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NYS Joint Legislative Public Hearing on 2022 Executive Budget Proposal: Health

Testimony submitted by:

Daniel C. Levler, President, Suffolk County Association of Municipal Employees

Within the Aid to Localities portion of the FY2023 New York State Budget, we are encouraged to find significant and continued funding for Health departments and employees across the state and in particular, here in Suffolk County.

The Suffolk County workforce represented by the Suffolk Association of Municipal Employees (Suffolk AME) includes nurses, epidemiologists, public health sanitarians, chemists, dieticians, drug counselors, medical social workers, pharmacists, physicians, psychiatrists and many more titles. In order to successfully implement programs intended to protect the health and welfare of Suffolk County residents, our members rely on funding from New York State and the support of our elected representatives at the state level.

For the purpose of testimony for the joint public hearing on Health, we would like to address the following topics within the Aid to Localities budget and how these proposals will impact the Suffolk County Workforce.

- Medical Services for Inmates in Correctional Facilities
- Public Health Emergencies
- Treatment Services
- Operation of Local Public Health Departments
- Training and Retraining of Health Care Employees
- Healthcare and Mental Hygiene Worker Bonuses

Medical Services for Inmates in Correctional Facilities:

Suffolk AME currently employs jail medical unit nurse practitioners, jail medical attendants, and many other titles that work within the County's correctional facilities. The portion of the Aid to Localities budget in relation to health services within correctional facilities will help keep intact necessary funding to support these county facilities. These titles, in particular, are continually under great duress not only due to COVID-19, but also

due to the hazardous nature of their workplace. Additional funding for these titles will allow Suffolk County to be more competitive in the hiring process, which is necessary considering the County has needed to hire outside, private-sector nurses, who not only cost more than using in-house nurses, but they lack the experience of working in a correctional environment. Toward this end, nurses working in the public sector often see a higher rate of turnover due to the limited funding available as compared with private sector nurses doing similar work. This funding will help to ensure that we can work towards equitable pay in this sector, and address concerns related to contracting out, particularly with regard to our jail medical nurses.

Public Health Emergencies:

Local and municipal governments took on the brunt of the workload surrounding the COVID-19 pandemic and continue to shoulder that load today. Our members across the board went above and beyond to support and assist the community in any way possible, including amending their current job titles to cover new responsibilities. We are encouraged to see a renewal of funding for localities within the NYS Department of Health for services and expenses related to public health emergencies (29975) and would appreciate any increased aid to local municipalities.

Treatment Services:

Suffolk County has been at the forefront of the opioid epidemic for many years and we are proud to see that efforts to combat that at the state, county and federal level have shown steady decreases in overdose deaths and hospitalizations due to opioids. We would like to also note that continued funding streams at the state level have made this possible. This year's Aid to Localities budget will help us to continue the positive trend by renewing funding for various prevention, diagnostic, detection, and treatment services (26988).

Our drug counselors, medical social workers, and other members of the county health workforce devote countless hours to ensuring that this type of funding helps to improve the lives of those battling addiction. We continue to work hand in hand with the NY State Office of Addiction Services and Supports as well as the Office of Mental Health to combat the opioid epidemic.

Operation of Local Public Health Departments:

As noted throughout this report, Suffolk AME's workforce is made up of a multitude of titles within the County's Health Department. We are pleased to see that continued funding has been allocated for the operation of local public health departments (29909).

Training and Retraining of Health Care Employees:

Because the Health Department works under strict rules and guidance to maintain the highest caliber of service possible, it is necessary to continue to train and retrain our employees. This often comes with significant expense, especially related to unfunded state mandates. While we will always work to abide by those mandates to keep Suffolk County

safe, we hope that programs like the Empire Clinical Research Investigator Program (29888) can be expanded to better serve public health departments and municipalities on more direct training expenses.

Healthcare and Mental Hygiene Worker Bonuses:

Healthcare workers at county health departments worked hand in hand with hospital workers, direct care workers and many others to ensure proper compliance to health code as well as assist in the direct treatment and support of county residents during the COVID-19 pandemic. We are glad to see that New York State is fulfilling its promise to support the healthcare workers who were on the front lines at the beginning of the pandemic and still are today.

Suffolk AME would like to thank Governor Hochul, Senate Leader Stewart-Cousins, Assembly Speaker Heastie, and all members of the Joint Committee on Human Services for their work on the 2023 budget. The programs outlined within the budget will continue to provide extensive financial support to the County and the County's municipal workforce, which we are proud to represent.