

ONONDAGA COUNTY EXECUTIVE RYAN MCMAHON

Good Morning Chairman Thompson, Ranking Member Katko and the rest of the House Homeland Security Committee. Thank you for the opportunity to address you today regarding our community’s efforts to confront the Coronavirus pandemic and the perspective gained one year later.

Located nearly 250 miles from the epicenter of COVID-19 in New York State, Onondaga County had the benefit of understanding how COVID-19 affected our neighbors in the Hudson Valley and New York City before the virus reached our community. The devastation would be undeniable and we moved quickly to activate our plan to mitigate loss and keep people safe.

Our first confirmed case of COVID-19 in Onondaga County occurred on March 16<sup>th</sup>, but our teams in Emergency Management and the Health Department had been preparing for months. As you probably know, it is the local governments who are on the frontlines fighting any pandemic and COVID-19 is no different. With a State of Emergency already declared and an aggressive campaign underway encouraging people to practice physical distancing, we quickly moved to bring together all of our community partners including hospitals, local governments, epidemiologists and others to ensure we could take decisive action as the data merited.

We partnered with a local Health Center and set up community testing. Just as important, we made efforts to ensure that our neighbors who lived in communities often hardest hit by public health emergencies had easy access to the resources they needed to stay safe.

Schools also were shut down, but not before ensuring every district had a plan to

take care of their most vulnerable. We know that for many children, school is the only place they receive at least two meals a day and we worked tirelessly to make sure those children continued to receive the meals they needed. We also partnered with Childcare Solutions to arrange for our first responders, essential employees, doctors, nurses, and nursing-home staff to have childcare. If these folks could not get to work during a global health pandemic, then the entire system collapses.

Acquiring personal-protective equipment was—let’s say—challenging. The PPE chain was the Wild, Wild West. Masks that you could get for under a dollar were now eight or nine dollars. People reached out to us who miraculously had contacts in Singapore, China and Taiwan for a small advance of \$500,000. Legitimate governments, however, do not make these deals. We pressed on, qualifying different supply chains, and finally bought PPE at decent prices. We even secured ventilators in the event we needed to transform the Manley Field House at Syracuse University into a hospital.

At the heart of our response to COVID-19 was our communication with the public. We held briefings twice a day, once via Facebook Live at noon and another briefing with the press at three. These briefings were televised across northern and Central New York and we took the opportunity to emphasize that we are all in this together and it would take everyone doing their part to ensure our community emerges stronger than before. As New York State continued to shut things down and we asked people to modify their social behavior, I was heartened at the number of people tuning in, listening and buying in to these sacrifices they were being asked to make, as scary as they were. We spoke about testing, quarantines, the number of cases, food security, daycare, and mental-health programs; anything and everything that was relevant to the well-being of the public. Our

job was to tell the truth without the slant of politics. We were asking people to sacrifice, and they had to know why. I never Monday-morning quarter-backed the decisions at the federal or state level. I just talked about how they impacted us, and I believe people appreciated our straight forward approach.

Emotionally, the loss of life was overwhelming, but I knew the unintended consequences of these shut downs would be severe. Whether it was individuals unable to identify or report domestic violence or child abuse to the rising cases in opioid overdoses or just the sheer devastation of our local economy, the human toll of this virus extended beyond what anyone could have imagined.

Over the last year, there has been a significant increase in the number of fatal opioid overdoses in Onondaga County. From January through September 2020 there was a 40% increase in opioid overdose deaths compared to the same time period in 2019 (121 deaths vs 86 deaths, respectively). The pandemic has exacerbated the opioid epidemic, through risk factors such as high unemployment rates, social isolation, and despair, as well as the disruption of available treatment and harm reduction support services that individuals with substance use may depend on.

We were shut down for months and lost millions of dollars in sales tax not to mention our room-occupancy tax essentially evaporated. We had to cut county government and execute rigorous austerity measures. Twice we offered retirement incentives, but still had to implement furloughs, voluntary and involuntary. We were facing a \$70 to \$80 million shortfall as we prepared our next budget. Adding salt to the wound, our population is 461,000, just shy of the half a million federal requirement to receive direct federal aid which would have totaled at least \$100 million from CARES Act funding. The current

funding formula resulted in the federal government sending our money to the State, but it was never redirected to us. This means that we have funded, and continue to fund, every aspect of this fight using whatever resources we could muster at the local level. Everything from testing, contact tracing, purchasing PPE and setting up vaccination clinics was done without one single dollar from any other either the federal or state government. To be clear, we have had some success in receiving reimbursement from FEMA, but this required our government to upfront the cost. While we were fortunate enough to be able to do this, there is no doubt that Onondaga County would have more greatly benefited if we had received the same direct allocation that our neighbors in Monroe or Erie counties had received.

So there we were, in the middle of a pandemic, with no additional money, forced to let go of staff while enforcing a host of new rules and policies including mask-wearing and physical distancing, necessary to keep our community safe. No upside to this, really, except that when businesses were finally able to reopen, they understood what was at stake. We did institute a system for residents to send concerns or complaints about establishments not following safety guidelines and we teamed up our legal, probation and health departments to investigate them. State agencies would eventually also lean on us about complaints they received, asking us to investigate. More often than not, we learned our business owners simply did not understand or know all of the new rules they were being required to follow and after empowering them with the necessary information, they quickly and gladly complied. At the end of the day I am proud to say that our local restaurant industry quickly and willingly agreed to be our partners when it came to following and enforcing the rules. Neither we nor the restaurant owners had any interest in seeing them closed again and we worked together to make sure that didn't happen.

“Confronting the Coronavirus: Perspectives on the COVID-19 pandemic One Year Later”

As difficult as this past year has been, as a county we have many things of which to be proud. On top of the list is how the community came together, everyone pulling in the same direction. We planned and prepared for the needs of our residents, and we acted. There was no paralysis. Whatever the obstacle, we figured out a way to get it done. We were especially aggressive about testing—symptomatic and asymptomatic—which is one reason why we saw our positive infection rates drop as we began our restart. We were intent on finding those hidden asymptomatic cases because we saw what the virus was doing to our seniors. Therefore, we tested in assisted living facilities and independent living facilities to box in the virus. We were equally aggressive in our schools. We deployed County personnel to perform saliva-pool testing for teachers to start the school year and asymptomatic testing for the entire student body, teachers and staff beginning in November. Simultaneously, we were building up the infrastructure every day so that we could quickly pivot once the vaccine arrived.

Syracuse University was also planning on using the Upstate Saliva Test to bring their students back in August, an effort which would provide a desperately needed boost to our local economy. However, it had yet to get emergency approval from the state or the FDA. Two weeks before school started, they had a decision to make. We were telling them they needed to test the students before they came back and we knew it was a big ask because it was going to cost them \$2 million. Syracuse University proved once again their commitment to our community and spent the money doing the right thing for public health. Testing kits were mailed to the student’s home, they self-administered the test, sent them back and were subsequently sent the results. Our community then knew which students were positive before they returned and required them to stay home and isolate. Those with

a negative test were allowed to return, but our efforts did not end there. When the kids got to campus, they were tested again and thanks to this impressive undertaking, Syracuse had a great start to the school year

We were also able to give some relief to small businesses, especially our hard-hit restaurants which are an important source of pleasure for our residents and tax money for the county. The Industrial Development Agency appropriated \$500,000 to cover the cost of COVID-related expenses—tents, heaters, fire pits, and more, so that outdoor dining could be more comfortable and compensate for the loss of capacity indoors.

While nothing has made me sadder than the hundreds of people we have lost to COVID-19, nothing makes me happier than to start quickly dispensing the vaccine so we can begin to reclaim our lives and move forward, together. Our community spent months planning, preparing and mitigating; now our focus has shifted to equitably distributing the vaccine.

Onondaga County has proven to be the best among the big counties in New York State in distributing the vaccine and doing so quickly. I think that is worth repeating, Onondaga County, with no additional dollars or resources, is the best among the big counties in New York State for distributing the vaccine and doing so quickly. In the past two months our POD has administered more than 20,000 first doses. While we are proud of this effort, we have the ability to ramp up to 18,000 shots a week. We just need supply. As I said earlier, it is local governments who are responsible for being on the frontlines fighting this pandemic. It is literally the job of your local health and emergency management departments to plan, prepare and train for such events as this. We are on the ground, doing the work, day in and day out to keep our community safe and eventually

reclaim our lives.

I want to conclude by taking this opportunity, with this audience, to thank the amazing team working for Onondaga County. They have worked countless hours, had many sleepless nights and sacrificed a great deal for the good of our community and I am eternally grateful to be able to lead such an amazing and dedicated team. To Chairman Thompson, Ranking Member Katko and the rest of the Committee, thank you again for the opportunity to share my community’s story and I am happy to answer any questions.