvania National Guard and our contracted partners in testing and staffing support, have all helped to prioritize long-term care residents and staff through very challenging situations.

We know this past year has not been easy for anyone. Thankfully, through the breakthroughs of science, we have vaccine available to offer hope. But we must also be transparent with Pennsylvanians: while there is light at the end of the tunnel, it is a long tunnel. While we see improvements every week, vaccine supply is still limited at this time. Knowing that, we must continue to do all we can to prevent this virus from gaining further ground within the state. As a commonwealth, caring for our communities is baked into our heritage. Wear a mask to protect your community, help a neighbor schedule a vaccine appointment to make them safer, keep connected to family and friends through virtual gatherings, stay vigilant with hand hygiene to protect yourself and your loved ones. These steps, small yet very effective, all can add up to help us move through this pandemic more quickly.

Finally, I would like to close with the Department's intentions for when we reach the other side of this pandemic. Our responsibility to Pennsylvanians to execute a vaccine strategy that is swift, effective, and equitable, cannot blind us from our duty to prepare for beyond the pandemic. The past year has been a harrowing sacrifice of unprecedented magnitude for many. The trauma induced by disruption to our livelihoods, our educations, our sense of community and humanity, and simply our daily routines, cannot be overstated. We must brace our fragile mental health care and addiction treatment system for tremendous utilization as we grapple with the trauma. We must address health equity by forging a path forward for interventions in communities of need. We must restore faith in our public health infrastructure by strategically investing federal funds with long-term intentions. We must address the crisis of the warworn long-term care industry by codifying some of the success strategies of the COVID-19 response, while ensuring the frontline workers are supported. We must prepare ourselves for the wreckage left after the pandemic and build, with intention, a better health care system, and society.

Thank you for the opportunity to offer remarks. I am happy to take any questions you may have.