

Finance Committee, FY2024 Budget Testimony
7th District Health Task Force

Good morning, my name is Linda Coronado, submitting testimony alongside Sue Avila. We are co-conveners of the 7th District Health Task Force, a group of more than a hundred advisors from 50+ organizations, direct care providers and activists in the Southwest side that was founded over 10 years ago. The Health Task Force meets quarterly to discuss the state of our public health system, its programs, and areas of interest and improvement. Our goal is to make sure that Cook County Health (CCH) is accessible to our residents, many who are immigrants, and that CCH stays true to its promise of providing quality care and making available a wide variety of healthcare services regardless of one's ability to pay. We expect to honor a tradition that recognizes that healthcare is a fundamental human right for all for all.

Following that ideal, the 7th District Health Task Force strongly believes in a County Health System budget that funds major accomplishments for communities while also addressing ongoing inequities within our health system. A few of the accomplishments the budget should continue to fund include providing much needed care to our patients in the 7th district, including advanced service expansion at Provident and ACHN locations (expanded services include cardiology, general surgery, gynecology, and thoracic surgery). CCH also awarded \$17 million in grants for Building Healthy Communities and Behavioral Health, providing communities with mental and substance abuse treatment. Additionally, CCH staffed 36 beds at Provident Hospital, and launched a nursing externship program, increasing the amount of space and staff to care for patients.

I am providing this testimony on behalf of the 7th District Health Task Force to address some areas of concern in the proposed Executive FY2024 Budget Recommendations. Specially, the 7th District Health Task Force urges the implementation and funding of the following programs:

1. Nutrition Education: According to local data shared by the Cook County Department of Public Health, 30% of suburban Cook County adults are obese. While data on race and ethnicity is unavailable for the County, Illinois data suggest that 41% of Black adults, 34% of Hispanic adults, 31% of white adults and 12% of Asian Illinoisans are obese.¹ At the most recent 7th District Health Task Force meeting, members described the impacts of obesity and diabetes affecting vulnerable populations, including children and women.
 - a. Educating residents about the importance of nutrition is a critical investment we should make. We recommend CCH to establish partnerships between schools and

¹<https://cookcountypublichealth.org/2022/09/29/new-national-report-shows-4-in-10-american-adults-have-obesity/>

community clinics to inform our residents and provide access to healthy and nutritious meals and continue the County Care emergency meals program.

2. Increase overall access to services: Cook County Health provides critical and life saving services to all residents. Unfortunately, many have shared how language barriers and financial barriers pose a hardship in accessing these services. While we commend the advancements CCH has made in expanding language services and charity care, there is more to be done.
 - a. We encourage the health budget to allocate funding for full time interpreters at medical centers, clinics, and throughout the hospital system. We also encourage the use of health promoters to understand why people don't seek services in the first place.
 - b. While charity care coverage has increased, it is important to eliminate the barriers in accessing free or charity-based services. For example, patients report having to provide documentation such as proof of income or identification. For undocumented patients, these documents can be difficult to provide, thereby discouraging patients from seeking care they need.
3. Increasing scholarships to fund the current and future generations of those who serve in the medical field: As Cook County Health faces a shortage in workers, it is critical that we invest in scholarship and tuition reimbursement programs that will fund health advocates, nurses, doctors, interpreters, and all who maintain and operate our County health system. Offering scholarship incentives will help ensure we maintain a robust workforce for years to come.
4. Behavioral and mental health access: The pandemic has negatively affected many people's mental health and created new barriers for people already suffering from mental illness. We urge Cook County Health to develop a proper response to address the increased need of behavioral health services in the communities.
 - a. CCH should increase the community outreach around mental health. Many residents simply do not know these types of services exist nor how to access them. The County can certainly improve its communication and inform residents of this benefit.
 - b. Additionally, once residents are informed of mental and behavioral health services, CCH should properly connect patients by increasing the number of doctors to schedule appointments, and offering in person or remote scheduling. It is critically important that non-English speakers are able to connect to providers in the language they feel comfortable in.

I urge the Board of Commissioner to take these concerns seriously and appropriately address. Thank you for your time.