



July 6, 2020

The Honorable Andrew M. Cuomo
Governor of New York State
NYS Capitol Building
Albany, NY 12224

Dear Governor Cuomo,

On behalf of the 58 local health departments working at the front line of the novel coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic, we write to thank you for your leadership and to address a concerning trend regarding a lack of access to COVID-19 testing among rural counties across New York State. Just as rural communities have long faced geographic barriers to care prior to COVID-19, these areas are facing similar issues with testing.

A recent county-by-county analysis shows that higher levels of testing in urban counties disguises a lack of adequate testing in rural areas. Nationwide, nearly twice as many counties lacking adequate tests were rural. In these areas populations tend to be poorer, older in age, and more prone to health problems such as diabetes and obesity than those in urban areas.

While New York State continues to lead the country in offering and improving access to testing, gaps remain in many rural counties in the state. Testing barriers in rural counties include:

- Lack of accessible test sites
- Distance and/or transportation issues
- Limited staff capacity at local health departments to administer testing
- Gaps in uptake by pharmacies in offering testing
- Restricted availability of free testing due to prohibitive insurance copays and denials of testing coverage for asymptomatic individuals
- Lack of capacity in larger, urban counties to expand access to meet the needs of rural communities

Potential solutions being pursued or suggested by rural health departments and providers include:

- Establishment of testing access for workers employed by rurally located farms throughout the State, particularly where we are seeing outbreaks
- Increased training and supply to community health centers so they can offer testing in more rural communities for asymptomatic individuals
- Continued improvement of lab capacity and access to supplies so larger urban areas can also serve neighboring rural counties
- Implementation of mobile testing sites to provide walk-up testing in the county one or two days per week to reach populations in more remote areas of rural counties

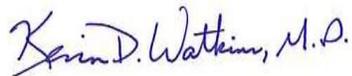
New York State's highly vulnerable rural counties are far less likely to overcome a COVID-19 outbreak due to a number of socio-economic, health, and structural factors. Addressing the lack of access to testing now will help prepare these communities for a potential second wave and to rapidly respond to an outbreak as primary and secondary schools begin to reopen.

Further expanding testing capacity is a critical component of safely reopening and helping residents return to work, school, and play. We strongly encourage New York State leadership to allocate a portion of

funding from the Coronavirus Aid, Relief, and Economic Security Act of 2020 to support COVID-19 testing efforts and expand capacity for testing, contact tracing, and containment in rural communities. We understand that \$750M in federal CARES funding has been approved by the CDC and allocated to statewide testing initiatives. Implementation of the solutions outlined within this letter would be appreciated by community members, leadership from county government and public health workers in rural areas of New York State.

If you have any questions, or if there is anything we can do to support your initiatives, please contact Sarah Ravenhall, Executive Director, NYSACHO at 518-456-7905 x 108 or sarah@nysacho.org.

Sincerely,



Kevin D. Watkins, MD, MPH

Public Health Director, Cattaraugus County Department of Health

President, New York State Association of County Health Officials



Sarah Ravenhall, MHA, CHES

Executive Director, New York State Association of County Health Officials



Stephen J. Acquario

Executive Director, New York State Association of Counties



Helen A. Evans

President, New York State Association for Rural Health

CC:

Robert Mujica, State Budget Director, Executive Chamber, State Capitol

Paul Francis, Deputy Secretary for Health and Human Services, Executive Chamber, State Capitol

Megan Baldwin, Assistant Secretary for Health, Executive Chamber, State Capitol

Elizabeth Garvey, Special Counsel, Senior Advisor, Executive Chamber, State Capitol

Dr. Howard Zucker, Commissioner, New York State Department of Health