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ON EMERGENCY MANAGEMENT

Informational Hearing

Lessons Learned from COVID-19: Preparing California for the Next Pandemic

August 9, 2022 – 1:30 p.m. – 1021 O Street, Sacramento – Room 2200

Briefing Paper

Summary

This hearing is intended to provide broad-based, high-level assessments of lessons learned from the state's COVID-19 response. A number of experts in the fields of health, public health, behavioral health and disaster response will share their perspectives regarding what is needed to ensure California achieves the overall readiness to respond more nimbly and effectively to the next large-scale public health emergency.

Then and Now

According to a synopsis in the July 21, 2022, edition of the California Playbook by Politico of the COVID-19 state of affairs:

“California has come a long way since March 4, 2020, when Governor Gavin Newsom first declared a state of emergency in response to a strange new virus that was tearing its way across the globe. Since then, nearly a quarter of state residents have reported infections and more than 90,000 have died. Masks went on, then came off, then went back on again, and came off once more. Vaccines offered a mental and physical reprieve, for a time, but the ever-evolving virus has given way to a new reality wherein Californians have learned to live with the threat of infection indefinitely.

Currently, the latest surge in cases has been fueled by the highly infectious Omicron subvariant known as BA5 and the state's test positivity rate sits at 14.5%. This figure is almost certainly an

undercount given the proliferation of at-home tests. Some experts estimate the actual case numbers could be as much as eight times higher than reported, but they also note that people are less likely to fall seriously ill compared to past waves, due, in part, to vaccines and treatments.

Still, it appears many Californians are simply tired of, or at best apathetic toward, COVID restrictions. According to a poll conducted by the Berkeley Institute of Governmental Studies in April 2022, housing affordability, homelessness, public safety, and gas prices outranked the pandemic on the list of voter concerns.”

More to Come

Pandemics, defined by epidemiologists as “epidemics occurring worldwide, or over a very wide area, crossing international boundaries and usually affecting a large number of people,” are not random events. As noted in an October 2020 report on improving pandemic preparedness from the Council on Foreign Relations (CFR) “pandemics afflict societies through the established relationships people have created with the environment, other animal species, and each other.”

The CFR estimates more than 40 new infectious diseases in humans have emerged in the past few decades. At the same time, the CFR points out that overuse of existing drugs and underinvestment in new ones produce treatment-resistant pathogens that can easily cross national boundaries, given increases in global trade, faster travel, and rapid urbanization.

To counter the occurrence of emerging and reemerging infectious diseases, the CFR recommends, among other things, that all levels of government develop and maintain metrics for assessing and monitoring pandemic preparedness capacity; prioritize readiness with disaster response triggers, mitigation guidelines, and drill exercises; and, strengthen protections for the multiple front lines of the healthcare system and for at-risk populations in future pandemics.

Planning and Preparedness Reports

A number of governmental and nongovernmental entities have recently issued planning and preparedness recommendations in response to lessons learned from the pandemic. Some of these are summarized below:

- *Intergovernmental Dimensions of the COVID-19 Responses and Consequences* Report by the National Academy of Public Administration, April 2022, recommends that the response to the next pandemic should incorporate the following key areas:
 - Testing: ensure rapid scale-up of testing, including lab capacity and contact tracing; provide clear and timely guidance at the federal level to states;
 - Mitigation strategies: fund research on promoting public trust in the government’s response to infectious disease emergencies;
 - Vaccines: require all states to participate in a common data sharing platform to facilitate vaccine reporting and provide funds to states that lack immunization information systems; and,
 - Personal Protective Equipment (PPE): work with industry partners and government procurement organizations to promote and adopt standards for PPE manufacturers,

distributors, and intermediaries.

- *Getting to and Sustaining the Next Normal: A Roadmap for Living With COVID-19*, March 2022, provides a comprehensive and coordinated roadmap to addressing this pandemic and developing the capacity to confront future biosecurity threats. Key recommendations include the following:
 - Broaden the focus of a coordinated response from COVID-19 alone to include all major respiratory viruses;
 - Provide funding not only to respond to COVID-19 but also to other future biosecurity threats;
 - Strengthen testing, surveillance and data infrastructure;
 - Support initiatives to develop new, more effective therapeutics and vaccines;
 - Improve and continuously monitor indoor air quality;
 - Codify new telemedicine regulations to maximize ease for health care providers to operate across the country;
 - Invest in the mental health of the health care workforce; and,
 - Leverage the infrastructure established within faith-based communities to create a permanent cadre of embedded community public health workers.

- President Biden's *National COVID-19 Preparedness Plan*, March 2022, includes recommendations centered around the following key objectives:
 - Protect against and treat COVID-19;
 - Prepare for new variants;
 - Prevent economic and educational shutdowns;
 - Provide vaccines; and,
 - Deploy emergency supplies.

- *California SMARTER Plan: The Next Phase of California's COVID-19 Response*, February 2022, focuses on the following areas:
 - **S**hots- The state will maintain ongoing vaccination efforts given that vaccines are the most powerful weapon against hospitalization and serious illness;
 - **M**asks- The state will continue to promote properly worn masking with good filtration to help slow the spread of COVID-19 or other respiratory viruses;
 - **A**wareness- The state will continue to be mindful of future surges, evolving variants and the emergence of new diseases, communicate clearly how people should protect themselves, and coordinate our state and local government response;
 - **R**eadiness – The state will be ready with the tools, resources and supplies needed to quickly respond and keep public health and the health care system well prepared;
 - **T**esting- Testing will help California minimize the spread of COVID-19 and the state will continue to focus on getting the right type of tests to where they are needed most;
 - **E**ducation- California will continue to work to keep schools open and children safely in classrooms for in-person instruction; and,
 - **R**x (therapeutics) – The state will make evolving and improving treatments increasingly available as a critical tool to save lives.

- *Assessing the Continuum of Care for Behavioral Health Services in California*, January 2022, by the California Department of Health Care Services (DHCS), aims to evaluate the behavioral health challenges and significant demands on the existing system of care and workforce capacity that have been exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic. Specifically, the assessment intends to do the following:
 - Provide a framework to describe the core continuum of behavioral health care services, making it possible to compare “what is” in California to “what should be;”
 - Review the available data and gather insights from stakeholders and experts on the need for and supply of key behavioral health services in California;
 - Support design and implementation of various behavioral health initiatives;
 - Explore issues and opportunities for specific populations identified as critical to address through an equity lens, but they should not be viewed as the only groups that warrant close attention; and,
 - Discuss the implications for DHCS' work and for California's broader efforts to strengthen the behavioral health system.

Conclusion

Unfortunately, the COVID-19 pandemic is far from over and could yet evolve in unanticipated ways. However, many experts have noted that one of its most important lessons is already clear: preparation and early execution are essential in detecting, containing, and rapidly responding to and mitigating the spread of potentially dangerous emerging infectious diseases. The ability to marshal early action depends on being prepared for the worst-case scenario and ready to execute on that preparedness before that worst-case outcome is certain.