

Written Testimony from Dean Ayman El-Mohandes, MBBCh, MD, MPH
City University of New York Graduate School of Public Health and Health Policy
Submitted to the Joint Legislative Hearing on Health/Medicaid

Tuesday February 10, 2026

Thank you, Chairpersons Paulin, Rivera, Krueger, and Pretlow, and the members of the Health, Finance, and Ways and Means Committees for the opportunity to submit this written testimony on the state of public health and the public health workforce in New York. The CUNY Graduate School of Public Health and Health Policy (CUNY SPH), a nationally top-ranked institution, is celebrating its 10th anniversary this year. In 2025, CUNY SPH celebrated our largest graduating class in the school's history, honoring students whose dedication and resilience exemplify the very best of public health leadership. These graduates joined a growing network of alumni who are reshaping health outcomes across New York City and far beyond, carrying forward our commitment to equity, justice, and community-centered care. As a university system, CUNY is known for being an economic driver, helping student achieve economic and social mobility. Within SPH, our diverse student body reflects the communities we aim to serve: 65.0% are Black, Indigenous, or People of Color (BIPOC), 37% are the first generation to attend college, and 57% the first to attend graduate schools. As the most affordable school of public health in New York City, CUNY SPH is more accessible than most, yet the majority of our students work either full-time or part-time while matriculating and need financial assistance to support their studies.

The Governor's State of the State and Executive Budget underscore the urgency of addressing many public health threats facing our state and how HR1 and other federal policies have exacerbated those threats. CUNY SPH appreciates the hard choices facing the State this year as well as the State's ongoing commitment to both expanding access to healthcare by shoring up Medicaid and New York State of Health with state funding after federal cuts and protecting and expanding sexual and reproductive health services and mental health programs. As a professional school of CUNY, we are grateful for the ongoing support of the State to expand CUNY programs, meet contractual obligations, and maintain affordable education for our students. CUNY SPH supports investments in local solutions to meet these challenges and build a stronger public health and healthcare workforce while boosting the State's economy. We ask the State to consider including public health professionals in healthcare loan repayment programs and career pathways training programs and to maintain a balance between growing industries, reducing regulatory barriers, and protecting the health of the public.

Sexual and Reproductive Justice and Environmental Impact

CUNY SPH proudly hosts New York State's first coordinated Sexual and Reproductive Justice Hub, an academic initiative that prioritizes advocacy and scholarship to advance reproductive justice. In October 2025, CUNY SPH launched the Byllye Avery Professorship

in Sexual & Reproductive Justice—the first endowed professorship of its kind in the nation. Named for pioneering feminist leader and founder of the Black Women’s Health Imperative, the professorship advances scholar activism at the intersection of reproductive justice and public health. This January our first class of students initiated their studies toward a Master of Public Health degree in Sexual and Reproductive Justice and Health. Faculty, staff, and students affiliated with the SRJ Hub have partnered with government officials, legislators, and advocates to protect gender equity, healthcare access, bodily autonomy, and data privacy in New York. As the State and City move to reduce extensive bureaucratic processes and regulations that inhibit growth in housing and infrastructure expansion, it is critical that we also pay attention to the quality and depth of environmental impact statements so that we can prevent health harms related to progress, particularly in regard to maternal, infant, and child health. Through continued funding added by the legislature to the FY 27 NYS Budget, legal and policy experts at the SRJ Hub at CUNY SPH shall conduct data driven assessments of these statements to illuminate gaps and better inform solutions.

Mental Health Services and Training

New York State, like most of the United States, is facing a mental health crisis, with an increasing number of individuals experiencing mental illness across a spectrum of severity. Once again, the Governor’s executive budget makes significant strides toward bolstering the State’s mental hygiene system, particularly for youth and older adults. The State of the State proposals to work with faith-based communities, more closely integrate mental health and substance use services, expand social services, and implement suicide prevention programs are critical to meeting the mental health needs in New York.

CUNY SPH’s virtual task-sharing program is uniquely positioned to help meet this demand by training a diverse community workforce to deliver culturally responsive, community-centered mental health services. Integrating this training into the proposed initiatives will not only address workforce gaps but also foster community resilience and health equity, ensuring that underserved populations receive the support they need, while furthering a career pipeline in mental health services with new entry points. Through continued funding added by the legislature to the FY 27 NYS Budget, this initiative will support placement of trainees at community organizations to provide mental health support to populations in need.

Grow Local Industry While Protecting Health

The State of the State includes proposals to expand New York’s hard cider industry and modernize the Alcoholic Beverage Control Law (ABCL) into order to promote agri-tourism and reduce licensing restrictions. While we support the growth of local industries, awareness of the health harms of excessive alcohol use is growing. [New York State Department of Health](#) reports that *“excessive alcohol use is associated with an increased risk for several chronic diseases and conditions. Alcohol is a leading preventable cause of cancer and has been linked to an increased risk for developing at least seven different*

types of cancer including oral, liver, colon, rectum and breast cancers. Excessive alcohol use also increases the risk for hypertension, cardiovascular disease, stroke, liver disease and digestive diseases. The short-term health effects of excessive alcohol use can also include motor vehicle crashes, violence, alcohol poisoning and overdose.” Therefore, we urge the legislature to consider these proposals in concert with Senator Fernandez and Assemblymember Levenberg’s [Senate Bill S4595 / Assembly Bill A9318](#) which will increase alcohol tax revenue in New York State and dedicate the funds toward prevention, education, and treatment of excessive alcohol use.

This approach would align with the State’s proposed enhanced taxation and enforcement tools aimed at addressing illegal flavored vapor products targeting youth and leading to nicotine addiction. We similarly urge the legislature to consider passage of existing legislation, [A2128](#) and [A4619/S4527](#) that would close loopholes in the public health law that led to the proliferation of readily available access to illegal products.

Expanding Access to Healthy Food

This year’s budget proposes to expand access to Hunger Prevention and Nutrition Assistance programs including critical infrastructure, modernization of EBT technology, and increased awareness of SNAP and other benefits to students and families, especially summertime assistance. As grocery prices continue to increase, more and more New Yorkers are experiencing food insecurity throughout the State. Policymakers lack access to a single, integrated, policy-ready data system that shows where food insecurity, food affordability pressures, and gaps in program participation are most acute. Food-related data are dispersed across federal, state, and nonprofit sources, reported at different geographic scales, and difficult to interpret without technical expertise. The CUNY SPH proposed New York State Food Metrics Dashboard is an interactive, easy-to-use tool designed for legislators and government agencies. The dashboard will integrate data on food insecurity, food affordability, access, program participation, and food system conditions into a single platform that supports legislative decision-making, budget and resource targeting, and program oversight.

Strengthening our Public Health Workforce

A robust public health workforce is essential to protecting the health of New Yorkers. Unfortunately, the public health workforce is shrinking when its role is more critical than ever. New data from the [2024 Public Health WINS survey](#), released by the de Beaumont Foundation and the Association of State and Territorial Health Offices in July 2025, shows that the permanent governmental public health workforce has declined by roughly 16% since 2008, and nearly one-third of current staff intend to leave their jobs within the next year. The study also reports that the main drivers of this exodus from the field are low pay and burnout. The survey indicates that more than 40% of the public health workforce carries student loan debt, averaging almost [\\$50,000 per person](#).

Public health is a unique discipline that uses training, science, evidence, data, and community input to recognize patterns and problems, and take collaborative action. It sits

at the intersection of social, environmental, physical, and economic influences. The [daily activities](#) of our public health workforce are broad and diverse, ranging from data collection, analysis, and visualizations to investigating the source of infectious diseases and contact tracing, to implementing and evaluating programs to change health behaviors at a population level, to crafting policy initiatives that protect communities. While public health often suffers from cuts when funding is scarce, the truth is that dwindling resources for social supports, healthcare, housing, environmental protections, and services for vulnerable populations increase the need for public health.

Misinformation and disinformation are creating confusion and making the public skeptical of proven interventions including vaccine safety, health benefits of fluoridation, and healthy eating recommendations. Changes in the federal system have impacted the availability of reliable, timely and accessible national data including immunization data, pregnancy outcome data, overdose fatality data, and health equity data. New York needs our public health professionals to maintain and rebuild our public health infrastructure, respond to these changes, and work collaboratively with our health care professionals.

We applaud the Governor's support of "SUNY and CUNY Reconnect for High Demand Jobs," particularly this year's extended eligibility to adults with a previous college degree who are now enrolling in community college to attain a nursing degree. In the past two years, New York State has also established two strong programs to expand healthcare coverage and address workforce shortages – the Career Pathways Training Program and the Health Care Access Loan Repayment Program. These critical programs are supporting nurses, physician assistants, mental health counselors, pharmacy technicians, certified social workers, case managers, community health workers, psychiatrists, primary care physicians, nurse practitioners, and pediatric clinical nurse specialists and other titles, with reduced costs and opportunities to work off their loans. In light of recent federal changes, access to such financial support to recruit public health professionals into training is more important than ever. We urge the State to consider expanding these programs to include public health training and titles.

Conclusion

CUNY SPH appreciates the Legislature's continued partnership and leadership. Thank you for allowing me the opportunity to share this testimony with you. CUNY SPH stands ready to collaborate to build together a healthier, more equitable future for all New Yorkers.