Good morning, President Preckwinkle and Commissioners. I’m Wesley Epplin and I serve as policy director at Health & Medicine Policy Research Group.

If there’s one lesson you take away from the COVID-19 pandemic, I hope it is this: People’s lives depend upon us having both a strong public health system and a robust medical care system, with health equity as the goal. We need your support for both the Cook County Department of Public Health and Cook County Health.

Regarding public health, as shared before, 80+ organizations have signed a letter to you **requesting a $23 million increase in funding to the public health department in FY2025**.

Our health department should never again have to face a public health emergency like COVID-19, the next heat wave, or deal with day-to-day public health problems and severe health inequities while being woefully understaffed due to underfunding.

We also need you to hire enough HR capacity and fix the hiring issues that plague the health department. Having positions go unfilled and large portions of unspent funds is unacceptable.

Beyond filling vacancies, the health department needs new positions. As examples, we want more funding for community health workers, sanitarians, communicable disease case investigators, and lead risk assessors. And more! These are just examples.

Let me now pivot to Cook County Health—which has a mission to provide high-quality health services to all Cook County residents, regardless of their ability to pay.

Here are a few issues that need your focus:

**Cook County Health has far too many vacancies.** This is very costly, as CCH relies heavily on temporary staff. Boost your HR capacity and make hiring go faster. Having slow hiring means we lose interested, qualified applicants to other health systems.

**Next, the mechanism for accepting external grants is broken.** That means CCH is leaving grant money on the table because it can’t properly apply for and manage grants, including hiring, performing the work, and spending funds on time. This threatens key areas such as HIV care, responses to violence, and research.

**Additionally, Cook County Health should focus on providing more care to CountyCare members within the system**. CountyCare is paying a large amount of money to external providers while some of that care could be provided by county hospitals and clinics, which would help with the system’s financial stability.

We have to protect and preserve Cook County Health as the indispensable main provider for our so-called safety net in Cook County.

So, pay close attention to Cook County Health’s finances, operations, and governance, with a focus on transparency and publicly asking difficult questions such that issues can be surfaced and debated.

And once more, we request an increase of $23 million to the Cook County Department of Public Health in FY 2025—and new positions to fulfill critical public health roles.