



Thank you, Chair Rosen and Committee Members, for accepting my testimony. My name is Sharrilyn Helgertz, and I work at the Minnesota Department of Health (MDH).

My story over the last year is like many other MDH employees'. We have worked incredibly hard to save lives, understanding that it is all hands-on deck to fight COVID, while also doing our usual jobs and caring for own families.

Last year, I worked with a team full-time for several months to adapt CDC guidance for expanding case investigation and contract tracing in Minnesota. We coordinated with local public health, IT, and MDH's legal, health equity, COVID testing, and case investigation and contact tracing teams to develop our plans. We knew that to stop the spread we needed to not only inform but make it easier for people to understand and follow the recommendations. We identified community barriers and potential solutions to help multiply-challenged Minnesotans follow the guidelines to stay home to limit the spread. COVID does not care if you are black, white, brown or indigenous, so we had to make sure no one was left out of our COVID response.

I want to highlight our work with the MDH Health Equity team. They work within special populations and had interacted with community members at a testing site. They gave us invaluable feedback about how what we were doing was working on the ground, what barriers kept people from complying with the guidance that was essential to saving lives, and what needs they had. That feedback allowed us to adapt our models to get help where it was needed most. This is an example of how working to ensure everyone is heard, allows us to stop the spread of COVID.

I am now mostly back to my regular job, which includes analyzing the 2020 Minnesota Youth Tobacco Survey and preparing for the 2022 Minnesota Student Survey. Data from the previous Student Survey revealed the mental health crisis that is looming for Minnesota's Youth. Anyone, myself included, who has a kiddo living with them understands: our kids are resilient but also have been through one trauma after another this year. We must help them cope with the incredible loss of this last year or see lasting effects for decades to come.

My colleagues at the Health Department and I have put everything into this last year. There is not 5% to cut. Without my job, you would forego understanding our youth's mental health and weaken our COVID response. Without the Health Equity Team, special populations might have been left out of the response. We have all been essential in the last year.

Your state government has stepped up this year, in every way possible to keep things going and adapt to the circumstances. We need investment, not cuts.

Thank you.