

July 16, 2020

**Testimony from Health & Medicine Policy Research Group  
To the Finance Committee of the Cook County Board of Commissioners  
Preliminary Budget Hearing for FY2021**

Hi. I'm Wesley Eplin and I serve as the Director of Health Equity at Health & Medicine Policy Research Group, a supporter of the Cook County Health system.

I'm here to discuss the FY2021 Cook County budget forecast, which makes a preliminary commitment to the County health system of just shy of \$83 million, the same as last year. This is despite an expected budget shortfall of \$187.4 million for the health system.<sup>1</sup>

A major mistake from the last decade of this legislative body is severely and unsustainably cutting the county allocation to the health system: Reducing the local allocation from \$481 million in 2009 to the roughly \$83 million of today.<sup>2</sup>

That \$83 million doesn't even cover the Cook County Department of Public Health and the health services for Cermak jail.

We are in the midst of an historic, deadly pandemic. People are dying from COVID-19 every day, with a toll of thousands of people locally, and nearly 140,000 people nationally.

We have not sufficiently responded to this crisis as a country and the results are tragic and unjust, following a pattern of health inequity from structural racism.

While Cook County has had a slight reprieve, we've also had an uptick of COVID-19 in recent days and expect the pandemic to be with us for the foreseeable future. We cannot afford to let our guard down as others have done.

And we cannot allow our local safety net—anchored by Cook County Health—to atrophy or lose services from a lack of funding. You must fill the health system's budget gap.

Now, Cook County Health has just had dozens of layoffs and I've heard, more may be on the way.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Cook County 2021 Preliminary Budget Forecast. Office of Cook County President Toni Preckwinkle. <https://www.cookcountyil.gov/sites/default/files/service/2021-cook-county-preliminary-forecast.pdf>

<sup>2</sup> Transforming Cook County Health. [https://cookcountyhealth.org/wp-content/uploads/CCH\\_Evolving\\_Paper\\_102519.pdf](https://cookcountyhealth.org/wp-content/uploads/CCH_Evolving_Paper_102519.pdf)

<sup>3</sup> Layoffs, tax hikes possible as Cook County braces for one-two punch of budget holes for this year and the next. Rachel Hinton. Chicago Sun-Times. June 26, 2020. <https://chicago.suntimes.com/politics/2020/6/26/21303770/cook-county-preckwinkle-layoffs-tax-hikes-budget-deficit-covid-19-coronavirus>

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Imagine being on the other side of this pandemic, looking back, whether or not you want to have overseen the reduction in staff and service capacity at Cook County Health in the midst of a global pandemic. That is the budget choice before you today.

We have major health inequities, and many people struggled to get healthcare even before this pandemic, which has added burden.

Filling the health system's budget shortfall will not be an easy task, but cutting healthcare positions and closing units will worsen health inequities and is unacceptable.

Now, you might ask, where should you get the money? While that is your job to figure out, here's one suggestion.

Health & Medicine supports the growing call to defund the police. Adding up the budgets for the sheriff, police, corrections, and other parts of Cook County's carceral system, it totals more than a half billion dollars.

From its start, policing in America has been a system of racist social control, worsening health inequities. Cook County should follow the good trend of reduced jail census by cutting policing and jailing, and dismantling this public system of oppression.

In closing, while we've shared one idea to help, the burden of figuring out how to fully fund public health and healthcare is on you.

Again, thank you for your time, and we implore you to look to the future and imagine having made the wise decision to fully fund and support Cook County Health in the midst of a deadly pandemic.

Healthcare is a human right, and you have a responsibility and the opportunity to help guarantee it in Cook County. Thank you!