

**NYS Legislature Joint Budget Hearing on Health**  
**Expanding the Role of Pharmacists in Vaccinations**  
**Written Testimony of Bronx Borough President Ruben Diaz Jr.**  
**February 25, 2021**

Over the past year, the COVID-19 pandemic has shown us both the strengths and limitations of the healthcare system in our state and country. Residents of The Bronx have faced higher infection rates and death rates than the rest of New York City, and Black and Latino people in particular have been more likely to get sick and die. The gaps and disparities when it comes to healthcare access have become even starker. As we move towards beating the pandemic through the mass vaccination efforts that the state and city governments are undertaking, it is clear that enabling people to seek healthcare at many diverse locations has proven to be a success.

New Yorkers from all over the state, including The Bronx, have started to get their vaccines at their local pharmacies. Last year, the Legislature authorized pharmacists to distribute potential COVID-19 vaccines. This current effort, as well as the mass flu vaccination efforts at pharmacies over the past thirteen years, has shown the efficacy of allowing pharmacists to deliver immunizations to their local communities. This year, the Legislature has the opportunity to extend pharmacists' immunization authorization even further, and you should act on it.

Part P, Section 3 of the Health and Mental Hygiene budget bill (A3007/S2507) would authorize pharmacists to administer all immunizations on the recommended list drafted by the CDC's Advisory Committee on Immunization Practices (ACIP). This would allow pharmacists to distribute the Hepatitis A, Hepatitis B, HPV, varicella (chicken pox), measles, mumps and rubella vaccines in addition to the ones they are already authorized to administer. The legislation provides sensible guidelines, which include limiting this authority to adult patients, requiring pharmacists to register and requiring appropriate record-keeping and passing of information to primary care providers when available. This provision is a strong step towards improving health equity in underserved communities, including many in The Bronx, and I encourage the Legislature to include this provision in the final budget bill that will be passed.

New York is an outlier nationally when it comes to allowing pharmacists to deliver vaccines – only two other states restrict pharmacists from providing any of these vaccines. We are the only state in the nation that does not allow pharmacists to distribute the Hepatitis A and B vaccines. New York has long lagged behind the rest of the nation when it comes to vaccinations at pharmacies. When New York allowed pharmacists to distribute the flu vaccine in 2008, we were the 49<sup>th</sup> state to do so. We should take this opportunity to catch up with the rest of the country and allow pharmacists to administer these vaccines.

There are several reasons why this legislation would be a step in the right direction. In many parts of the state, there is lower access to general medical practitioners than in others. For example, The Bronx has the lowest rate of general medical practitioners among the five boroughs – 225.5 per 100,000 versus 1,196.9 per 100,000 in Manhattan. Moreover, Bronx residents are least likely among city residents to report having a primary care physician. Only 83.8 percent of Bronx residents report having one compared to 91.7 percent on Staten Island. Many communities do not have adequate access to doctor's offices or other medical practices. However, while there may be fewer doctors available, there are still many pharmacies in medically underserved communities that could fill this gap. This access gap occurs not only in urban areas like The Bronx but in rural communities Upstate as well. This measure will have a positive effect throughout the state.

Additionally, the COVID-19 pandemic is an obvious confounding factor when it comes to vaccine distribution. At the moment, the most important public health action is the mass vaccination of vulnerable individuals with the COVID-19 vaccines. Currently, many New Yorkers, including in The Bronx, have gotten or will be getting the COVID-19 vaccine at their pharmacies. Encouraging public trust in the vaccination process and the efficacy of vaccines is an important public health strategy. Enabling individuals to increase their vaccine compliance by utilizing their local pharmacies would be helpful on this front as well.

Increasing the vaccination rates will have several positive effects, most obviously, that it will prevent illness. This will lead to other second order effects such as increased healthcare cost savings and lower productivity loss due to employees taking sick days. In New York, there have been recent outbreaks of Hepatitis A and measles, two diseases whose vaccines this expansion would cover. Allowing pharmacists to distribute these vaccines would help stem these outbreaks or prevent them from reoccurring.

Enacting this change in law would be a strong move towards ensuring health equity and access. In areas such as The Bronx that are underserved by medical practices, allowing pharmacists to step into this gap will help increase vaccination rates against dangerous and communicable diseases. This is especially true during a pandemic when people are more hesitant about travelling to visit their doctor's offices. Closing this access gap will help narrow some of the racial disparities that the COVID-19 pandemic laid bare. I urge the Legislature to include this important provision in the final bill.