



**Connecticut Department of Public Health**

**Testimony Presented Before the Appropriations Committee**

**March 26, 2021**

**Acting Commissioner Deidre S. Gifford, MD, MPH  
860-509-7101**

**Senate Bill 705, An Act Concerning an Office of Pandemic and Public Health Preparedness**

The Department of Public Health (DPH) provides the following information regarding Senate Bill 705, which establishes an Office of Pandemic and Public Health Preparedness. The Office would be authorized to prepare the state for future pandemics and other public health emergencies. We are pleased that this bill reflects a commitment to supporting public health preparedness. Thank you for the opportunity to testify on this important issue.

DPH opposes creating a separate Office of Pandemic and Public Health Preparedness. Responding to the COVID-19 pandemic required the input of Commissioners from multiple agencies as well as the leveraging of agency systems and partners. The Department appreciates the acknowledgement that emergency response is an important part of government function, and that it is vital we prepare for future emergencies, but we would prefer to work with committee members to refine the system in place rather than create a whole new structure.

In March 2020, under the direction of Governor Lamont, the Unified Command, a statewide emergency response infrastructure through the [State Response Framework](#), was activated in response to the COVID-19 pandemic. This framework is based on the National Incident Management System and Incident Command Structure, and enables the state to plan, organize and respond to emergencies, regardless of the hazard. It allows the Governor to bring together the collective might of the state to robustly and effectively respond to emergencies. Under the Unified Command, daily communication and coordination occurred across state agencies. DPH was designated as one of the lead response agencies to provide subject matter expertise in epidemiology and public health. DPH staff began scientific evaluation to mitigate the pandemic by developing and implementing policies and protocols that could be used statewide.

The DPH Office of Public Health Preparedness and Response (OPHPR) is responsible for the development and implementation of the state's public health emergency plan and initiatives. OPHPR promotes the health and safety of Connecticut residents by preparing the state against public health emergencies and ensuring the timely response of emergency countermeasures through local and state means while maintaining equal access to preparedness services for all

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communities. This Office ensures compliance with all state and federal mandates with respect to preparedness and response and coordinates Department operations during emergencies.

OPHPR established an incident command system within the Department to coordinate activities with the Unified Command, as well as activating and staffing the Emergency Command Center at DPH. Staff helped secure and deliver personal protective equipment (PPE) from the Strategic National Stockpile to health care facilities and emergency medical service organizations. They developed the medical surge alternate care sites and deployed the mobile field hospital for relief and decompression of Connecticut's hospital system. Staff routinely provide guidance and communication to local health departments on COVID-19 initiatives. They have been instrumental in organizing the state's mass vaccination plan.

To support these activities, the OPHRP identifies and secures grants that strengthen the state's public health preparedness, including administering the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention's Public Health Emergency Preparedness (PHEP) and Hospital Preparedness Program (HPP) cooperative agreements. The program contains two state-funded staff. The bill would allow the Office of Pandemic and Public Health Preparedness to request assistance from staff from other state agencies in the performance of its duties. This would not be feasible for OPHPR since most of its staff are federally funded by the aforementioned cooperative agreements and must perform duties outlined in those agreements. These staff cannot engage in work that is outside of those parameters.

During the pandemic, the state purchased and distributed millions of pieces of PPE and is currently maintaining a stockpile. It is important to note that no state funds are currently allocated to OPHRP to maintain any stockpiles or to maintain existing medical equipment purchased this past year, or in years past. Establishing a strategic reserve inventory would come at an enormous cost for storage, handling, rotation, and maintenance of PPE and other medical equipment. Supporting the healthcare industry, non-profits, small businesses, and state agencies with PPE would amount to stockpiling tens of millions of PPE units of different types. Although PPE supply was a commonly cited challenge during the COVID-19 pandemic, state maintenance of a large stockpile of PPE and medical equipment may not be fiscally feasible from a long-term perspective.

Regardless of how an Office of Pandemic and Public Health Preparedness would be structured or where it would reside, a significant investment by the state would be necessary to implement the provisions of this bill.

Thank you for your consideration of this information.

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