



New York State Public Health Association (NYSPHA)

UPDATED November 2, 2020

The Honorable Andrew M. Cuomo
Governor of New York State
New York State Capitol
Albany, NY 12224

Dear Governor Cuomo,

The New York State Public Health Association (NYSPHA) is the New York State affiliate of the American Public Health Association (APHA) and serves as the statewide organization for members from all disciplines across the spectrum of public health professionals and organizations. Our mission is to improve the public's health through advocacy, education, networking, and professional development.

In past years, NYSPHA has written to you with detailed recommendations for funding specific components of the public health infrastructure including diverse topics such as supporting local health departments, chronic disease prevention, tobacco control, public water supply protection, and other issues of public health importance. Our comments have focused on the fact that public health has been underfunded traditionally, even before the current circumstances, and that opportunities to prevent disease have gone unaddressed. However, this year the challenges presented by the COVID-19 pandemic will require an innovative approach to budgeting. Therefore, this letter focuses on our recommendations to raise the revenue necessary to support the public health infrastructure in general, including support for the state and local health and mental health departments, and to avoid any funding reductions.

As you well know, the COVID-19 pandemic has amplified existing health and behavioral health inequities, with the largest impact falling on Black and Latinx New Yorkers and those living in low-income communities.¹ These populations are already facing significant health disparities.² The pandemic is also causing financial hardships for many New Yorkers, as evidenced in a recent poll of NYC residents showing significant numbers expressing serious problems with finances, difficulties paying bills, and challenges feeding their families.³ Such clustering of vulnerabilities creates the conditions for even greater public health harms.

NYSPHA recognizes that the federal government must provide significant new resources to state and local governments to address the impacts of the pandemic. We support your efforts to obtain additional federal funding. NYSPHA will continue to advocate vigorously with APHA and other national public health organizations for increased federal funding for states and local governments. However, while we wait for necessary federal aid, we recommend that New York State take the

following steps to raise additional revenue to maintain a public health infrastructure as economic conditions worsen and the COVID-19 pandemic continues.

1. Increase the tax on cigarettes and other tobacco and vaping products. NYSPHA recommends that New York State raise the cigarette tax by \$1.00 per pack. Raising the cigarette tax is one of the most effective tobacco prevention and control strategies, but the tax has remained static for the last ten years. A \$1.00 per pack cigarette tax increase is projected to net \$30.40 million in new annual revenue, which could be used to support the state and local health departments. Additionally, it is estimated that 29,500 youth under age 18 would be prevented from becoming adult smokers, decreasing future healthcare expenditures due to smoking. Currently, \$9.7 billions is spent annually on tobacco related healthcare costs in New York State. Therefore, increasing the price of cigarettes not only raises critical revenue – it decreases the prevalence of tobacco use, particularly among youth and young adults. To further increase public health benefits, increase cost savings, and generate revenue, New York State should also raise the tax on all other tobacco products including e-cigarettes and cigars to provide tax parity with cigarettes. This will also prevent tobacco users from jumping between products whenever one product's price increases.

2. Increase the income tax on the wealthiest New Yorkers. To redress the health and economic challenges facing our state's residents, NYSPHA recommends that New York must secure additional revenue from the wealthiest among us. One way to do this is to pass the Billionaire's Mark to Market tax which would for the first-time, tax the increase in the value of stocks, bonds and other assets owned by billionaires. Currently, taxes are only paid when these assets are sold. This proposal is projected to raise more than \$5 billion in the first year. Increasing the tax paid by the state's billionaires makes sense because, according to the latest estimates, billionaires' wealth has increased by 20 percent since the start of the pandemic.⁴ Also, New Jersey has recently raised the tax rate on those with incomes between \$1 and \$5 million a year, which is expected to raise \$390 million. This could also be considered for New York State; however, raising the tax rate for billionaires in New York would raise significantly more money. According to the Fiscal Policy Institute a new poll shows that an overwhelming majority of New Yorkers continue to support increased taxes on the wealth to close the deficit, rather than drastic cuts to government services.⁵

3. Establish a tax on Sugar Sweetened Beverages (SSB). According to the NYS Department of Health, over 25% of all New Yorkers are obese. The negative effects of obesity are disproportionately burdensome for the state's poor residents and for African American New Yorkers. SSBs are associated with increased body weight, poor nutrition, diabetes and obesity.⁶ As demonstrated in Philadelphia and elsewhere, sugar sweetened beverage taxes are an effective policy tool for reducing sugary drink purchases among at-risk populations. SSB taxes can be especially effective when some of the revenue collected is reinvested in the low-income communities that are especially at risk for obesity and for increased SSB consumption.⁷ The tax could raise additional needed funds for public health and other initiatives that support New Yorkers who are most in need as a result of this pandemic.

Funds raised from these sources of revenue should be invested in strengthening our state and local public health infrastructure and bolstering the Article 6 General Public Health Work program that supports our local health departments. As you know, local health departments are on the frontlines of the fight against the COVID-19 pandemic.

The public health infrastructure is built on people – local health officials, preparedness coordinators, epidemiologists, public health nurses, sanitarians public health educators and support staff. Stagnant

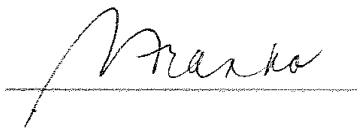
state aid, tax caps, funding eligibility restrictions and other administrative barriers have all undermined the local public health infrastructure, the one we all rely on to be there in emergencies. As a result, our public health workforce outside of New York City decreased by one-third between 2011 and 2018. In the words of one local health official, “*We are just barely making it as it is.* ANY reduction in funding is catastrophic to our pandemic response. We pulled people from other programs, departments, and grants - *it has been all hands-on deck - any cut in funding would be devastating.*” Now is not the time to reduce state funding.

Similarly, local mental health departments are playing a critical role in addressing the mental health impacts of the pandemic caused by social distancing, business closure, and unemployment. New Yorkers across the board are struggling with their mental health during this time of upheaval. We applaud your implementation of the Emotional Support Line for those struggling with stress and anxiety related to COVID-19. However, we underscore that the mental health struggles of New Yorkers are not temporary. We urge you to consider the development of statewide crisis services available 24/7/365 with talk, text, and in-person options, similar to that of Colorado. This type of service will go a long way in reducing rates of depression, anxiety, suicides, drug overdoses, and domestic violence.

Throughout the pandemic, New York State has been a leader in taking data driven strategies to protect the public’s health. We urge you to use this extraordinary moment to change the budget process to include these new sources of revenue and to continue to support the health of our communities.

We respectfully ask you to **support the health of all New Yorkers** by including these recommendations in the FY 2021-2022 New York State Executive Budget.

Sincerely,



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New York State Public Health Association
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CC:

Dr. Howard Zucker, Commissioner, New York State of Department of Health
Dr. Richard Becker, Deputy Secretary for Health and Human Services, Executive Chamber
Robert Mujica, Director, New York State Division of the Budget (Katie Hare)
Lisa Pino, Executive Deputy Commissioner, New York State Department of Health
Danielle Greene, Chief of Staff, New York State Department of Health
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¹ <https://covid19tracker.health.ny.gov/>

² https://www.health.ny.gov/statistics/community/minority/mcd_reports.htm

³ https://www.npr.org/sections/health-shots/2020/09/09/909669760/npr-poll-financial-pain-from-coronavirus-pandemic-much-much-worse-than-expected?fbclid=IwAR1t_CkE02T_DDFbib_yE1iUYQZvYGcPrD-2VacmHqpOt-kc

⁴ Chuck Collins, "U.S. Billionaire Wealth Surges to \$584 Billion, or 20 Percent, Since the Beginning of the Pandemic," Institute for Policy Studies, June 18, 2020.

⁵ <http://fiscalpolicy.org/new-poll-shows-overwhelming-majority-of-new-yorkers-support-taxing-the-wealthy-to-close-budget-deficit>

⁶ Brownell, KD, Farley T, Willett WC et al. The public health and economic benefits of taxing sugar sweetened beverages. *NEJM* 2009;361(16): 1599-1605

⁷ Community Health Councils. California's Sweetened Beverage Tax: A Health Impact Assessment. 2017. https://www.pewtrusts.org/-/media/assets/external-sites/health-impact-project/chc_ssb_hia_2017_final.pdf