

Texas State Senate
Committee on Health and Human Services
Invited Testimony
December 7, 2020

Good morning and thank you for inviting me to provide testimony on our public health and emergency response activities for COVID-19. I am Dr. David Persse and I serve as the Chief Medical Officer and Local Health Authority for the City of Houston as well as the Chair of SETRAC. I am glad to have my friends and colleagues joining with me to today to provide information about how important it has been for us to have closely coordinated efforts in our responses from the beginning. My goal today is to share with you key local, regional and state coordination activities for our response, the essential public health functions underway with the Houston Health Department, and finally what are some immediate needs and achievable wins with this response.

Testing large numbers of people, particularly in medically vulnerable, and otherwise underserved neighborhoods has been a priority for us from the beginning. Testing allows us to have an idea about how active the viral spread may be and in what neighborhoods. This allows us to be able to direct education and other interventions to those populations where these efforts are likely to have the greatest impact. Once we have the test results, we can then move forward with contact tracing to notify those persons who may unknowingly be infected and educating them on the need to quarantine. The Houston Health Department has been able to hire over 350 employees for our contact tracing program.

An innovative program first explored by the Houston Health Department is wastewater testing for coronavirus. In collaboration with Rice University, Baylor College of Medicine and Houston Public Works and Engineering Dept., the Houston Health Department has validated laboratory testing and a strategy to monitor the amount of coronavirus found in the sanitary sewer system. The team has further devised analytics that allow us to know if the amount of virus in the neighborhoods served by a sewer system is rising or falling. The results are determined weekly and are comprehensive to the entire City of Houston. Our experience has shown that this analysis is highly accurate and demonstrates changes in the viral activity much more quickly than community oral/nasal swab testing or hospitalization data. The Houston Health Dept was the first in the nation to embark on this innovative

strategy and it is now being implemented in communities across America. To date we have tested each of the City's 39 separate sewage systems, and three buildings to include the Harris County Jail and two homeless shelters. We will soon be adding sampling capability for approximately 60 school campuses.

As you know, in addition to our overall goal of keeping people healthy, one of the goals of our public health efforts is to help ensure a hospital bed is available for anyone who needs one. Our integrated efforts with the Southeast Texas Regional Advisory Council (SETRAC) has allowed us to monitor for conditions within hospitals not only for overall capacity, but also the COVID patient burden on general beds, ICU beds, pediatric populations, ventilator needs, etc. SETRAC provides us such visibility not only for Houston and Harris County but for three trauma service areas (TSA's) across 25 counties. We have also developed a close working relationship with the leadership of the Texas Medical Center and all of their member institutions over a multi-county area.

Another innovative program supported by the City of Houston is the adaptation of our emergency telehealth and navigation (ETHAN) program where EMT's and paramedics on city ambulances can directly connect with an emergency physician to redirect patients away from emergency departments to a specialized coronavirus testing center. This program gets the ambulance or fire truck back in service immediately and avoids sending potentially COVID infected persons to the waiting room of an area hospital for a service better provided elsewhere.

As you all are aware, COVID-19 has created a need to support local restaurants in underinvested neighborhoods. A program we have created as a solution, the Houston Eats Restaurant Support (H.E.R.S.) Program provides food security to individuals affected by COVID-19 with subsidized meals and delivery services from those very restaurants. The program delivers economic stimulus to local restaurants and their employees while providing critical food access from November 1, 2020 through the end of this year. Our goal is to ensure that 10-25 identified restaurants provide a minimum of 37,500 meals to qualifying Houston residents per week.

Last and certainly not least, there are two challenges related to vaccination that I would like to address with you today. One of the greatest challenges we have is vaccine hesitancy due to misinformation specifically in underserved communities.

As you are aware Houston is one of the most diverse cities in the great state of Texas. Creating a robust media and marketing campaign that is culturally and linguistically relevant is vital to mobilizing the community. Engaging community trustees in the development and ongoing distribution messaging will be an essential component. Another anticipated challenge is enrollment of existing 'access points of trust' to serve as COVID-19 vaccinators. The successful engagement and enrollment of non-traditional vaccination sites such as consulate offices, churches, and community centers will be key to high immunization coverage. It is vitally important that we are intentional in our plans to build on the existing relationships organizations of trust have with individuals living in underserved communities and communities that have been disproportionately impacted by COVID-19.

Thank you for your time hearing these local experiences and recommendations. I also thank you for your continued support.