



**BRONX BOROUGH PRESIDENT VANESSA L. GIBSON**

**Testimony of Bronx Borough President Vanessa L. Gibson  
New York City Council Committee on Health  
Oversight: Addressing the Decline in Childhood Vaccination Rates  
February 29, 2024**

Good afternoon and thank you to Chair Schulman and the members of the Health Committee for convening this hearing to discuss this important issue. The decline in recent years in vaccination rates among children is a troubling sign for the future of our public health efforts in the city, and it is an area that requires robust intervention by our local government and community partners.

The decline in vaccination rates is occurring nationally as well as right here in New York City. According to the CDC, vaccination rates for major childhood diseases such as measles, whooping cough, and chickenpox fell from 95% to 93% between 2020 and 2023. While this may not seem like a big decline, falling below 95% increases the risk for outbreaks. Here in New York, we saw a measles outbreak in 2019 that sickened 649 people, most of whom were small children. Outbreaks like this are increasingly likely in the future, if we do not improve vaccination rates.

However, we know that vaccination efforts work. After the measles outbreak in 2019, there was a strong effort by the state and city to vaccinate more children. This resulted in there being zero reported measles cases in 2020 or 2021.

The COVID-19 pandemic played a large role in the drop of the childhood vaccine rate, for several reasons. First, with people staying home as much as possible, many young children missed their routine pediatric appointments, where they would have been immunized. Too many of these children have still not been back to the doctor since the pandemic. We must make more of a concerted effort to undo the effects that the shutdown had on people's ability and willingness to access routine healthcare services.

Secondly, the pandemic has resulted in increased mistrust of the healthcare system. When people do not feel that the system is responsive to their needs, they are less likely to engage and get the care they need. Many residents of The Bronx were already mistrustful of the healthcare system, having had negative experiences including poor outcomes, institutional racism and sexism, and an overall lack of respect. This mistrust must be addressed and rectified if the decline in vaccine uptake is to be reversed.

Additionally, during the pandemic, we saw these same factors at play, with Bronx residents less likely to get the COVID-19 vaccine. The city engaged in a wide campaign to get more people vaccinated for COVID, and something similar must be done to get these routine vaccinations to the children who need them.

These issues particularly impact The Bronx in several ways. We know that there is a disparity in who gets vaccines. People with insurance through Medicaid, Black and Latino people, and low-income people are all less likely to access routine care, and their children are less likely to have received all the required vaccinations on time. This disparity is leading to worse outcomes for Bronx residents, and we must do more to build bridges into these communities to encourage vaccination.

The city's outreach must be made more culturally responsive. Residents need to be met where they are and be convinced of the need for vaccination. We must work with credible messengers in communities, importantly including faith leaders, to bring this important information to the people whose children have the greatest need. The outreach must be conducted in the languages that the residents speak. It does not do any good if the people most at-risk are unable to access the information.

The city must also increase its outreach among the migrants and asylum seekers that are coming to our city. They are at increased risk of acquiring infectious diseases, and everyone at risk – both adults and children – must be up to date with their vaccines. The city has already begun a strong outreach effort to migrant parents, helping them to get their school-aged children vaccinated, and these efforts should be continued and expanded.

The city must directly combat the misinformation that spreads in our communities, including the misinformation that proliferates online. Misinformation can only be combatted with correct information. This information must be spread in multiple languages to reach everyone in our city. Allowing this misinformation to spread unchecked has resulted in fewer people getting the vaccines that are necessary to protect their health.

It will take a holistic effort to bring the vaccination rates back up to where they need to be. We must work with all our community partners to bring this message into local neighborhoods. The city must be culturally responsive and work with credible messengers that can reach hesitant community members. This is important work, but it is crucial to protect the well-being of our city's children.