



August 27, 2021

**Testimony on behalf of Health & Medicine Policy Research Group
Cook County Health and Hospitals Systems Board
Wesley Epplin, MPH, Policy Director**

Hello. I'm Wesley Epplin and I serve as the Policy Director at Health & Medicine Policy Research Group, a nonprofit focused on improving the health of all Illinoisans by advancing health equity. As a long-time supporter of Cook County Health and its critical mission, we offer our testimony today regarding the health system's fiscal year 2022.

Health & Medicine supports the development of an equity and inclusion office within Cook County Health. We hope Cook County Health will make strides on equity both among its employees and in its health services. Having all staff focused on advancing equity and the makeup of staff better reflect the communities being served will improve quality of care, accessibility, and trust.

Next, Health & Medicine urges the Cook County Health board and administration to make a much larger request for funding for both the Cook County Department of Public Health and for clinical services.

The proposed budget requests only a \$1 million increase in the local taxpayer allocation to the health department. The Cook County Board has long provided insufficient local funding for public health.

Contrast that small increase with the Cook County Department of Corrections, which the forecast suggests will receive a more than \$50 million increase in its local allocation. In the midst of a deadly pandemic, after underfunding public health for many years, it is unconscionable to not put massive new local resources into public health. The ongoing COVID-19 pandemic is on top of preexisting deadly health inequities and other public health threats, including climate change and future pandemics.

The noted \$25 million CDC grant for public health will be gone before we know it and Cook County Government needs to ramp up local spending on public health by tens of millions of dollars to create sustainable capacity change in public health, reduce and eliminate health inequities, and save lives.

As examples, there should be funding for more epidemiology staff to bring data to bear on public health decisions; for staff to promote health equity in all policies; and for community health workers to provide health education, guidance, and advocacy alongside of communities. We need new public health staff to partner with community organizations who are focused on the social determinants of health, in areas like housing, food access, and environmental justice. To work to reduce and eliminate health inequities, our local health department needs sustained sufficient local funding.

Also, Health & Medicine urges the Cook County Health Board and administration to increase the request for funding its healthcare operations. As more patients gained coverage under the Affordable Care Act, the Cook County Board has reduced the local taxpayer allocation to Cook County Health's hospital operations in an unsustainable manner. While there is a proposed modest increase in the local tax allocation, it is insufficient. Much more funding is needed to successfully fulfil the mission of Cook County Health and to invest into system transformation and service expansion. Mental healthcare, dental care, specialty care, and primary care should all be considered areas for expansion with a larger local funding allocation to make it happen.

Health & Medicine thanks this board for the opportunity to provide input and testimony on this budget. We challenge this board and the administration of Cook County Health to make a much larger request for local allocations for public health and healthcare.