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## **2025 State of Public Health Testimony**

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### **Introduction**

Good afternoon, Chair and members, I am Dr. Erica Pan. I have the great honor to serve as your new State Public Health Officer and Director of the California Department of Public Health as of February. I am grateful for this opportunity today to present on the state of public health in California in 2025.

I'd like to start by emphasizing that public health aims to promote health and well-being, and to prevent illness and death before they occur, increasing protective factors and reducing exposure to things that can make us sick. With this focus on prevention, we promote a healthy life course starting from the conditions we are born into and setting foundations for wellness throughout our lives. Public health activities are investments in keeping people well, in contrast to health care where we spend at least 97% of our health dollars in the U.S. caring for illness.

### **Future of Public Health**

In the years leading up to the pandemic, public health funding in California remained flat or decreased, and was largely funded by categorical, sporadic, federal and state special funds restricted to very specific diseases or activities. COVID-19 was an unprecedented challenge, that underscored the importance of a strong public health workforce and the need for 21st century infrastructure. The introduction of COVID-19 disease not only changed all our lives, but the health impacts also led to a drop in life expectancy for the first time in two decades from 81 years in 2019 to 78.4 years in 2021.

Our statewide response included a large influx of one-time state and federal funding that allowed us to improve our data and disease response systems and expand our workforce dramatically. Now, 2 years into recovery, COVID-19 is no longer among the leading causes of death, and life expectancy has rebounded.

Thanks to the landmark Future of Public Health investment, California has addressed some critical resource gaps and improved capacity and flexibility to maintain core public health operations.

This investment is crucial to sustaining some of the gains we've made, especially as we face upcoming expiration of significant amounts of one-time federal COVID-19 funding in 2026. It will take continued commitment to address ongoing and future threats and improve population health for future generations.

## Emerging Issues & Public Health Action

Public health challenges are growing in complexity and frequency. These include health disparities, climate change-driven extreme weather events, new and re-emerging infectious diseases, a rise in mental health issues, misinformation, and an aging population.

### H5N1

In our H5N1 bird flu response, enhanced data systems, surveillance and coordination capabilities that we gained during the pandemic have allowed CDPH and local health departments to respond swiftly. CDPH is leading a One Health approach working closely with many partners to address health across the animal-human-environmental spectrum; preventing exposures from infected animals or food products; and working with local health departments and healthcare systems to detect, treat, and contain human cases of bird flu with a focus on protecting our farm workers at highest risk. While the current risk to the public remains low, we must remain vigilant as we continue to learn about this evolving virus and how it spreads.

### Wildfires

CDPH's teams are working closely with federal, state, and local partners (including LAC and Pasadena PH) to prevent and mitigate health impacts of the devastating urban wildfires in LA county. CDPH response and recovery efforts range from supporting health facilities, providing translations, replacing vital records, providing environmental health guidance, ensuring minimal disruptions to essential services such as WIC, and addressing mental health resources needed for survivors and responders. The impacts of these fires will have long lasting impacts and CDPH will continue to work with partners to support recovery.

## Key Trends in Population Health

Now for some highlights of key population health trends in CA.

We have made important gains in lowering mortality. Since 2000, death rates for cardiovascular diseases and cancers, for men and women, are at all-time lows. Specifically, heart disease death rates have dropped by 39% and cancer death rates have decreased by 29%.

These achievements are thanks to strong tobacco regulations, health education, stigma reduction, and increased access to relevant healthcare. While these rates have improved, heart disease, including strokes, continue as leading causes of deaths. In addition, Alzheimer's disease-related deaths have increased in the last 20 years and are amongst the top causes of death in California, especially among older adults.

It's also striking to note that the drivers of premature death are related to injury and mental health, including road injury, homicide, drug and alcohol-related deaths, and suicide.

Although the rate of increase has slowed, drug overdose death rates continued to increase in 2023, reaching an all-time high. Sadly, overdoses are the leading cause of death for ages 25 to 54 years old and have risen to become the fifth leading cause of death overall.

Amongst young adults, the increasing and concerning rates of mental health conditions such as anxiety and depression are the leading cause for hospitalizations. Suicide is among the leading causes of death in younger adulthood; and the highest rates are in male adults 75 and older.

Thus, our focus on addressing behavioral health is crucial to address these major preventable causes of young lives lost. Research shows that a lack of social connection influences behavioral health outcomes and is an independent risk factor for deaths from all causes. CDPH and this Administration have prioritized investments like the Children and Youth Behavioral Health Initiative and Behavioral Health Services Act prevention funding, where we have a transformative opportunity to address and improve these heartbreaking years of life lost.

### **Social Determinants of Health & Equity**

Public health recognizes that health and well-being are linked to the conditions of the communities in which we live. These are known as the social determinants of health. These upstream environmental factors have a profound impact on the length and quality of our life. By identifying and addressing the foundational influences of where we live, our education, our income, the color of our skin, who we love, and our access to opportunities, we work to advance equity.

Across many areas of health, there are significant disparities, with Californians of color, particularly Black and Indigenous people, disproportionately impacted.

Homicide rates show some of the greatest racial disparities, and while we can be proud that California has some of the lowest infant and pregnancy-related mortality rates in the nation, it is unacceptable that rates in our Black infants and mothers are over 5 times higher than our lowest rates.

Some examples of how public health addresses disparities and promotes a healthy start include nutritional support, home visiting, behavioral health, disease screening, and other focused outreach for the communities where our data shows the highest needs.

Finally, as a pediatric infectious disease specialist and a parent, I must highlight the impact of vaccinations. Vaccines are a shining example of public health success – if I were presenting to you before the existence of vaccines, I would be reporting infectious diseases as the leading causes of death and disability. We have essentially eliminated diseases like polio and diphtheria, and while we now have 5 cases of measles this year exposed during international travel, the lack of additional linked cases or outbreaks is thanks to California's robust school vaccination requirements. We have maintained kindergarten MMR vaccination rates of 96%, compared to 82% in an area in West

Texas with an outbreak of over 200 cases and growing, and tragically, the first death in a healthy child since we eliminated measles in the US in 2000. We must continue to promote and support vaccinations, or we will lose ground on the success we've had.

## **Conclusion**

In conclusion, while Californians have seen major improvements in our health over the past 20 years, we are also facing a critical time with evolving challenges. We must do better to communicate and build confidence in the science that public health is built on. We can leverage the data we collect to empower the communities we serve to be healthy and address equity.

We know our work contributes to healthier Californians, and we are committed to working with you to sustain our investments and achieve our shared vision of saving lives and promoting healthy and thriving communities.

Thank you for your partnership towards a healthy California for all.