

Senior Policy Analyst Mayra Diaz delivers testimony on disinformation and underinvestment in public health

Good morning, Chairwoman Rodriguez-Sanchez and members of the Committee and City Council. Thank you for the opportunity to speak today on this urgent topic.

My name is Mayra Diaz, and I am the Senior Policy Analyst at Health & Medicine Policy Research Group. I'm here to discuss the critical need for policies that protect and strengthen our public health system, especially now as we face both an erosion of trust and underinvestment in public health at the federal level.

We are living in a moment when federal-level misinformation and, quite frankly, disinformation are actively undermining public health, putting the safety and well-being of all Chicagoans at risk. Misinformation and disinformation do not just mislead or deny people access to credible, accurate health information; they are deadly forces that have cost lives in our very own neighborhoods right here in Chicago. We witnessed the detrimental harm of misinformation on our communities during the COVID-19 pandemic. False information regarding coronavirus and vaccines flooded the news cycle and social media networks, in great part by the actions of the current Secretary of the Department of Health and Human Services, Robert F. Kennedy. This false information led some to mistrust and not get vaccinated against the potentially deadly coronavirus. Research by the Center for Countering Digital Hate from 2021 found that 65% of anti-vaccine content online was led by just twelve individuals known as the "The Disinformation Dozen," with Robert F. Kennedy being among them.

Efforts to intentionally mislead the public leave communities, particularly historically excluded communities, susceptible to dangerous health advice. In fact, research shows that Black and Brown communities are specifically targeted with disinformation, exploiting the historical injustices these

communities have suffered by the medical system and perpetuating ongoing distrust and fears around health services that can help keep these communities healthy, including vaccines, chronic disease prevention services, substance use interventions, and mental health support. Let's be clear: this is not by accident. Disinformation campaigns thrive in environments where people have historically been mistreated and feel unheard by the system.

Here in Chicago, disinformation threatens to exacerbate long-standing health inequities, namely the life expectancy gap of over 11 years between Black and other Chicagoans. Chicago's life expectancy gap is not merely a statistic; it is a daily lived reality for many communities and a direct result of systemic failures to protect health as a fundamental right. These inequities are made worse when false claims discourage people from seeking care, accessing vaccines, or trusting health information, leaving communities vulnerable to preventable illness and death.

At the same time, underfunding of the Chicago Department of Public Health weakens our ability to respond with the accurate, culturally relevant guidance our communities need to make informed choices. With federal COVID-19 funds expiring and cuts to Medicaid and SNAP already enacted at the federal level, the City of Chicago must be responsive to these gaps. Without an increase in local funding, CDPH will lose critical capacity, leaving us unable to respond effectively to emerging threats and to the onslaught of misinformation with consistent, trusted, local health guidance.

Increased investment in our public health department will ensure that we are able to:

- Deliver an alternative to federal information sources to ensure access to credible, evidence-based education on urgent public health issues, including chronic diseases, maternal and child health disparities, communicable diseases, the opioid crisis, mental health, and more

- Fund and expand community health workers, the trusted messengers in our communities who help to engage our residents, deliver accurate information, and help community members navigate health and social services
- Strengthen our epidemiology and emergency preparedness capacity so we can detect, communicate, and respond to new health threats before they escalate
- Support trauma-informed policies and practices across city services, ensuring that residents who have been harmed by misinformation and health inequities can engage with public health systems without fear
- And much more

Chicago needs a public health department that is capable of countering misinformation not only with research and facts but also in close collaboration with other public health agencies, health providers, community-based organizations, and residents. To do this work well, CDPH needs adequate funding, staffing, and resources.

Health & Medicine thanks Alderwoman Rossana Rodriguez-Sanchez and Alderman Anthony Quezada for introducing the resolution under discussion today and to the Committee for elevating these important issues. We urge City Council to build on today's resolution by committing to protecting and expanding Chicago's public health infrastructure so that every resident, regardless of their background or what neighborhood they live in, has equitable access to accurate information and the care they need to live a healthy life.