Committee on Mental Health, Disabilities and Addiction

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## THE COUNCIL

# Briefing paper OF THE HUMAN SERVICES Division

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**COMMITTEE ON MENTAL HEALTH, DISABILITIES AND ADDICTION**

*Hon. Diana Ayala, Chair*

#### September 22, 2020

**Oversight: Increased Drug Overdose, Depression and Anxiety During COVID-19**

**Int. No. 2005-2020:** By Council Members Louis, Kallos and Ayala

**Title:** A Local Law in relation to reporting on the mental health of New Yorkers during the COVID-19 public health crisis

1. **Introduction**

 On June 16, 2020, the Committee on Mental Health, Disabilities, and Addiction, chaired by Council Member Diana Ayala will hold a hearing entitled “Increased Drug Overdose, Depression and Anxiety During COVID-19.” The Committee will hear Introduction Number 2005-2020 (Int. 2005), sponsored by Council Member Louis, A local law in relation to reporting on the mental health of New Yorkers during the COVID-19 public health crisis. Among those invited to testify are representatives from the New York City Department of Health and Mental Hygiene (DOHMH), and other interested parties.

1. **Background**

*COVID-19 Background*

Since the novel coronavirus first emerged in Wuhan, China in late 2019,[[1]](#footnote-1) it has spread rapidly around the world. As of September 22, 2020, there have been more than 29.7 million confirmed COVID-19 cases and more than 937,000 deaths worldwide, including more than 6.7 million cases and more than 199,000 deaths in Unites States.[[2]](#footnote-2) New York State and New York City have been hit particularly hard by this pandemic, with the virus likely initially entering New York via travelers from Europe.[[3]](#footnote-3) As of September 22, 2020, there have been more than 450,000 confirmed cases[[4]](#footnote-4) and more than 32,655 deaths in the State,[[5]](#footnote-5) including more than 243,000 cases and 23,750 confirmed deaths[[6]](#footnote-6) in New York City.[[7]](#footnote-7)

In order to slow the growth of COVID-19 cases in New York, Governor Andrew Cuomo declared a State of Emergency on March 7, and has since issued a series of orders that have closed schools, businesses, and changed the day-to-day lives of millions of New York residents.[[8]](#footnote-8) The goal of these social distancing measures was to slow the spread of coronavirus, and thereby “flatten the curve.”[[9]](#footnote-9) The primary concern for public health authorities in recommending these measures was to ensure that the number of people who required hospitalization was limited as much as possible, to put hospitals in a better position to manage a surge in cases.[[10]](#footnote-10)

In the weeks since these social distancing measures were enacted, the immediate concern regarding hospital capacity has abated as the number of new COVID-19 cases, hospitalizations, and deaths has declined significantly.[[11]](#footnote-11) On May 4, Governor Cuomo announced a phased, regionally-based reopening plan for the state, which began on May 15.[[12]](#footnote-12) While New York City has slowly reopened since, these drastic social distancing measures required – and still require – many New Yorkers to remain more isolated, indoors, and alone than ever before, which has, in combination with the stressors, losses, fears, and uncertainties of a global pandemic, significantly impacted mental health and substance abuse disorder throughout the City.

*Effects of COVID-19 on Mental Health*

 COVID-19 has brought many emotional anxiety and socioeconomic uncertainties. The fear of contracting coronavirus—a deadly disease that has killed hundreds of thousands of people—has been compounded by the ripple effects of the pandemic on daily life.[[13]](#footnote-13) For many, these concerns include exposure to infected sources, infected family members, loss of loved ones, school closures and the pressures of homeschooling children, the loss of childcare, job loss and economic insecurity, home confinement issues ranging from social and emotional isolation to domestic violence concerns, the inability to effectively manage preexisting physical or psychological conditions, inadequate access to supplies such as groceries and money for rent and utilities, loss of employer sponsored healthcare resulting in the lack of prescription medications, and an overall shortage of pandemic related resources such as timely testing and access to personal protective equipment (PPE) for essential workers.[[14]](#footnote-14) According to the New England Journal of Medicine, these daily pressures “undoubtedly contribute to widespread emotional distress and increased risk for psychiatric illnesses” associated with and attributable to COVID-19.[[15]](#footnote-15)

For many, the fundamental challenges associated with the pandemic are compounded by various state and local stay-at-home and quarantine orders that have resulted in a variety of psychosocial stressors including feelings of fear, frustration, confusion, and anger due in large part to the indefinite nature and unknown scope of the crisis.[[16]](#footnote-16) Absent a national plan to address COVID-19, “conflicting messages from government and public health authorities” have served to heighten already inherent uncertainties of the pandemic, thereby serving to increase emotional stress, rather than alleviate it.[[17]](#footnote-17)

 Whereas after a conventional disaster, some people emerge more resilient having found a renewed sense of inner strength and resolve, the seemingly unending nature of this pandemic has served to provoke vulnerable communities.[[18]](#footnote-18) This is especially true for those living with substance use disorders and mental health diagnoses who, in the absence of access to regular care, may be more prone to emotional distress and relapse.[[19]](#footnote-19) Prior to COVID-19, nearly one in five American adults reported having a mental illness, serious mental illness or major depressive episode within the past year.[[20]](#footnote-20) For many, the COVID-19 pandemic has served to exacerbate pre-existing mental health and substance use disorders.[[21]](#footnote-21) According to a July 2020 Kaiser Family Foundation (KFF) Tracking Poll, 53 percent of adults in the United States reported that their mental health has been negatively impacted due to worry and stress over COVID-19, which is a significantly higher number than the 32 percent previously reported in March (See Figure 1 below).[[22]](#footnote-22) Survey respondents attributed this increase to a direct result of experiencing isolation due to social distancing, job loss, or negative health consequences during the pandemic which had resulted in “increased depression, anxiety, distress and low self-esteem, which for some led to higher rates of substance use and suicide ideation.”[[23]](#footnote-23) Notably, barriers to accessing mental health and substance use disorder services during the pandemic compounded behavioral health problems and a recent study found that 13.3 percent of adults found new or increased substance use to be an effective coping tool for increased stress and anxiety.[[24]](#footnote-24)



*Effects of COVID-19 on Substance Use Disorder and Overdose Rates*

While epidemics have been known to induce general stress across the population, it is likely that mental health challenges and substance use disorder rates will continue to increase among individuals with and without prior histories of behavioral health disorders.[[25]](#footnote-25) Data collected nationally from ambulance teams, hospitals and police departments indicates that suspected drug overdoses jumped 18 percent in March, 29 percent in April, and 42 percent in May.[[26]](#footnote-26) Suggested causes include the disrupted supply chains, prompting people to seek substances from less familiar suppliers, and social distancing, which has left some to “take drugs alone…making it less likely someone will be there to call 911 or administer Narcan.”[[27]](#footnote-27) Additionally, a White House drug policy office analysis showed an 11.4 percent increase in fatalities during the first four months of the year, while a New York Times analysis estimated the increase to be 13 percent.[[28]](#footnote-28) According to the American Medical Association (AMA), while drug overdose deaths in the US fell in 2018 for the first time in years, “as of July 20, 2020 more than 35 states have reported increases in drug-related deaths and other concerns with drug use and mental illnesses…with some municipalities reporting overdose death rates increasing by as much as 60 percent.”[[29]](#footnote-29) In response, the AMA urged governors and state legislatures to adopt new Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMSHA) and Drug Enforcement Administration (DEA) guidelines which include the removal of barriers such as prior authorizations for medications used to treat opioid disorders.[[30]](#footnote-30)

In July, respondents to a Siena College Poll reported that 59 percent of New Yorkers have been affected by or “touched” by opioid abuse—up from 54 percent two years ago.[[31]](#footnote-31) According to preliminary New York City Police Department (NYPD) statistics, “while overdoses have fallen overall in the first half of 2020, overdose deaths appear to have significantly increased during this time…” However, DOHMH has stated that it is currently “too soon to tell” if there has been a spike in overdose deaths, due to the way data is tracked using anecdotal evidence rather than real time statistics.[[32]](#footnote-32) According to some preliminary statistics, Queens saw a 56 percent spike in overdose deaths during the first five months of the year; Staten Island saw 58 overdose fatalities so far this year, representing an increase from 49 at this time last year.[[33]](#footnote-33) Additionally, Emergency Medical Technicians in New York City administered opioid overdose-reversal narcotics 23 percent more often than last year.[[34]](#footnote-34)

*Mental Health and Substance Use Disorder Resources from the State and City*

There have been several efforts at both the state and city level to address the increasing mental health and substance use disorder needs of New Yorkers throughout the pandemic.[[35]](#footnote-35) Such efforts have included existing services that received renewed attention and other efforts have included newly created resources[[36]](#footnote-36). Those efforts include:

* NYC Well: A free, confidential mental health support system, where users can connect to a counselor via phone, text, or chat and receive access to mental health and substance use services, in more than 200 languages, 24/7/365, operating under Thrive NYC;[[37]](#footnote-37)
* DOHMH partnered with select CVS and Walgreens pharmacies to give out free naloxone kits to any individuals who requested one, operating under NYC Well;[[38]](#footnote-38)
* Resources to address the behavioral health needs of New York City veterans, including a partnership between Thrive NYC and the New York City Department of Veterans’ Services to create Mission: VetCheck, an initiative that allows volunteers from the veteran community to make check-in calls to veterans across NYC;[[39]](#footnote-39)
* The New York State Office of Mental Health (OMH) created an Emotional Support Helpline, which offers free and confidential support to those experiencing increased anxiety due to COVID-19;[[40]](#footnote-40)
* Additionally, OMH created a guide for managing Stress and Anxiety during the COVID-19 Outbreak;[[41]](#footnote-41)
* The New York State Office of Addiction Services and Supports compiled a list of addiction treatment centers offering remote addiction support services during the pandemic.[[42]](#footnote-42)

In addition to these services, many community-based organizations and service providers have successfully shifted their models to offer virtual or socially distanced services to New Yorkers, though many are struggling to transition with limited budgets and shifting health guidelines.

*Issues and Concerns*

While there are many concerns surrounding the increased mental health and substance abuse challenges experienced by New Yorkers due to the COVID-19 pandemic, perhaps none are more pressing than the continued need for access to quality behavioral health care.[[43]](#footnote-43) For many New Yorkers who were seeking treatment, accessing in-person mental health or addiction services treatment has been nearly impossible due to the many physical office closures of mental health providers.[[44]](#footnote-44) Additionally, a large number of psychiatric beds in hospitals were shut down to make room for COVID patients, and such departments have not yet returned to full services.[[45]](#footnote-45) While this difficulty accessing in-person services has necessitated an unprecedented effort to offer telehealth services[[46]](#footnote-46) – a solution that could be incredibly helpful in the long run – underlying issues surrounding pay rate parity and a dearth of culturally sensitive mental health providers serve as barriers to achieving full, adequate access to quality behavioral health care.[[47]](#footnote-47)

Many concerns also surround the lack of comprehensive data in New York City, where, unlike other states and jurisdictions, neither the State nor City health departments have collected and published public data about overdose deaths and mental illness rates in 2020.[[48]](#footnote-48)

Finally, as the City and State face massive budget cuts and cuts to public programming due to the economic downturn, without a guaranteed federal bailout behavioral health services face potential cuts in provision.

1. **Conclusion**

At today’s hearing, the Committee looks forward to hearing from the Administration and community advocates about the programs and initiatives that are being utilized to address rising mental health challenges and substance abuse disorder and overdose rates in New York, and learning about what the Council can do to continue to address the needs of New Yorkers throughout the COVID-19 pandemic.

1. **Legislation**

**Int. No. 2005**

This legislation requires DOHMH to track and issue a report on the aggregate number of mental health-related cases in the city during the public health crisis resulting from COVID-19. It also requires DOHMH to issue the report no later than six months after enactment, and every six months thereafter. Finally, it requires DOHMH to break down the aggregate numbers by age, race, and gender, as well as the identification of any disparities in those numbers.

The bill would take effect immediately.

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| Int. No. 2005 By Council Members Louis, Kallos and Ayala A Local Law in relation to reporting on the mental health of New Yorkers during the COVID-19 public health crisis Be it enacted by the Council as follows: Section 1. Biannual report on COVID-19 and mental health. a. No later than 6 months after the enactment of this local law, and every 6 months thereafter, the New York city department of health and mental hygiene (“DOHMH”) shall track and issue a report on the aggregate number of formally diagnosed or identified mental health-related cases following the declaration of a state of emergency by the mayor of the city of New York on March 13, 2020, in response to the new coronavirus, COVID-19. Such report shall be issued to the mayor and the speaker of the council and shall be published on DOHMH’s website. DOHMH may work with community-based organizations, federally qualified health centers, and other community providers to conduct surveys and obtain aggregate information, and may seek information from hospitals, the department of education, the department for the aging, and any other entity as the commissioner of health and mental hygiene deems appropriate.b. The report shall include the following information:1. The aggregate number of formally diagnosed or identified mental health-related cases;2. Breakdowns of such aggregate number by age, race, and gender;3. Identifications of age disparities, racial disparities, and gender disparities in such numbers; and4. Any other information the commissioner of health and mental hygiene deems appropriate.c. No information that is otherwise required to be reported pursuant to this section shall be reported in a manner that would violate physician-patient confidentiality or any applicable provision of federal, state or local law relating to the privacy of medical information.d. The commissioner shall include with any such report required by this section a recommendation to the mayor and the speaker of the city council about whether continued reporting on such topic is necessary and appropriate.§ 2. This local law takes effect immediately.  CPLS #149546/9/20 3:06 PM   |

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