FAILURE OF NYC'S TECHNOLOGICAL RESPONSE AND NEW DETAILS ON THE MONKEYPOX VACCINE ROLL-OUT

NEW YORK - Council Member and Chair of the Committee on Technology Jennifer Gutiérrez held an Emergency Oversight Hearing today on the Failures of NYC’s Technological Response Under Critical Demand.

Council Member Gutiérrez called for an emergency hearing on July 17, in response to the highly publicized failures of the rollout of New York City’s monkeypox vaccine portal. The hearing examined the ways in which the City continues to fall short in its technological responses to the pressing needs of the public. The City continues to invest millions of dollars in the digital transformation of our programs and services, so it is vital that mistakes of the past do not appear again in our future.

Testifying at the hearing was Commissioner Matthew Fraser, Mayor Adams’ appointee to the newly rebranded and reorganized Office of Technology and Innovation (OTI, formerly DoITT). First Deputy Commissioner Dr. Torian Easterling answered questions on behalf of DOHMH.

In January 2022, Mayor Adams released an Executive Order, which included a mandate that OTI would serve as the City’s leader and clearinghouse for technology projects. Unfortunately, regardless of that investment, there are still significant issues in what should be straightforward service delivery.

When asked about the timeline of events that led to the failures of the monkeypox vaccine roll-out, Commissioner Fraser testified that OTI was consulted by DOHMH in mid-June, and began working on June 29 to adapt the existing Vax4NYC website for monkeypox. OTI’s work was completed on July 13, with the final rollout on July 14. OTI confirmed that the current monkeypox vaccine site is situated within the infrastructure of the existing Covid portal, which is run by the vendor MTX B2B Solutions. MTX B2B Solutions manages the Salesforce platform that runs the frontend and backend of Vax4NYC. At the sole discretion of the DOHMH Commissioner, DOHMH went to vendor partner MedRite, with which DOHMH had an existing contract, to set up a website for vaccinations. This new agreement and expanded scope of work was initiated despite previous conversations and agreements with OTI, that OTI would mount a vaccine portal for monkeypox through Vax4NYC. MedRite experienced what Dr. Easterling described as “tech issues,” including their failure to deactivate a specific link that listed most of the appointments as unavailable. It was also noted by the Technology Committee that MedRite required a sign-up process, which meant that by the time the sign-up step was concluded, appointments were unavailable. This was a known barrier that had previously been acknowledged and resolved when DoITT was responsible for mounting the original Vax4NYC platform. After the issues with MedRite, DOHMH went to another existing vendor partner, Affiliated Physicians, whose portal also failed, specifically due to the traffic of New Yorkers trying to make appointments. Both vendors offer a suite of services unrelated to technology, including the management of physical vaccine sites.

Commissioner Fraser testified that because these vendors entered into contracts with the City under the previous mayoral administration, OTI did not conduct any vetting processes to determine if these vendors could deliver this specific technological product. DOHMH testified that they conducted user testing, but regardless, opened the site to the public with the sign-in barriers intact. OTI and DOHMH testified that they did not conduct or require server testing on these vendors to handle an influx of web traffic. As Council Member Erik Bottcher noted during his line of questions, while it was vital the City prioritized getting vaccines to people as soon as possible, these kinds of failures damage the trust that many people have with the public healthcare system and New York City government.
Commissioner Matthew Fraser confirmed that going forward, OTI will have expanded oversight of public-facing sites, and will conduct testing on all initiatives of this size and scale involving a technological service provided to the public. He also confirmed, in response to questions regarding the cyberattack on Illuminate Education (a DOE vendor) in January 2022 that affected the data of 820,000 New York City DOE students, that the City is ultimately responsible for ensuring that New Yorkers’ data is secure, regardless of the third-party cloud service on which the data is stored. OTI has also updated and is enforcing riders on all new vendor contracts that include requirements from the City in relation to performance testing, cybersecurity, and privacy, as well as penalties if a vendor can not perform the duties outlined in the contract. However, Commissioner Fraser did not provide an answer when asked if the City would seek to recoup the millions of dollars spent on non-functional products as delivered by vendors MedRite and Affiliated Physicians.

The committee also posed questions about the future of MyCity, an application in production by OTI’s Strategic Initiatives team. MyCity aims to create a single, unified portal for all City services - from payment of traffic tickets to benefit applications. The Strategic Initiatives team comprises more than 100 people, including quality assurance specialists, customer service agents, project managers, and user-centric testing specialists. The forthcoming childcare portal, currently being touted by Mayor Adams as the first part of MyCity to be unveiled, will be built in-house by OTI, with only minimal outsourcing, if at all.

Commissioner Fraser also testified, when asked about the poor performance of HPD’s Housing Connect website, that the City is in the process of securing a new vendor, and OTI is involved in this selection and testing process.

For each agency providing programs, services, and resources to New Yorkers, there are unique application processes, visual designs, and accessibility and security protocols. The current state of NYC’s technology requires New Yorkers to be deeply technologically savvy to navigate a new process each time they need assistance. And those that need the most assistance are often those that simply don’t have the luxury of English proficiency, time, or even an easily accessible and stable internet connection. The Technology Committee was appreciative that moving forward, new contracts and vendors will be evaluated using a more stringent process, but the Committee also implores OTI to continue reviews of existing vendors – especially when original contracts were designed to include service provision and product delivery at a significantly increased size and scale.

BACKGROUND:

From the COVID-19 and monkeypox vaccines, to ACCESS HRA and Housing Connect, New York City’s websites are confusing, inconsistent, and failing New Yorkers and buggy software, crashing websites, glitching applications, and poor community outreach are some of the issues that have plagued our City’s digital service delivery.

Upon Mayor Eric Adams’ inauguration, he invested significant resources in DoITT’s reorganization and rebranding as the Office of Technology and Innovation (OTI) through Executive order No 3, which states that OTI is responsible for providing reliable and cost effective data processing and communication services to agencies, technical assistant and support with procuring and managing hardware and software.

New York City's monkeypox vaccine rollout was marred by problems - both from health equity and technological perspectives. The first 1000 available vaccines were announced only on Twitter at a single location in Chelsea in Manhattan. On July 6th, within a few hours of releasing another round of appointments, the Department of Health announced there was an “unfortunate glitch” and the appointments were gone. On Tuesday, July 12th, the online appointment scheduler crashed 30 minutes after the Department of Health announced limited slots were available. This crash was attributed to an unexpected level of traffic - raising questions about why the Department of Health, and the vendor, did not anticipate this demand after the past two years.
In 2021, after the Department of Health was tasked with building the Covid-19 vaccine platform, significant issues of functionality and access required former Mayor de Blasio to shift the platform to be built and managed by the Department of Information Technology and Telecommunications (DoITT), in partnership with the Department of Health and Hospitals (DOHMH). New York City then built out one of the most robust responses to the Covid-19 pandemic: from a functioning vaccine website that integrated multiple health care providers, to a robust testing network for individuals and schools alike, to a comprehensive outreach system, reaching millions of New Yorkers by phone, text, and door knocking. Those teams worked within the New York City Department of Health and Mental Hygiene and worked closely with DoITT on implementation.

In his State of the City speech in April 2022, Mayor Adams expanded on his plan for MyCity from his campaign, announcing that the first function available on the portal would be a “unified application process for all subsidized child care options offered by the city. The MyCity portal is currently under development by the Mayor’s Office of Technology and Innovation (OTI), and is aimed to launch in 2022. New York City currently does offer online access for direct cash benefits through the AccessHRA system run by the Human Resources Administration. OTI officials have said that eventually, AccessHRA will be integrated with the MyCity portal.

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