



COVID-19 Working Group
New York City
www.covid-19workinggroupnyc.org

7 May 2020

To: Mayor Bill de Blasio
Speaker Corey Johnson
NYC Council Health Chair Mark Levine
NYC Council Hospitals Chair Carlina Rivera
NYC Council General Welfare Chair Stephen Levin
First Deputy Mayor Dean Fuleihan
Chief of Staff Emma Wolfe
Deputy Mayor for Health and Human Services Raul Perea-Henze
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For the NYC COVID-19 Working Group

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As New York City begins to emerge from the worst COVID-19 epidemic outbreak in the United States, and one of the worst in the world, we are writing to our City leaders to demand that the next phase of the pandemic response—one which is vital to restoring the City to health and its economy to functionality—be based on sound public health practice and leadership. This requires a strong, coordinated, professionally led response that includes testing, contact tracing, and supported isolation to stop forward transmission of SARS-CoV-2 and to prevent new cases and avoidable deaths.

To our shock and dismay, we hear from media [sources](#) that Mayor de Blasio intends to place Health + Hospitals in the leadership role of a new citywide initiative to do the essential work of tracing contacts linked to new COVID-19 diagnoses.

This catastrophic proposal would fundamentally disrupt the key role and statutory authority of the Department of Health and Mental Hygiene to lead and coordinate contact tracing efforts—as mandated by law and backed by decades of demonstrated expertise conducting ethical contact tracing in the communities which are already suffering disproportionately from the effects of COVID-19. This proposal is not only a likely violation of law and the Health Code, but also a reckless and potentially disastrous departure from sound public health practice. On the most basic level, H+H must comply with federal HIPAA law, which prohibits the sharing of confidential health information. This alone makes contact tracing by H+H staff effectively illegal.

A large-scale effort to identify, trace, and isolate persons exposed to COVID-19 is desperately needed to continue to drive down new cases and restore our City's economy. DOHMH, the preeminent local health department in the nation—comprise staff whose core training, experience and expertise is in engaging communities to identify, diagnose, prevent, and control infectious disease. Any decision by the Mayor to shift contact tracing responsibilities away from DOHMH to an agency with no experience in contact tracing, which is bound by HIPAA restrictions, and which will require guidance and expertise from DOHMH, will hamper rather than advance these efforts—in a manner that mirrors the dysfunction of the federal response, where CDC is being similarly shunted aside in an approach focused on optics rather than results.

H+H clearly has an ongoing role to play in our pandemic response: providing care and treatment for patients, and supporting those convalescing at home or in temporary shelter, in coordination with community based organizations and DOHMH. However, they simply have no expertise or capacity in outreach, health education or contact notification.

This move would compound the Mayor's poor management of the COVID-19 pandemic, already characterized by his reluctance to follow the advice of DOHMH experts to swiftly enact social distancing measures. As a result of these delays, and other missteps, NYC has borne an almost unbearable burden of illness and death, and became the gateway to COVID-19 for the entire country.

We demand the Mayor scrap this ill-conceived approach, and support the expertise and authority of the DOHMH to carry out its core function of protecting the public's health.

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