



Exclusion of Community Partnerships in Bloomberg and Johns Hopkins-Controlled New York COVID-19 Contact Tracing Plan Decried

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New York City Community groups, with long and outstanding records of undertaking health initiatives in COVID-19 impacted communities, today expressed extreme dismay at the just announced state contact tracing plan which would be largely administered through Bloomberg Philanthropies—and entirely excludes community partnership and participation.

“We want to see contact tracing succeed,” said Anthony Feliciano, Director of the Commission on the Public's Health System, “but the Bloomberg and New York State Health Department initiative as now announced seems almost designed to frighten and alienate the very communities where success is most important.”

The plan will be basically administered out-of-state and proposes to train and hire thousands of people who do not live in—or even near—COVID-19 impacted communities as the contact “tracers.”

“It's astounding that the state seems unaware that in the past, local community groups, have been phenomenally successful at contact tracing in exceedingly difficult situations, from HIV/AIDS to Hepatitis,” said Chris Norwood, Executive Director of Health People in the Bronx. “Here we have an unprecedented situation where Black and Latinx communities have been almost branded as unable to escape an epidemic. Local trust, peer engagement and community knowledge are going to be key to participation and to really moving forward.”

Equally important, with speed being key, already existing coalitions of community groups, well-proven to be able to reach and engage high risk and high need communities, are in place, on the ground. The Access Health NYC Initiative (AHNYC), for one, is a New York City Council group initiative, including 33 agencies, contracted by the City DOHMH. AHNYC

empowers trusted community-based organizations to provide culturally responsive, accurate information to ensure that all New Yorkers understand health care coverage and services. The initiative's value is clearer than ever as the pandemic disproportionately impacts the communities served by the awardees across the five boroughs.

Communities Together for Health Equity is a city coalition of 75 community agencies that work with state health initiatives. Both upstate and the suburban counties have their own similar networks, providing immediate statewide access to groups with local roots and well-developed outreach.

“You don't have months to plan and do this. You have weeks to get this up and running,” Governor Cuomo said, in making the announcement.

The announcement revealed that Bloomberg Philanthropies would largely subcontract administration of the New York State contact tracing program to Johns Hopkins University in Maryland and to Vital Strategies, a global health promotion organization, started in India and now headquartered in New York. Former Bloomberg Health Commissioner Dr. Tom Frieden is its chief official after the President.

While Bloomberg Philanthropies controls the initiative, the state itself will pay for some 5,000 contact tracing positions created.

“It is the opposite of the Governor's statement to bypass existing local resources for out-of-state administration of this program and new hiring of thousands of people who have no connections whatsoever with COVID-19 impacted communities,” said Feliciano.

“The Governor speaks highly of New Yorkers being tough and able to rise to the moment, but this effort is seriously disconnected from such a time of uncertainty and mistrust in NYC's most vulnerable populations. The need to leverage the trusted gatekeepers and CBOs who have years of trusted relationships with many of the community members most impacted by COVID-19 during this time and with this endeavor of "tracing" are essential.”

We must ensure anonymity as a critical component to the tracing protocols. Contact tracing must be balanced with maintenance of trust with vulnerable communities and sensitivity to individual situations. This is why groups are demanding that Bloomberg Philanthropies immediately partner with community groups and the formation of a Community Advisory Board to review and advise on New York COVID-19 contact tracing.