



COMMONWEALTH OF PENNSYLVANIA  
OFFICE OF THE SECRETARY OF HEALTH

House Appropriations Committee  
Department of Health Budget Hearing

Testimony of  
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Good afternoon, Chairman Harris, Chairman Struzzi, and members of the House Appropriations Committee. I am joined today by Executive Deputy Secretary Kristen Rodack, and we appreciate the opportunity to appear before the committee to discuss Governor Shapiro's proposed 2026-2027 Fiscal Year budget for the Department of Health (Department).

Governor Shapiro's 2026-27 budget proposal continues to support the Department in its mission to promote healthy behaviors, prevent injury and disease, protect public health by following the science and ensure access to quality health care for all Pennsylvanians. This budget supports the health of Pennsylvanians with funding to continue improving outcomes for mothers, children and families, investing in health research, boosting Emergency Medical Services, and addressing critical health care workforce needs, especially in rural areas. In short, this is another common sense, balanced budget for Pennsylvanians.

Before we discuss the proposed budget, I would like to share a few examples of the Department's accomplishments over the past year.

- The Department swiftly implemented Executive Order 2025-02 to protect Pennsylvanians' access to vaccines. Working with sister agencies, the Department readied the PA CARES program to ensure children in the Commonwealth who are eligible for the federal Vaccines for Children (VFC) Program will continue to have access to vaccines recommended by the American Academy of Pediatrics without cost sharing or any additional hurdles should the federal government back away from offering free vaccines for kids. We also issued clear vaccine guidance to health care providers and families, updated all our websites, and convened a Vaccine Education Advisory Workgroup to share scientifically accurate and current information with the public.
- We provided equipment and training to support Emergency Medical Services units across the state as they responded to the calls for help from more than 2.2 million Pennsylvanians. In addition, EMS training funds of nearly \$650,000 were distributed to 418 applicants; reimbursement ranged from \$300 to \$5,000 depending on level of certification and other scholarships received. EMS agencies received over \$164,000 to support recruitment and retention programs.

- We supported over 20 responses in the last year, coordinating with local, county and state partners to efficiently respond to emergency situations. Three recent examples include the fire at Lehigh Valley Hospital in Dickson City, the explosion at Bristol Health and Rehab Center in Bucks County, and the closure of Crozer Chester Medical Center and Taylor Hospital.
- We supported maternal health initiatives including:
  - Expanding maternal mental and behavioral health services serving people in more than 15 counties through grants to 11 organizations.
  - Providing doula training, specifically for people of color, to support healthy birth outcomes for populations disproportionately affected by maternal mortality and morbidity.
  - Engaging in a Perinatal and Postpartum Education Campaign to bring awareness of Perinatal Mood and Anxiety Disorders (PMADs) and encourage individuals to seek support.
  - Screening more than 1,000 WIC participants for high blood pressure as this is a significant health risk for maternal morbidity and mortality. More than 100 women with elevated blood pressures were provided a free blood pressure cuff with education on how to use it, a tracking log, hypertension resources, when to seek medical care in multiple languages, and local linkages to medical care. This effort is still being fully implemented.
- The Department provided funding to over 750 schools to ensure more than 650,000 young women have access to free menstrual products so they can focus on learning.
- We restructured the Nurse Aide registration and testing program, enabling the registration of more than 3,000 new nurse aides in 2025, to help support the current health care workforce. This represents nearly a 4% increase in registration over 2024.
- In response to discussions with hospitals and partners, we issued updated guidance to reduce the burden related to new and replacement equipment to care for patients. This change was celebrated by hospitals across the Commonwealth. We also clarified guidance to ensure adequate physician coverage to meet patient needs and instituted a structured exception request process for certain Ambulatory Surgical Facility regulations, including anesthesia administration and anesthesia services, to reduce administrative burden on facilities.
- We streamlined numerous processes at the Department to improve efficiency and better serve Pennsylvanians, for example:
  - The Bureau of Epidemiology improved public accessibility and operational efficiency by establishing an automated transfer of environmental health concerns from the Department of Environmental Protection to our Department. Since inception, with the new process, more than 3,100 concerns were transferred and about 6.5% of individuals proceeded to contact the Department after reviewing the information provided.

- The Bureau of Medical Marijuana developed a Product Compliance and Research Division (PCARD) to improve timeliness and consistency of product reviews. When the Shapiro Administration started, requests sometimes took a year for review and approval. The PCARD now reviews products within two weeks. Not only has this program resulted in improved relations with Medical Marijuana Organizations, but it also increases product choice for patients in the program.
- The Bureau of Laboratories worked with the Office of Operational Excellence to reduce error rates and processing time for clinical laboratory permits. By redesigning the application form, making it a fillable online form, and creating a checklist to help applicants submit complete packets, the submission error rate decreased by nearly 25% and processing time by 23%.

The proposed 2026-27 budget will allow the Department to continue focusing on improvements in many areas of public health and safety including:

### **Strengthening the Health Care Workforce, Especially in Rural Areas**

For the last three years, a top concern we heard is the difficulty recruiting and retaining skilled health care professionals, especially in rural areas. The work of the Department's Primary Care Office is to increase the health care workforce in underserved communities. During the 2023-24 fiscal year, the program supported nearly 800 health care providers, primarily in rural communities. The Department will continue to partner with sister agencies to increase access to care in health deserts and continue to encourage expansion of innovative care models.

### **Improving Maternal Health**

We continue to build on the foundation laid over the past few years to improve health outcomes for mothers, babies, and families. We are working with health care providers and local partners to promote maternal health education, enhance prenatal care, address racial and geographic disparities in maternal care, and strengthen support systems to help ensure that every pregnant woman has a safe and healthy pregnancy, birth, and postpartum period. The Shapiro Administration is working to ensure that children and mothers thrive. The additional \$2.5 million proposed in the Governor's 2026-2027 budget will help reduce the number of child deaths by enhancing the child death review process to help better understand and address the trends impacting our youngest residents and their families.

### **Emergency Medical Services (EMS)**

EMS is often the front line of health care for many Pennsylvanians, especially in rural areas. The Department recognizes the important role first responders play in communities and in health care. As health care continues to change, EMS must also adapt. The Department has worked to improve our support of and our relationships with the EMS community, largely through consistent communication and collaboration with the regulated community and with the other agencies whose work connects to EMS. Regarding work with the EMS community, there are now monthly meetings between the Bureau of EMS and the Regional Council Directors.

Also, starting in early 2025, the Bureau began monthly virtual open roundtable conversations for EMS agency leaders. Attendance ranges from 150 to 250 individuals, and several EMS Regional Council Directors and others have expressed appreciation for these opportunities to connect and be heard. The Department uses the information shared in these meetings to collaboratively develop ways to enhance EMS services and ensure agencies can continue to provide vital services to their communities. Regarding work with other agencies, the Department is working with the Departments of Human Services, Insurance, and others to develop policy and legislative strategies to address pressing EMS issues, such as sustainable funding for patient care and readiness, workforce recruitment and retention, and efficient deployment of resources.

### **AI in Health Care**

The ways that adults and children engage with AI are rapidly changing, and increasingly, this includes health-related uses. Similarly, health care organizations and providers are more regularly incorporating AI into their operations and daily work. The Department, in coordination with other state agencies, is taking an active role in reviewing the impact of AI on people's lives. For example, we want to ensure that parents and children are educated about the healthy and safe use of AI and drive home the message that AI chatbots should not replace the importance of consulting with their doctor – an actual human being. We also want to ensure that health care providers and organizations use AI tools ethically, transparently, and appropriately as they care for patients.

### **Leading the Charge on Neurodegenerative Research**

In the Fiscal Year 2025-2026 budget, the General Assembly approved the Governor's proposal to invest \$5 million for qualifying institutions to advance research on neuro-degenerative diseases such as Alzheimer's disease, amyotrophic lateral sclerosis (ALS), and Parkinson's disease. The Department is currently working to finalize disbursement of this funding. Pennsylvania is home to some of the top research institutions in the world and thus has the opportunity to lead in neurodegenerative research. That is why the Governor's proposed budget again includes a \$5 million investment to continue this critical research.

We will continue to work closely with the Department of Aging and partners across the state to improve services and resources for individuals and families affected by Alzheimer's, dementia, and related disorders.

I look forward to working with all of you to help implement this sound budget proposal that would enhance the health and well-being of all Pennsylvanians.

Thank you for the opportunity to be here today to discuss the Governor's proposed budget for the Department of Health. I am happy to answer your questions.