

# **The New York City Council Committee on Health**

Lynn C. Schulman, Chair

*Committee Members:* Joann Ariola, Charles Barron, Oswald Feliz, Crystal Hudson, Mercedes Narcisse, Marjorie Velázquez, and Kalman Yeger

February 1, 2023

## **Testimony of Bronx Borough President Vanessa L. Gibson**

**Re: Diabetes Oversight, Int 0675-2022, Int 0687-2022, T2023-2913**

Good morning **Chair Schulman** and the members of the City Council Committee on Health, I am Bronx Borough President Vanessa L. Gibson. Thank you for convening this hearing today on the very important issue of diabetes in our city. And thank you for the opportunity to speak on how we can formulate a plan to collectively address this public health crisis.

The Bronx is the epicenter of this epidemic, with some of the highest rates of diabetes across our city. In Bronx neighborhoods such as Mott Haven, Hunts Point, Tremont, and Morrisania, more than twenty percent of the population has been diagnosed with diabetes. And that number does not account for individuals who are unaware they are living with the condition.

Diabetes is a diet-related disease. Research shows that food insecurity is higher among people with diabetes and that the limited availability of healthy food affects long-term diabetes management. Diabetes

disproportionately affects people of color and low-income communities that lack access to quality healthcare. People afflicted with diabetes often have additional underlying health conditions such as hypertension, obesity, and heart disease. These chronic health conditions put our residents at high risk and significantly diminish their quality of life.

Food insecurity has been a longstanding challenge for many Bronxites, but the situation was certainly exacerbated during the COVID-19 pandemic. Due to the economic downturn, shortages of goods, and soaring prices, the lack of access to healthy food has worsened. However, fast-food chains remain readily accessible.

My office regularly meets with Bronx Health REACH and other health and food providers regarding nutrition and food access initiatives in our borough. Our goal is to apply an evidence-based approach to understand the food landscape in The Bronx and high-need neighborhoods requiring more intervention.

My office is mapping community gardens and healthy food access points across the borough to share with the public. We look forward to establishing hyperlocal fresh food connections, helping small food retailers sell healthy options, and expanding food security and nutrition research.

Health outcome data on diabetes surveillance was missing in the 2021-22 Robert Wood Johnson County Health Rankings, an indicator of pandemic

related constraints. The DOHMH and State DOH funding projections for FY2023 lack any funding allocation for surveillance of diabetes, hypertension, and other preventable chronic illnesses. In 2023, public health leaders *must* refocus efforts on the prevention and effective management of diabetes, the most pervasive chronic illness and challenge for population health.

As outlined in my Strategic Policy Statement, my team is preparing to launch a boroughwide Diabetes Taskforce – a coalition of Bronx stakeholders and experts, community-based organizations, social service agencies, and healthcare and insurance providers. Collectively, this taskforce will drive change with a Bronx Plan, by developing strategies for improved nutrition education, outreach, funding, diabetes screening, and culturally competent care to improve long-term health. Healthy living starts with healthy choices, and that begins with New Yorkers understanding what they are consuming.

Today, I am proud to join with my colleagues in the City Council in support of Int 687 on the agenda, which would require chain restaurants to post labels when a food item has a high sugar content. We must empower our residents to make the food choices that are best for themselves and their families, and this can only be done by letting them know what is in the food they eat.

Bronx residents would benefit from more telehealth service options. This is why I support Int 675, which would require DOHMH to create a telemedicine accessibility plan. Additionally, I support the creation of a citywide diabetes reduction plan that will help spotlight neighborhoods with high-risk populations.

Thank you to **Chair Schulman** and the New York City Council Committee on Health for prioritizing this issue that plagues our communities. Diabetes is a preventable illness and together we can improve health outcomes and end this epidemic.