Returning to work: PEF’s dedication to creating a safe workplace
The President’s Message

By WAYNE SPENCE

PEF focused on making your return to work safe and productive

With much of the state beginning to reopen, many of you have been asked to return to your workplaces. We know this may be causing anxiety for some of you who may be worried about such things as maintaining social distancing, mask wearing, childcare issues, and testing, to name a few. We have been working with the state on all of these issues and more, because advocating for your health and safety is our number one priority.

Last month, we participated in a teleconference with Lt. Gov. Kathy Hochul, where we were able to lay out our concerns about returning to the workplace and provided her with the information we believed the state needed to re-open offices safely, and share with her the PEF “Return to Work Toolkit”, prepared by PEF health and safety staff, that is also being used by the American Federation of Teachers and the Service Employees International Union in their guidance for back-to-work best practices.

Throughout this time period, we have been proactively speaking with the Governor’s Office of Employee Relations (GOER) and were gratified to see that many of our recommendations are included in GOER’s guidelines that were issued May 26th.

This “Interim Guidance” provides a framework for each agency to use to base their return-to-work plans on. Since that time, PEF staff has analyzed the 11-page document, looked for deficiencies and provided recommendations to GOER that we think are paramount for a safe return.

In the meantime, we have been meeting with your local union leaders to ensure they are meeting with agencies on a statewide level to review the overall return-to-workplace plans and to ensure they are kept up to date on information coming from the state, so that they can answer your questions.

You also may reach out to PEF Field Services Organizing and the PEF Health and Safety Department with any questions or concerns you may still have.

In these trying times, I want to thank you for your dedication to your work. It is because of you that New York state can move forward. We are doing everything we can to protect your jobs and to protect you at your jobs. We know that getting back to some sort of “normal” means ensuring health and safety in and for the workplace.

Finally, I would like to address the protests that are taking place across our country. The tragic death of George Floyd has awakened not only the United States, but the whole world, to another pandemic - racism. Black people, brown people, white people of all ages from coast to coast and throughout Europe have taken to the streets in mostly peaceful demonstrations with a goal of effecting change and making the world a better place.

This is a good time to remember that throughout history, peaceful protests against unequal civil rights have led to important systemic change:

- The Boston Tea Party, which was a precursor to the American Revolution;
- Protests after the Triangle Shirtwaist Factory fire killed 146 young immigrant workers led New York state to reform laws governing working conditions;
- Suffragette protests resulted in an amendment to the Constitution guaranteeing women the right to vote;
- The March on Washington, where Martin Luther King delivered his infamous “I Have a Dream” speech before 200,000 peaceful demonstrators led to civil rights legislation; and
- George Floyd protests are calling for policy change to ensure everyone is equally protected under the law.

We believe these peaceful protestors demonstrating for constitutional rights must not be confused with the rioters and looters that have used the George Floyd tragedy to wreak havoc, cause more pain and blur the message and memory of Mister Floyd. Just as the majority of protests have been peaceful, we know the majority of law enforcement officers are trying hard to do their jobs to protect the communities they serve, and they, along with the protestors, just want a better world for us all.
PEF, state must work together quickly to ensure safe return to work

By SHERRY HALBROOK

After a couple of months on “Pause,” it’s time to put your foot on the gas if you are the PEF chair of a joint labor-management, or health and safety committee.

PEF President Wayne Spence and the union’s health and safety staff strongly conveyed that urgency in a May 20 conference call with the chairs and division leaders. Their mission: Reach out and meet quickly with management to discuss and jointly plan for the safe return of non-essential staff to their worksites before the state finalizes its plans and employees are walking in the doors.

Management and labor must work together if they want to achieve the best results for everyone.

PEF had already emailed a “tool kit” of two documents to each of them the chairs and leaders, with one document for them to give to their managers outlining what PEF believes should be discussed and considered in planning, and the other document to provide the PEF chairs and leaders with the technical information they will need to properly assess potential risks associated with the return to work and to understand how best to address them. And the PEF organizing department is reaching out to the union’s local leaders to ask what problems and challenges they foresee in the return to work process for their members.

Spence praised the union’s health and safety committee and staff for creating the materials in the tool kit, which both of PEF’s international affiliates, the Service Employees International Union (SEIU) and the American Federation of Teachers (AFT) have chosen to use with the millions of members they represent nationwide.

“Make sure to reach out and meet with management right away on jointly conducting a worksite risk assessment and developing a return-to-work plan,” PEF health and safety specialist Geraldine Stella said. “You need to approach management at both the statewide and the local levels. We are already seeing that they may refuse our request to meet. They may tell you they are waiting for the state to give them a plan. But those plans need to be tailored to each worksite.”

Stella added that even if management refuses to meet with PEF, it still might incorporate some of the information in the document PEF provides into the agency or workplace plan.

If management is stalling or unwilling to meet with you, Spence said to notify him and he will step in to help the state see the many advantages of working with the union to ensure the full workforce return is both safe and efficient.

“Commissioners are not calling the shots,” Spence said. “It’s the state budget director who is calling the shots, because the state has a multi-billion dollar deficit.”

Stella added, “Get your meeting request in management’s hands immediately. Request the meeting for a specific date very soon. List at least three people you want to represent PEF at the meeting and give them a specific date to respond to this request. Put it in writing along with the outline we sent you for what needs to be addressed at the meeting. If they refuse, send their refusal to President Spence. You should also notify your PEF field representative and the health and safety department as well.”

It is the state’s responsibility to provide a safe environment for its employees and if the state wants the public and the private sector to follow the governor’s guidelines for businesses to reopen, Spence said, then the state should lead by example.

PEF is asking for the same provisions for a safe return that the state is requiring of business. These include:
• Adjust workplace hours and shift design as necessary to reduce density in the workplace;
• Enact social distancing protocols;
• Restrict non-essential travel for employees;
• Require all employees and customers to wear masks if in frequent contact with others;
• Implement strict cleaning and sanitation standards;
• Enact a continuous health screening process for individuals to enter the workplace;
• Continue tracing, tracking and reporting of cases; and
• Develop a plan for resurgence of the virus.

During the call, Stella and PEF health and safety specialist Shawn Bobb reviewed some of the technical issues raised in the tool kit material and highlighted issues the PEF members should be sure to consider in their risk assessments of specific worksites.

And Paige Engelhardt, occupational safety and health specialist, discussed the importance of phasing in the return of staff, accommodating at-risk employees, and planning for a possible resurgence of the virus.

After requesting the meeting with management, health and safety and other leaders should:

• Assess the worksite risks;
• Modify the outline above to suit your worksite;
• Make sure everyone is tested;
• Talk to members to hear their concerns; and
• Provide members the information they need, which may be on PEF’s COVID-19 webpage.

The tool kit provides a great deal more information through a detailed outline to follow as the return to work progresses through the reopening phases.

Bobb emphasized the importance of air handling capabilities to maximize the circulation of fresh outside air coming into workspaces. This can be very helpful in removing the COVID-19 virus and reducing exposures, but it can also increase operational costs if the outside air needs to be cooled or warmed and even increasing fan use will drive up energy costs.

The union should strongly encourage its members to wipe down their work area when they begin their shift and again when they end their shift.

Even though your workplace or your state car may be cleaned overnight, take your own initiative to protect yourself, Spence advised. If a member feels cleaning is not part of their job description, they are losing sight of the more important priority of protecting themselves from a dangerous infection.

“Don’t let small gripes overshadow more important issues,” Spence said. “Cleaning your area is a miniscule issue. This is time for serious priorities and leadership. I’m a parole officer. I would wipe down my state car, because I don’t know if the cleaner who did it might have the virus and wasn’t showing symptoms.”

A leader from western New York said he worries that employees there may be too complacent because they have not have felt as threatened by the virus as those in New York City and Long Island.

Stella advised him to remind members who are reluctant to wear a mask, social distance and keep washing their hands and cleaning work surfaces that, “It only takes one uncontrolled exposure for you to become infected.”

That same leader said members of his division all seem to think they should be issued N95 grade masks and they expect to receive them when they come to work.

Bobb said you only need an N95 mask if your job requires it – usually for direct care or close contact with a COVID-positive or suspected COVID-positive patient or inmate. Otherwise, you should wear a surgical or cloth mask. Members, however, may provide their own N95 mask even if their job does not require it.

Another PEF leader asked what the local union should do if the agency or the Office of General Services is not cooperative in preparing and operating the building to maximize safety.

“If OGS tries to pass the issue off to the tenant building committee, let us know,” Stella said. “Staff member Paige Engelhardt might be able to help resolve the issue.”

Stella emphasized that the COVID-19 virus is very new and still mutating, so there is still much to learn about it and how to prevent its spread. The information that PEF is providing now in the tool kit will need to be updated and evolve as well. “This is very fluid,” she said, “and we need to hear from you about what is going on at your agencies and worksites, and we will hold more of these teleconferences if you need them to share new information and answer more questions.”

To share information or ask questions, contact the PEF health and safety department at HealthAndSafety@pef.org or call 518-785-1900, ext. 254.
PEF putting help (you may not have known you have) where you can easily find it and use it

By SHERRY HALBROOK

PEF is concerned that you may be experiencing high levels of stress or personal problems during this pandemic and the transition back to work as worksites reopen, and the union wants you to know that help is available to you as a joint benefit provided by PEF, other state employee unions and the state as your employer. It’s called the Employee Assistance Program (EAP) and it’s available here.

“This is not a new benefit,” said PEF Vice President Randi DiAntonio, “but it is a valuable one that you might not know is there for you, or what it does or how to access it. That’s why PEF is making a handy “one-stop-shop” opportunity for you to find lots of useful information about EAP on the union’s website. And this information will be updated to keep it current and relevant, especially right now with the extraordinary stressors and challenges so many members and their families are facing.”

Charles Roland, who represents PEF on the multi-union and NYS EAP committee, said the current crisis has spotlighted the need to make members aware of this benefit and increase your ease in accessing it.

“Take a look. You will be surprised to see how much help this benefit can provide,” Roland said.

“EAP is essentially a referral service. You bring your concerns, issues, and needs for help and EAP helps you find the help you need. The PS&T contract pays for this benefit and it costs you nothing to access the referrals,” Roland continued.

“EAP information has been hard to find on the Governor’s Office of Employee Relations website,” DiAntonio said. “You won’t have to search for it anymore. PEF is making it easy.”

PEF President Wayne Spence appointed DiAntonio to head a work group tasked with gathering the best and most up-to-date EAP information and getting it posted on the union’s website. The group also includes Roland, Vincent Cicatello, Conrad Davis and Maureen Kellman, who is an EAP coordinator at the state Department of Financial Services where she also is an associate actuary. PEF associate counsel Debra Greenberg is serving as staff for the group.

“President Spence also asked us to work with PEF leaders to assess and identify agencies or worksites where EAP supports are not readily available to members,” Roland said. “We found 17 vacant EAP coordinator positions, and that’s a lot. We identified a lot of areas that needed shoring up. Wayne asked us to act quickly to shore up and fast-track EAP during the pandemic, so we’ve been working hard to gather additional services. The need is very great right now. More than 100 employees at South Beach Psychiatric Center where I work have lost time because of the virus and some have been hospitalized, Roland said. “Sometimes people who come to EAP for help don’t need a referral, they just need someone to talk to about what they are going through."
“You don’t have to be a PEF member to be an EAP coordinator, they come from other bargaining units as well. But it helps to have certain skills or experience such as social work. The Governor’s Office of Employee Relations provides training.”

EAP goes further than just referrals. A classic example came up a few weeks ago when the DFS realized its employees were faced with unprecedented challenges and stress. They asked Kellman to create a virtual “lunch and learn” program to help her more than 1,000 coworkers in New York City get through it. She did and the program was so well received that DFS quickly shared it with its employees throughout the state, recommended it to “EAP Central” staff at GOER, and now it is being shared throughout state service.

Kellman lives on Long Island and works in Manhattan, areas that have experienced extremely high levels of COVID-19 infections and deaths. It has taken a heavy toll even on those who have not been infected.

Just as the pandemic quickly evolved and overwhelmed the downstate area, the stress levels and needs of PEF members and their families also evolved quickly over that time frame, Kellman said.

“From mid-March when the governor ordered all non-essential workers to stay home to mid-April, people were feeling very stressed, uncertain and scared,” Kellman said. “And that was heightened by being in the epicenter of the pandemic. Then people we knew started dying and the calls I was getting for EAP help suddenly jumped way up. Expressions of fear and anxiety were rampant in the comments from DFS employees on the department’s website. That’s when the department asked me to prepare and present a virtual program to help people understand how to get through this.

“DFS is exceptionally supportive of EAP and I’m allowed to email everyone in the department. DFS is really, really good in this regard and I wish all state agencies were like that,” Kellman said.

As social distancing and other measures began to flatten the peak of infections in the city and the state, Kellman said she has seen the concerns employees bring to her have evolved as well.

“It’s shifted in the last three weeks,” she said. “Now, it’s more work-related issues, conflicts with supervisors. Employees say their supervisor doesn’t understand what they are experiencing at home and in their personal lives as they try to work from home. And they are worried about how to cope with reopening and returning to their worksite.”

Kellman said that although state employees have held onto their jobs and paychecks, their spouses, adult children or other household members may have lost their jobs. Financial stress and uncertainty has combined with the trauma of widespread grief and bereavement. People have lost touch with their family, friends, work and social networks, they have been isolated and forced to fend for themselves in unprecedented ways. These sudden, radical changes can lead to loneliness, depression and loss of confidence in themselves and their ability to cope and control their lives. People may find it harder to resist dangerous addictive behaviors. If you are approaching retirement, you may see your investments have lost value or you may have lost your spouse to the virus or suddenly find you need to raise orphaned grandchildren. The rug has been pulled right out from under you and all you have worked and planned to achieve. These stressors are raising the incidence of domestic violence, child abuse and divorce. People are losing their jobs, their family members, and their sense of security. Their children lost their schools and day care, everything is destabilized and everyone feels insecure.

If you live upstate, you may not be experiencing this crisis as intensely as people at the epicenter, Kellman said. And you may not grasp why coworkers are responding and behaving differently than they did just a couple of months ago.

“You have to understand, I’ve attended six virtual funerals of people I know in just the last two weeks. And tomorrow is the funeral for one of the EAP coordinators in the city who died of COVID. She’s the second one to die. No one is immune. We all feel our vulnerability.

“Remember: Nothing is normal now. You need to take time and recognize how you and other people are feeling, have dialogue about it and set reasonable goals,” Kellman said.

“Your usual activities and expectations don’t work now and nothing is normal. So, remember: “We are all dealing with this crisis. But every crisis comes to an end. Try to outlive this crisis. Reach out to the people who can help you.”

Along with your family, friends and your work supervisor, you may need some professional advice and help navigating this topsy-turvy environment. That is where EAP can help. Roland said some state agencies do not have their EAP coordinator positions filled, and many have to fund them out of their agency budgets. Currently at least 17 EAP posts are vacant, but if your agency doesn’t have a coordinator, you will be connected to someone else who can help you. All of that information and much more is part of tools assembled for you on the PEF website.

“Keep checking back from time to time, because we will keep updating this information” DiAntonio said. “PEF knows that it’s important to support the emotional wellbeing of our members and their families, especially now, and we are working hard to do that.”
Legislators, PEF President join PEF nurses to discuss issues during Zoom forum

By KATE MOSTACCIO

May has traditionally been the month PEF nurses traveled to the state Capitol to lobby, providing legislators with first-hand accounts of nursing issues and ideas for much-needed change.

This year, the COVID-19 pandemic prevented that important day but PEF nurses found a way, meeting digitally with legislators during a Zoom forum on May 27. The two sessions brought together legislators, union leaders and nurses to discuss the topics most important to their profession.

“I know we didn’t get a chance to lobby together,” said PEF President Wayne Spence. “For most of our nurses we have been on the frontlines since March and we have been going hot and heavy. We know quite a few of our coworkers have gotten ill while trying to deal with this virus and treat folks. It doesn’t discriminate. Some of our PEF members have passed way.

“We wanted to get together to have some conversations,” he said. “This looks like it could be prolonged. We wanted to have a conversation about our experiences since March and what we would like to see done.”

More than 10,000 strong, PEF nurses have more power together and are ready to effect change.

“PEF nurses have been the boots on the ground and these folks are not afraid to engage elected leaders and engage PEF leadership for change,” Spence said. “I wanted to make sure there was an opportunity to continue the good work PEF nurses have done over the years.”

Spence talked about some of the most pressing COVID-19 issues facing PEF nurses and health care workers.

“No one should have to endure the challenges the nurses have had to deal with in the workplace,” he said. “There are still issues with dealing with PPE. Some agencies are reusing N95s. They have come up with some way of saying they can clean N95s and reuse them.”

N95 masks produced by 3M are intended for single use. “I went on the 3M website and looked at N95 masks,” Spence said. “They were never designed to be reused. It was a disposable mask. Yet the state and some agencies, some hospitals, are reusing them after they claim they can decontaminate the mask. There is no reason for that. There is no process for it, no guidelines for it, it’s unacceptable.”

PEF is also joining forces with nurses from several fellow unions to demand better access to protective gear, hazard pay, better compensation and protections, and respect for the profession.

“I want to thank all of you, as the president of your union,” Spence said. “Thank you is certainly not enough for your sacrifices. I wish I could say to you that you’re going to be getting a bonus of some sort for hazard duty. That, effective immediately, you’ll be making $60 an hour and that it will be permanent. I wish I could say those things. That’s the way we should be saying thank you. We are trying to get things like that to happen. We think people are seeing the issue of safe staffing, nursing shortages, and how all those things relate to a salary that doesn’t compensate you for what you do.

“We are fighting with the governor and federal government to get you funding for hazard duty,” Spence told the nurses. “We’re fighting with the governor to increase your salary grade. It’s not good enough for people to say you are a hero and do a video. It has to be more tangible than that.”
Legislators address PEF nurses

Assemblywoman Aileen Gunther, who represents District 100, joined the morning session and thanked PEF nurses for the vital work they do every day. Gunther has been a strong advocate for safe staffing and has worked to bring about change.

“I remember picketing and screaming from the rooftops about safe staffing,” she said. “At this point in time we know that we did not have enough nurses (during the pandemic). We had to bring people back and bring people from other states. We haven’t had safe staffing for a long time.”

She said she is hopeful nursing issues will gain traction after COVID has shown how important the profession is to the public good.

“As a representative and someone watching what has been going on, I think the health care system is somewhat broken,” Gunther said. “We don’t pay our most essential staff the appropriate wages. I think every nurses’ union has to come together at the beginning of session next year. We can’t afford to have another outbreak like this and we can’t afford to lose more nurses from our field.”

PEF Statewide Nurse Committee member and Region 12 Coordinator Nora Higgins thanked Gunther for her support.

“You have been my role model for many years,” Higgins said. “I’m so happy that you are still fighting hard for us and trying to change the tide for safe staffing. It’s so important that we have adequate staffing.”

Both Gunther and Higgins talked about their opposition to the reuse of N95 masks.

“The N95 masks on the box does say one-time use only,” Higgins said. “I think we are putting our people at risk and it is unfortunate we don’t have a supply chain actively moving in America yet.”

Gunther echoed her sentiments.

“We have always been taught to follow directions on the box, whether it’s pancake mix or something else, and all of a sudden they are changing the tune,” she said. “Right now they don’t know how long this virus remains in the air. We don’t really have the science. I think we should err on the side of caution.”

Region 7 Coordinator and PEF nurse Bobbi Stafford highlighted the wage discrepancy between public and private hospitals and the need to be competitive for retention.

“We are in the business of training nurses and since we can’t afford to pay them wages comparable with private hospitals, they are immediately leaving,” Stafford said. “We spent $100,000 to $200,000 to train them and they leave. They aren’t invested. This is a huge issue plaguing the three SUNY hospitals.”

Gunther suggested working on legislation to address this.

“Maybe we can work together next year on some piece of legislation regarding those PEF nurses in the SUNY hospitals,” she said. “They really don’t have an incentive to stay. The nurses are making a lot more in private hospitals. I think we really have to work together to make sure these SUNY nurses are paid appropriately and fairly.”

Also joining the morning session of the forum was Assemblywoman Karines Reyes, representing Assembly District 87.

Reyes said she has been in Albany working on COVID-related legislation.

“We all know how much our communities have been impacted by this,” she said. “I have to thank the nurses. In the face of these very challenging times they have really shown what they’re made of. People showed up every day after working two or three shifts in a row, day after day. Many people didn’t go home because they were afraid to infect their families.”

As a nurse herself, who returned to work on the floor at Montefiore Medical Center to assist with COVID response, Reyes understands what nurses need and face in the workplace.

“For me [going back to the hospital] was a no-brainer,” Reyes said. “It’s kind of what nurses do. They are asking nurses to come in from other parts of the country. We had a lot of travelers. Often times they are not committed to the community they are serving. They are not in their home hospital or community. It’s important that we hire from within the community.

“When I see my community is struggling and the numbers are picking up, why wouldn’t I go serve at the bedside?” she said. “These have been some of the worst shifts I have ever worked. The lack of PPE is an understatement. It is physically and mentally exhausting.”
She said the plight of nursing during COVID has been front and center and that publicity may help advance nursing issues.

“Staffing is such an important issue and I think this has definitely made the case for staffing,” she said. “When nurses work in a facility that is understaffed they burn out so quickly. They can’t wait to get out of there.”

Reyes told the nurses attending the forum that the Assembly was working on a bill that offers enhanced whistleblower protections for health care workers.

“We saw many nurses retaliated against because they spoke to media about inadequate PPE,” she said. “We want to make sure we protect anybody who blows the whistle on unsafe working conditions.”

After passage of a paid sick leave bill earlier in the year, Reyes said it is vital that nurses speak out if their facility is docking paid time off when a member tests positive for COVID.

“We want to make sure they aren’t using it for COVID,” Reyes said. “At the end of the day, this is a line of duty issue. They should not be using their personal time for it. If nurses have faced this it is important they speak out.”

Higgins, who works as a nurse at Stony Brook University Hospital and sits on a committee with AFT looking at the processing of N95 masks, asked Reyes about her experience with N95 masks that had been cleaned for reuse.

“We are hearing everybody has the same processing company for the masks and there have been issues, such as headaches and rashes,” she said.

Reyes developed rashes after shifts with N95 masks.

“I think it’s important that we start to look at reusable equipment and investing in it,” she said. “There can be a process where things are autoclaved and reused. The same thing they do with intubation trays. In the long run, it would save us money.”

“I think it’s also important to note this was a global issue,” she said. “If you look where PPE is manufactured, most is manufactured in China. Before we were at our peak, China had been shut down for weeks. Their processing plants as well. We need to look at how we outsource our PPE. Really look into reusable, environmentally friendlier options for our frontline workers.”

During the evening session, another legislator joined the conversation.

Senator Gustavo Rivera, who represents the 33rd District in the Bronx, acknowledged May as National Nurse Month.

“I want to express gratitude and admiration to all of you on the frontlines on a day-to-day basis and even more so in times like this,” Rivera said. “You’ve been providing critical and immediate care to New Yorkers facing an incredible and unpredictable situation. We know that you have done it without the proper protective equipment and that you’ve done it without the proper payment.

“When we are talking about the jobs that are essential, the definition of essential becomes so much clearer,” he said. “We have to ensure that you get the support that you need, that you get the equipment that you need. We are trying to do that with legislation.”

Rivera said now is the time to push for a bold agenda.

“This situation has shown much clearer than any other moment how clear the dividing lines are in our society,” he said. “I still can’t believe we are discussing raising taxes on million and billionaires. The folks that are on the frontlines, like all of you, the folks actually sacrificing are the poor working class folks. The millionaires and billionaires are not. They are fine. They’re not the ones losing their jobs and homes. We are not taxing them at the place that we should. I think we need to do more about that.”

Rivera is looking forward to the work that can be accomplished in the coming weeks, months and years, and said when the dust settles we can’t go back to the way things were pre-COVID.

“I think when we talk about what is going to happen post-Corona, we cannot go back to normal,” he said. “We cannot go back to the way things were in February, we have to do something different.”

President Spence thanked Rivera for years of steady support.

“Not just now but over the years for PEF,” he said. “If everything was normal, we would have had our nurses lobby day and we would have probably knocked on your door like we did in the past.

“All you hear about since March are essential workers,” he told the senator. “We’ve talked to nurses at SUNY
Downstate and I can’t begin to tell you the horror stories in the very beginning.”

Spence told the forum attendees about a day at SUNY Downstate when a PEF nurse had been speaking to a patient on a gurney, had left to assist another patient, and when she returned that first patient had died and fallen to the floor. “For a while that was their experience for a lot of nurses,” he said. “Can you get used to that? To see what nurses have had to deal with across the spectrum, my concern is that there are opportunities to deal with what they dealt with. It’s similar to what soldiers deal with in times of war, seeing death around them. There are going to be issues.

“I hope the city and state of New York don’t forget about the mental health of our nurses,” Spence said. “What they went through in the last couple of months is not natural unless it’s in times of war -- and war is not natural in any sense of the word.”

**AFT’s Randi Weingarten joins with nurses**

“It’s hard to know where to start given that there are not enough words to say thankyou and there are not appropriate words to convey how deep not only mine but how deep a nation’s gratitude is to the people who have been on the frontlines of all of this,” Weingarten told the nurses attending the morning session. “We have 200,000 health care professionals and essential workers who, every single day since February, have been risking their own lives and the lives of their families, given what we know about COVID, to actually make a difference in the lives of other people.”

She said health care and public service employees going into the profession know they may be put in harm’s way to do their job – but not to the level caused by COVID.

“Nobody goes in knowing they are going to risk their lives every single day and not have adequate PPE,” she said. “Wayne and I were on the phone many a Saturday or Sunday figuring out which decibel of screaming was going to get the governor’s staff attention because of the things we were hearing.”

AFT purchased $3 million worth of PPE to distribute to affiliates, including PEF, and PEF sought both donations and made purchased of PPE to support the needs of members. “This is personal to all of us,” she said. “What we tried to do as a union in the first phase, we had our first press conference on COVID on February 4 -- the day of the State of the Union. We understood that it took more than just washing hands and not touching your face to deal with this virus. The fact that the nation was downplaying it, that we hadn’t done any travel alerts.

“If we had the information we had in the beginning of March, in the beginning of February, so there wasn’t the Hunger Games on testing and PPE, protocols could have been negotiated,” she said. “All of this stuff could have happened in February instead of everything turning on a dime.”

Weingarten said the preparation in the early days of the pandemic was lacking but the preparation for reopening shouldn’t be.

“I’ll be damned if we don’t try to prepare better in the reopening than what happened to us in the closing,” she said. “We try to focus on the wellbeing, safety and health of our members and communities. Focus like a laser on the safety and health.”

Infection numbers are dropping and New York is slow reopening, but the future is still unknown. “We don’t know if there will be a second peak,” Weingarten said. “Or if there is one, when it is. Twenty states are seeing a rise as they reopen.”

To reopen, certain steps are crucial, Weingarten said. “We know that we need to have public health tools that reduce the transmission of disease,” she said. “We have to have infrastructure for testing, tracing and isolation. In the workplace, we have to have ways of reducing transmission. That’s why we’re talking masks, social distancing, sanitation, cleaning and washing hands.”

Representatives from the labor movement must be at the table, she said. And, so must the financial means to accomplish what’s needed.

“When you think about what we really need to do, it actually costs more money not less,” Weingarten said. “Just like we had five million phone calls and letters into the Senate when they were contemplating [Betsy] DeVos [for U.S. Secretary of Education], we need to have that degree and level of intensity in terms of this fight. The public is with us.

“Nurses should not be furloughed in this moment when they have done everything,” she said. “We should actually be giving you what you need, including bonus pay, because of what has happened. You are the ones who got us through a pandemic the likes of which we have not seen in a 100 years.”
Nurses share experiences, get answers at Zoom nurses forum

By KATE MOSTACCIO

“United nurses in a united workplace are more powerful than the best negotiator in the world,” said PEF Interim Nurse Coordinator Gabriel Kristal during PEF’s Zoom Nurses Forum on May 27. “Over the next several weeks I want everybody on this call to email me because I want to help you organize your facilities and your agencies. We want to make sure the members of PEF understand that they are union. The power we get is acting all together.”

MORE FROM THE FORUM: Legislators, AFT president join PEF nurses to discuss issues during Zoom forum

PEF staff and union leaders joined nurses on Zoom during two sessions, morning and evening, to talk about nursing issues and to answer questions nurses have on topics from tuition reimbursement, to the status of the PEF contract, to how the Statewide Nurses Committee functions.

Contract update

PEF Contract Chair and Region 10 Coordinator Darlene Williams attended the evening session of the forum and provided a brief overview about contract negotiations. “Since the COVID crisis started, we had to put contract negotiations on pause,” Williams said. “Everyone knows there were so many fires during that time that the union was trying to put out. This crisis was overwhelming. We didn’t really grasp how bad it was at first.”

Williams said management and the Governor’s Office of Employee Relations (GOER) could not negotiate two things at once – the PEF contract and issues pertaining to COVID. “We both said let’s put this on pause. We are dealing with too many different things at one time,” Williams said. “Our union shined at the height of this crisis. We were able to show New York state who we really are. The nurses who stepped up. The members who work for the Department of Labor with so many unemployment claims. Our members were there. “Where human beings had to be cared for our staff, our nurses, doctors, social workers, psychiatrists came and were there to help,” she said. “The governor sees it. Your neighbors see it. The people in your community see it.”

PEF members on the frontlines and in the public eye during the COVID pandemic can be a powerful presence when PEF returns to the bargaining table.

“Once we can all get back together and start to negotiate the contract, I’m hoping that they remember,” Williams said. “Don’t allow them to have a short-term memory. President Spence sent out information that the governor wants to hear from us, about our story. Don’t read the email and say someone else is going to send in a story. Send in your story, let the governor know.

“When we get back to the table, not only will we have the skilled contract team members, including Bobbi Stafford and Michele Silsby, who will be at the table, we will have your own personal story,” Williams said. “Do a video, do it in writing. Make sure we are heard. That way we’re bringing hundreds to the contract table.”
PEF Director of Organizing Dan Carpenter said negotiations may be on pause but work is still being done toward obtaining a fair contract.

“Nurses are well represented,” he said. “They have their own small table. We are trying to address some of the issues we have faced for decades. While I say we are on a pause, we are still working to strengthen our side of the table. We are finding information and data to strengthen our bargaining. “The contract team is definitely doing due diligence and making sure nurses issues are addressed during these negotiations,” he said.

A discussion with former NYSNA executive director

Jill Furillo, no stranger to nursing issues, joined the discussion during the evening Zoom forum. Trained as a nurse at SUNY Downstate, she worked nursing jobs and crossed the country for work before joining the leadership of the New York State Nurses Association as executive director.

“When I came back to New York to be executive director of NYSNA, we hit the ground running fighting to keep our hospital open for care in Brooklyn,” she said. “We united together NYSNA, 1 199, SUNY nurses, all the workers at SUNY Downstate, DC37. We had a united front fighting the hospital closure. We had some success and we were able to keep SUNY Downstate open. It’s an honor for me to be invited to speak to you today.”

She pointed out that SUNY Downstate has been crucial in COVID care.

“Can you imagine if those hospitals closed? What we’ve seen with this pandemic crisis with health care workers, all our essential workforce, has exposed inequities in the health care system,” Furillo said. “What nurses have done in New York is absolutely extraordinary when you see in a very short period of time what nurses had to go through. No one should ever have to go through what nurses, all health care workers and all frontline workers, have had to go through during this pandemic.”

Furillo remembers the beginning of the AIDS epidemic and the fear surrounding it, when hospitals were overwhelmed and overrun.

“That doesn’t even come close to what nurses have had to go through here in New York,” she said. “When I look around the country and I see all the health care workers and frontline workers have had to put up with, nurses in New York have been at the epicenter of this pandemic.”

Furillo said the pandemic will leave the nursing profession with a mark.

“I was in touch with nurses in Italy. Now that the dust has settled there they are starting to see the aftermath,” she said. “It’s like going into battle. The difference between soldiers going into battle is that when you leave the battlefield, you’re gone. But, in this crisis you have to keep coming back to the same place you experienced the trauma. We need the labor movement to give strong mental health support and assistance.”

At the federal level, the AFL-CIO has filed a lawsuit to compel OSHA to issue emergency standards to protect workers, Furillo said.

“I know that the AFL-CIO and all unions are pushing hard to get that legislation passed at the federal level for emergency temporary standards and protections for all workers affected on the front lines,” Furillo said. “There are continuing, ongoing efforts to address the issues.”

A member at the Zoom meeting said they go to work every day and there is no one with PPE and no one wearing masks. “I actually count the people without masks,” the member said. “I caught COVID and pneumonia at work.” The member asked what the implementation of an emergency temporary standard would look like.

“The lawsuit is alleging that OSHA has not done due diligence to the workers on the frontlines making sure they are protected,” Furillo explained. “It is the responsibility of OSHA to do so. [U.S. President Donald] Trump basically said they don’t need a mandatory standard. They think it’s better to leave it up to employers, which we all know is not adequate. There needs to be a mandatory standard and it needs to be implemented immediately.”

A member told Furillo their workplace allows them to sign out one mask, which is inadequate.

“I finally was like, ‘Really?’ and went out and bought my own masks and PPEs,” the member, an employee of OPWDD, said. “You can catch anything over those cubicles and we have no protection.”

Furillo said many workers testified or wrote down their story and shared it with AFL-CIO.

“It’s the same story,” she said. “Everybody had to buy or bring in their own PPE. They were told you have one mask and you have to keep reusing that mask. That is really, really unacceptable. That’s why the AFL-CIO has filed this writ in the
U.S. Court of Appeals, to compel OSHA to do that.”

The member who had COVID pneumonia has returned to work – but is exhausted and looking for options.

“My employer has really not been nice,” she said. “They don’t know all the effects yet. I’m exhausted. I want to come home, my doctor has asked can you work half days, I’m getting no. I looked at Workers Comp but I don’t know if that’s the way to go.” Furillo told the woman that lawyers from many unions are looking at these issues.

Tuition reimbursement

A number of nurses submitted inquiries about tuition reimbursement for 2020. The answer came from PEF Training Specialist Kim Loccisano.

“At this time, PEF doesn’t have any of our educational benefit programs available,” she said. “PEF’s programs are funded through Article 15 of the PEF/NYS contract. Without a contract in place, there is no funding for our programs. As soon as a new contract is in place, PEF will notify our members what benefits are available for 2020.”

If a course can be postponed to later this year, that was advised. If not, it was advised that all documentation be kept. There is no guarantee that reimbursement would be retroactive to January, Loccisano said.

For nurses interested in loan repayment, the contract doesn’t cover loan repayment but the Training and Education Department can answer questions about enrolling in the Student Loan Forgiveness Program offered to public sector employees.

She also encouraged members to utilize a new member benefit called SUMMER.

“PEF a has wonderful free membership benefit through AFT called SUMMER, it is on our website,” she said. “This is tailored help. AFT will go through all grants and repayment plans and suggest which programs you should apply for.”

Loccisano said a recent student debt clinic Zoom training conducted by PEF is available for viewing on the website. Access the clinic here.

PPE, health and safety information

Before the Zoom forum, and sometimes during, nurses submitted questions they had about workplace situations, health and safety.

One member asked what should be done in situations where it was not practical to wash hands.

Geraldine Stella, a PEF occupational safety and health specialist, said hand sanitizer was the way to go when members don’t have the opportunity to wash their hands.

“One of the most important things you can do is have proper hand hygiene,” Stella said. “Washing hands for 20 seconds and not touching your face. If you don’t have access to wash, use hand sanitizer with more than 60% alcohol.”

Stella said the Department of Corrections and Community Supervision (DOCCS) had been manufacturing hand sanitizer when it became difficult to obtain. She said some of this has made it’s way to other agencies.

As far as information about personal protective equipment (PPE), Stella directed members to the PEF.org website.

“Click the COVID link,” she said. “There is a lot of information on PPE, a lot of resources you can look at for questions you may have.”

PEF opposes any decontamination of N95 masks, Stella said.

“We are not in support of that. We are looking at the Battelle system and we have been talking to agencies about how they are doing that,” she said. “If you are having issues with PPE, supply of hand sanitizer, there is a form on the PEF website – the Exposure Reporting Form. That is being tracked by our organizing department.”

Also on the PEF website is information about Workers’ Compensation, Stella said.

“We developed relationships with three attorney firms that have offices all across New York state,” she said. “You can contact these attorneys and they will answer your questions. If you think you were exposed at work, you are going to want to file for Workers Comp now. There is a lot in the works from the different unions on coverage for Workers Comp.

“We learned an important lesson from 9/11,” she said.
“Document now and preserve your right to potential future benefits.”

As state employees move back into workplaces, PEF has put together a Return-to-Work Toolkit.

“The toolkit has great detail on what you should be asking for through your labor management chair and health and safety chair for your safe return to work,” Stella said.

Hazardous duty pay during pandemic

PEF Vice President Randi DiAntonio field questions from nurses about the potential for hazardous duty pay.

“Never before has saying, ‘Show us the money,’ been more relevant. The time is now,” DiAntonio said. “We have an entire country that is recognizing what we’ve known all along -- how fabulous, dedicated and hardworking our nurses are.”

DiAntonio said PEF is fighting on a number of fronts to achieve fair pay for members.

“PEF proposed Essential Duty Premium Pay for essential workers in our bargaining unit,” DiAntonio said. “It would increase hourly pay by 50 percent, or by $15 an hour, whichever is greater. Our proposal also would provide an extra two weeks of vacation accruals added to balances on December 31. They would have up to two years to use those accruals.”

SUNY hospitals would require separate negotiations, DiAntonio added.

“The reality is we need to push the state legislature to do things to raise revenues while at the same time pushing the federal government to pass the Heroes Act,” she said. “New York state is in a very large deficit, to the tune of $13 billion. Members have a role in this because I can call legislators and Congress but I may not be their constituent or a nurse with a frontline story to tell that really resonates with them,” DiAntonio said. “We need members to reach out to representatives. We need all hands on deck.”

DiAntonio is the chair of the Statewide Political Action Committee (PAC). She urged nurses to get involved in their regions.

“Without your voices at that table we might not be making the arguments you all want us to make,” she said. “We want people to get involved.”

Information is available on the PEF website here.

“We have an opportunity here during this very terrible time to really highlight everything we do and raise the visibility of what nurses and other essential workers deserve and need,” DiAntonio said.

Director of Organizing Dan Carpenter said PEF recently engaged in a texting campaign to urge members to contact representatives.

“There are a number of issues within that Heroes Act that really would benefit the members of PEF,” he said. “We are encouraging all members to continue to contact their legislators in the House and Senate to voice support for this bill.”

14 days leave for COVID may not be enough

A PEF nurse on the Zoom meeting, who had contracted COVID and developed pneumonia, said she was still exhausted – even after the standard 14 days at home. She wanted to know if she had any recourse to get time off without using all her accruals.

“One of the reasons we are also recommending that people file for Workers Comp if they have workplace exposure is because we don’t know the long-term effects of this illness and how long people might be sick from it,” Stella said. “If you have a Workers Comp claim established, you might get some of your time back.

“PEF is continuing to work on the 14 days issue,” she said. “If they say no your case wasn’t work related, you can charge accruals while your case is pending, including sick leave with half pay. People low on accruals who may need to have something for the future, it’s a possibility if that case is established you could have some accruals restored.”

PEF Statewide Nursing Committee Chair Carolyn Cole said this issue has come up at some Office of Mental Health and Office for People with Developmental Disabilities facilities and the telecommuting agreement with the state was useful.

“We have suggested because there is an MOU out there for telecommuting to put in for reasonable accommodations,” Cole said. “Get your union steward involved. Most agencies will abide by it. Get your PEF field representative involved.”
The fight for safe staffing

PEF Region 12 Coordinator and SWNC member Nora Higgins, a nurse at Stony Brook, directed a question to Jill Furillo about the fight for safe staffing in California and her experiences there.

“What advice would you give us to move on safe staffing in this climate, where it’s obvious it was necessary to begin with?” Higgins asked.

Furillo said the fight in California was long, beginning in the early 90s and continuing until the bill was finally signed in 1999.

“We fought, fought and fought some more,” she said. “The timing was right when we finally were able to get it signed by the governor. It was at a time when there was another health care crisis. There was unity among all nurse groups. There was also support from the broader labor movement as well as a change in the political makeup of the legislature.”

California’s success hinged on the power of a united profession.

“There was unity. It was very strong,” Furillo said. “We mobilized, organized, there were demonstrations and rallies. It was in the media. That has to continue in New York state.”

Childcare for members in need

A federal bill earmarks $12.15 billion in funding to provide childcare or adult care services for essential workers, including health sector workers. PEF members have yet to see that benefit.

VP DiAntonio fielded the question.

“The bill was passed and unfortunately GOER needs to review the bill and issue guidelines for state agencies to be able to participate in it,” DiAntonio said. “At this point GOER has not issued those guidelines. The bill has a loophole that says certain health care providers and essential workers can be exempted from it. Because of the loophole, the Governor’s Office has not forced agencies to issue decisions when they ask about it.”

In the meantime, DiAntonio said, specific cases could potentially be dealt with at the local facility level, by way of negotiating accommodations or scheduling changes.

“We are disappointed the Governor’s Office is dragging its feet on it,” she said.

Members must engage in the fight

President Spence drew the forum to a close with a look to the future and call to get involved.

“One of the issues we’re hearing is the talks of furloughs and layoffs of essential workers,” he said. “Not just PEF members but state and city workers across New York. SUNY is talking about laying off adjunct professors and part-time professors. They aren’t going to have insurance…” anything.

“Everyone is relying on Washington D.C. to pass a stimulus passage,” he said. “If not, we may need to talk about furloughs and layoffs. We don’t believe that’s the case, we believe there are a lot of wealthy New Yorkers and they can pay a little bit more to offset the work that essential workers did.”

RELATED: New York unions call on state leaders to raise taxes on the rich to address COVID-19 budget shortfall

Spence said the situation could become even more dire if there are layoffs and furloughs and then a second wave of COVID in the fall.

“We’re not out of the woods yet,” he said. “It’s not enough to think that I’m too busy to make a phone call to a legislator, somebody else can do it. It ends up nobody will do it. We should be thinking, ‘If I don’t do it, who will do it?’”

Spence urged members to spread the word to family and friends about calling legislators to support the stimulus package, even those in other states.

“You need to make those calls,” he said. “We need the money.”

Interim Nurse Coordinator Gabriel Kristal said strength in numbers and participation by members is crucial to achieving success on a legislative agenda.

“I want to underscore this one theme,” he said. “PEF is not me, it’s not Wayne, it’s not Carolyn Cole. PEF is the public sector members that make up the union. Power is not because anyone is particularly persuasive. The power we have to get things done is based on how organized we are as a union. We need to build an agenda so we can speak with one voice that nurses needs matter and so we’ll be able to put the pressure on the state to adequately fund to ensure that nurses are fairly compensated,” Kristal said.

RELATED: Have a nursing issue? Contact your Statewide Nurses Committee

Now is the time for nurses, Spence said.

“Never in my history as a person in the union movement and in PEF have I seen so much focus on nurses. Nationally and internationally,” he said. “The people who have been called saviors for the world have been nurses.”
Have a nursing issue? Contact your Statewide Nurses Committee

By KATE MOSTACCIO

The PEF Statewide Nurses Committee (SWNC) serves as a place for nurses to share issues in the workplace that need to be addressed.

Carolyn Cole, a registered nurse for 38 years and currently a community health nurse with the Office of People with Developmental Disabilities, chairs the committee.

“The SWNC is a committee that was developed to represent all facets of the nursing workforce,” she said. “Members represent hospitals, institutions, correctional facilities and community. We come together with all the different concerns nurses are facing in their workplace. Every area is unique.” The committee collects information and works to come up with a collaborative plan to execute and gain the best defense for the profession, Cole said.

“I’ve been on Lobby Day many, many times,” said said. “I know that the power is by the voice. I know nurses need to come together. We have developed this committee so they feel like they have a voice and their concerns can be raised.”

The committee has also been working to set up regional nurses committees. To contact a SWNC member, visit the PEF website here.

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Carr-Joyner steps up when Division needs a new leader

By KATE MOSTACCIO

Division 274’s leadership recently transitioned as the Council Leader, Co-Council Leader, Treasurer and Secretary stepped down from their positions, paving the way for Shelli Carr-Joyner to step in and take the reins.

Carr-Joyner had been thinking about getting more involved in the union and the decision of the leaders to vacate those positions provided an opportunity.

“I started working with OMH (the Office of Mental Health) in November 2016,” she said. “Immediately, I joined the union. I wasn’t a steward but I did volunteer to help the previous Council Leader because I’m that type of person who likes to get involved.”

Carr-Joyner’s volunteer efforts gave her a taste of what a Council Leader does.

“It was quite interesting to me so I really inquired about what it would take to be a Council Leader,” she said. “With all four leaders giving up their positions, now was a perfect time to try.”

She ran unopposed for the position and became the Council Leader at Mid-Hudson Psychiatric Center.

The new Division leadership is diverse.

“I’m an RN, my co-leader is a doctor, our treasurer is a nurse administrator and our secretary is a social worker,” Carr-Joyner said. “We have a nice rainbow group. We’re hitting different disciplines.”

Shortly after the new leaders took their positions, COVID-19 came blasting in.

“Unfortunately, I didn’t get much training because people were out sick,” she said. “We’ve been winging it thus far. Before being in this position, I didn’t realize how many different disciplines are involved in PEF. Once I got in I realized it is a vast amount of disciplines, doctors, psychologists, people from dietary. When I saw this, I realized I may have bitten off a little more than I can chew.”

She didn’t let the daunting task stop her. Instead, she and the new slate of Division leaders hit the ground running and working to support their members during an unprecedented crisis.

“People nowadays want to be informed,” she said.

“Knowledge is power. When people don’t know what is going on you start seeing morale lowered. My goal as a Council Leader is keep members educated, informed and in touch.”

The Division leaders decided to create subcommittees for each discipline in their facility to streamline the flow of information.

“Each discipline will have a go-to person,” she said. “We’ll meet with those go-to people and try to get our members taken care of quickly.”

COVID has been difficult on everyone in the facility, Carr-Joyner said. As Council Leader, she has done what she can to help and boost morale.

“Due to COVID, everyone is running around and they are scared,” she said. “But they have been so strong and dedicated. We thought we needed to do something for them. So, for Nurses and Doctors weeks, we bought umbrellas. In recognition of Mental Health Awareness Month in May, everyone got one. They were happy with that. That was a huge success.”

There is also a plan to have a heroes breakfast, lunch and dinner on June 19.

“We want to thank them for their dedication,” she said. Carr-Joyner praised Region 9 Coordinator Diane Jaulus and PEF Field Representative Dominick Mannino for their assistance.

“They have been a huge help while we’re trying to get our feet wet and get our bearings together,” she said. Despite the difficulties presented by COVID, Carr-Joyner is happy to be helping her fellow members.

“I’m really excited,” she said. “I wanted to be involved to help develop a better relationship between employees and management. When employees need help, I want to be involved.”
The disastrous economic impact of the COVID-19 pandemic has been unfolding in New York state for many weeks, with near-daily stories of the toll it’s taking on working people, our families and the services our unsung heroes provide in our communities. As a parole officer and union leader, I have never seen anything like this. If coronavirus is exposing anything, it’s that we’re all in this together and the time for action is now.

My members are showing up to work every day, despite the risk to themselves and their families, because they know they are mission-critical and because they care about their communities. PEF nurses and health care professionals, correctional facility sta and parole officers, sta at state-operated residential facilities, and workers across every other agency processing unemployment, disability and workers compensation claims are not making million-dollar salaries and do not receive $100,000 state pensions. But they do provide vital services to the residents of this state.

Now we need our elected leaders in Albany and Washington to do their part. We need federal support so our state can continue functioning right now, but we also need our leaders in Albany to spread the huge financial burden of paying for this crisis fairly across all income spectrums.

Without all of our elected leaders doing their part, New York will be forced to start cutting state services. Those cuts will hurt all New Yorkers, adding more people to the ranks of the unemployed and making it harder for everyone to recover — physically, psychologically and economically — from the coronavirus. Working people on the front lines are fighting for all of us. Now it is time for our federal and state leaders to stand up for us.

This pandemic should serve as a stark reminder that failing to invest in the services we need has dire consequences when disaster strikes. So let’s pull together to get through this crisis and make choices that will better prepare us for the next. That’s how we’ll get through this and get our economy going again.

Wayne Spence is the president of the Public Employees Federation

Keep New York strong; invest in essential services

By WAYNE SPENCE
New death benefit protects families of frontline workers

By SHERRY HALBROOK

PEF is applauding Gov. Andrew Cuomo’s decision to sign a bill May 30 that was passed by the state Legislature to lift the burden of funeral expenses from the families of frontline workers who die after becoming infected with COVID-19 on the job.

“We urged state lawmakers to make this part of new, emergency legislation to respond to the pandemic,” said PEF President Wayne Spence. “Our legislators saw the fairness of this measure, and so did the governor. We are all in agreement that this extraordinary emergency has called for some workers to put their lives on the line to save others and man the battle lines against this horrible, invisible monster that has ravaged New York City and made New York suffer like nowhere else on earth.

“When these courageous front-line workers fall victim and lose their own lives to the virus, it’s only right that their families should be spared the additional sacrifice of paying their funeral expenses,” Spence said.

The governor was on the same page when he said, “They gave their lives out of love and we respect that. Giving death benefits to all the families of frontline workers who gave their lives for us is the least we can do to say thank you, we honor you, we remember you. You gave your lives for us. We will be there for your families going forward.”

Spence thanked the governor and the lawmakers for their quick action in providing this benefit.

“While I wish and hope that no more workers will have to give their lives in this cause, I also hope that this new death benefit will ease our members’ minds as they continue to fight this virus and maintain public services. Now, at least, they can know that if the worst comes, this is one burden their family would not be left to lift alone.”
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DEC members keep programming alive with digital campaign

By KATE MOSTACCIO

Now would normally be the time members at the Department of Environmental Conservation (DEC) would host events and programming to introduce the public to outdoor recreation and resources across New York State.

But NY on Pause and COVID-19 struck again, leaving members at DEC to find other ways of delivering that content to eager New Yorkers looking to get out of their homes.

Public Participation Specialist and PEF Member Kayla Baker has been hard at work behind-the-scenes to move the flow of information from in person to on screen.

“When we first started working from home we knew that a lot of our programming would be potentially at risk with New York on pause,” Baker said. “We came up with the idea to do a virtual campaign. We wanted to make sure anyone in New York state could do it anywhere. It’s important to reach audiences who may not have a backyard or park to go to, like in New York City. There are things you can do on your balcony, out your window or at a neighborhood park.”

DEC’s Adventure New York morphed to #AdventureAtHome.

“The goals of Adventure New York include both infrastructure and programming,” Baker said. “With #AdventureAtHome, we want to encourage the public to get outdoors and try new activities, paddling, archery, fishing, birdwatching. We knew there was potential for those to be done close to home and we still want to engage people in outdoor recreation.”

The “I Love My Park Day,” in cooperation with the Office of Parks, Recreation and Historic Preservation, and Outdoors Day have traditionally been big days for DEC’s Adventure New York program. Bans on large gatherings have prevented those from happening as planned.

Taking to Facebook, the department began its #AdventureAtHome series of videos and social media posts on May 26.

PEF Member Steven Wong, an environmental program specialist with DEC’s Bureau of Fisheries, presented the basics of fishing at Brooklyn’s Prospect Park in the inaugural video.

Fishing clinics are typically more detailed than the Facebook Live presentation Wong gave from the park, but the goal of the day was to encourage anyone, anywhere, to try fishing.

“This video was really focused on just getting people out on their own,” Wong said. “We just want to get people fishing so I wanted to start with the most basic knowledge to get out there and catch anything. Everyone needs the fundamentals to start doing it. Freshwater fishing is really accessible to virtually everyone around the state.”
DEC’s public information office says license sales for fishing have increased dramatically over last year’s sales.

The Facebook video fits in well with the work of the Bureau of Fisheries.

“This is typically what we do, just not in the video format,” Wong said. “I work in the Bureau of Fisheries and part of our work is to manage the fish in our regions but also, in our region in particular in New York City, we do a lot of fishing promotion.

“Unfortunately, a lot of fishing promotion we do is in person, so we have really had to get creative and reach people and promote fishing,” Wong said. “This is a platform we are trying to explore so people can recreate on their own.”

Wong’s video took viewers through what resources are available on DEC’s website, including maps, pamphlets and regulations for different parts of the state.

“New York City has a special regulation of catch and release only,” Wong said. “and everywhere in the state, there are particular regulations for fishing. Outside of NYC you can find places to catch fish to eat as well. Before you go fishing, check the DEC website for places to fish, all statewide regulations and to buy your fishing license.”

“The website is a great first resource.” Wong said. “The DEC fishing maps located on the website might show you the amenities at a location and or the species you can catch there.”

Wong’s video urged New Yorkers to stay local to fish and recreate outdoors. He said bodies of water with a stretch of bank with no trees, whether a stream, lake or pond work best for beginning anglers.

He explained the different rods and parts of the rod; how to tie the hook to the line; where to position a bobber to control the depth of the hook; and how to cast different rods.

The digital format of Facebook Live allowed Wong to present a steady flow of information.

“The process was less pressure for me to just speak normally rather than have a script and follow it,” he said. “For me, I wasn’t very nervous.”

Wong hopes his video will help New Yorkers looking to try out fishing. He also hopes they do so responsibly.

“We had a campaign about social distancing for COVID,” he said. “Fish local, stay close to home. Keep fishing trips short and avoid high traffic destinations. When fishing on boats, make sure they are large enough so that people on board are six feet away. If you are older than 70 or have a compromised immune system, maybe postpone your trip.”

Baker said plans for the next video are set.

“We will be talking about ways you can birdwatch from home,” she said. “Teaching people how to birdwatch from their window, from their backyard.”

A nature program in collaboration with NYS Parks is also planned.

“The nature program with state parks will discuss how to discover nature while still being close to home,” Baker said. “It will be the traditional nature educational programming you might see at an education center.”

Working in an entirely new medium has its challenges.

“It’s a lot, it’s multipronged,” Baker said. “We have Facebook lives and crafted social media posts, at least three a week, highlighting the weekly theme, as well as a weekly newsletter Find Your Adventure that provides resources to over 120,000 subscribers. After the Facebook live, we have an engagement post to get people to comment or share what they’ve done that week.”

Visit the DEC website and view the #AdventureAtHome box to see weekly content related to that week’s theme. Sign up here for the Find Your Adventure newsletter for camping, wildlife viewing and hiking information.

“We are seeing a need and that’s why we feel it’s really important,” Baker said. “We know people are going to get outside. We wanted to promote our resources so people don’t just go on Google to get information. DEC has resources to help people find things to do close to home.”
Have you ever wondered if state leaders really understand the challenges you face on the job and in your personal life? That question bothered PEF Region 12 Coordinator Nora Higgins and she decided to run for the state Senate to bring a different perspective and voice to the Legislature.

If you are a Democrat living in state Senate District 1 at the eastern end of Long Island, you will see Higgins’ name on your ballot in the June 23 primary election. She is one of five candidates vying to be the party’s candidate for the Senate in the November 3 general election.

Long Islanders and New Yorkers overall need more occupational diversity in their Legislature, Higgins said. “While attending a Health Committee meeting in the state Assembly in 2019, I saw a room full of lawyers and there was Assemblywoman Aileen Gunther, who’s a nurse, trying to sway the opinion of a few outspoken members of that committee,” said Higgins, who was attending the meeting on behalf of the PEF Nurses Committee that she co-chaired. “It occurred to me that a little occupational diversity among our elected leaders was in order.”

As a native of Suffolk County, a wife, mother, nurse, public employee, and community and union activist, Higgins said she wants to bring a very local, down-to-earth and caring voice to this important forum that tackles the state’s toughest issues.

Noting that the Republican incumbent in the district has represented it for decades, Higgins said she feels it’s time to embrace new ideas and insights.

“We need to forget about the old way of doing things, and focus on the right, and just way of doing things,” Higgins said. “I believe all New Yorkers need to have enough to eat, enough money to live, and be able to establish trust in the people who are responsible for the outcomes of our very lives.”

Higgins said she has a world of respect for lawyers, but feels that a broader range of perspectives, professional expertise and personal experience is needed to ensure the state’s lawmakers can relate to the lives and needs of the people those laws will govern.

“I promise to bring the same high standards of professionalism and caring spirit to the role of legislator that I have brought to my duties as a nurse at SUNY Stony Brook and other health care facilities in Suffolk County,” Higgins said. “I know from my own experience how hard it is to be a working, single mom trying to raise a young family and still maintain a standard of professional excellence on the job. I am blessed now to be remarried and to have learned so much from my activism on behalf of my fellow health care professionals and other state employees. I want to bring that experience and all that it has taught me to the Senate.

“I have been with all of you through this pandemic nightmare, working to save lives and to provide compassion and emotional support to frightened patients, bereaved families and exhausted co-workers. I also understand that Long Island is losing it’s young adults, is seeing its middle class beaten down, and its seniors challenged on many levels. Enough is enough! I hope voters will stand with me at the polls as I will always stand with them through all of the challenges ahead.
PEF is now on Instagram! Follow us today @nyspef
Union fighting to protect members who stepped up to get NYS through crisis

By SHERRY HALBROOK

PEF members and other state employees responded quickly, generously and courageously when the governor suddenly called on them in mid-March to maintain essential state services in the face of the coronavirus pandemic infecting and killing thousands of New Yorkers. The emergency required fast action with little time to discuss and negotiate the details of how it ultimately would affect the employees.

As some workers were sent home to work remotely, others were kept at their worksites to maintain hands-on services. Still other employees were asked to pitch in and do high-priority work outside their job duties. Many put in long, exhausting hours, day after day, week after week. Some still are working far beyond their regular workdays and shifts.

The work has been getting done based on the trust and good faith the employees bring to it. Now, however, some of them feel their trust was betrayed, because the state has not dealt with them in good faith.

"Just as the state had to spring into action to protect New Yorkers, we, at PEF, had to respond quickly to protect our members," said PEF President Wayne Spence. "I, along with my executive staff, our Contract Administration Department, legal staff, field services and health and safety staff and others have been in constant contact with the Governor’s Office of Employee Relations, legislators (state and federal lawmakers (who passed emergency legislation) various commissioners and many other state officials to head off problems and try to reach agreements and resolve issues as they arose."

Some issues have been more easily or quickly resolved than others. Two issues have been particularly difficult to resolve and PEF’s Contract Administration staff are focused on them. The first involves access to paid time off from work provided under federal COVID legislation, and the second issue centers on overtime and pay for work outside the members’ job duties.

"PEF members are being denied access to benefits afforded to them under the Families First Coronavirus Response Act (FFCRA). This federal legislation, which provides paid sick leave and paid family medical leave, went into effect nearly two months ago, yet many NYS agencies still have not acted in granting the employees the much needed time off provided by the act," said PEF Director of Contract Administration William LeBeau.

"PEF staff has made almost daily inquiries into the status of the FFCRA with GOER, but no answers have been provided," LeBeau said.

Meanwhile, the state is suing the U.S Department of Labor over some of the regulations it has imposed under the FFCRA. The state contends the USDOL regulations far exceed the scope and intent of the FFCRA. The state argues that those federal regulations opened the door to excluding from coverage an overly expansive set of health care and emergency responder job titles.

"In spite of that lawsuit, the state’s failure to rule on our members’ requests to utilize the federal benefits is the same as issuing that broad exclusion," LeBeau said. "We have filed many contract grievances on the constructive denials, but those grievances will take many months to be heard and decided. Members need access to this benefit immediately."

The pay issues have been equally gnarly.

The state has asked many PEF members to help the state Labor Department deal with the sudden deluge of millions of unemployment insurance claims coming in from all of the workers who lost their jobs when the governor ordered businesses to shut down to help slow the rapidly spreading infection. Other members have been asked to help the state Health Department staff the tsunami of calls coming into its COVID-19 hotline.

"Despite PEF’s repeated requests for the state to provide clarity to volunteers about the compensation for these assignments, the state has failed to do so," LeBeau said.

"PEF members stepped up during this crisis and took these assignments, only to be advised -- after the fact -- that they would not be paid at their regular overtime rate of pay, but at an overtime rate of a salary grade 9 or at an overtime rate.
based on the average of the employee’s salary grade and a salary grade 9,” Spence said. “That’s not fair. They should be paid based on their own pay grade. If the state wanted to pay them less, it should have told them that up front.”

“We feel the state created this problem by failing to provide the advance information regarding compensation that our members needed to make educated and voluntary decisions about signing up for such assignments,” LeBeau said. “PEF also disagrees with the state’s determination to pay overtime at a lower rate of pay, when such information was not disclosed in a timely manner.”

PEF has filed a class action grievance on behalf of affected members. The union also has provided guidance on its website to members who have volunteered, wish to volunteer or who are mandated to perform any COVID-19 related assignments outside of their regular job duties.

COVID-19: PEF Q&A

PEF Members should contact their Division’s local leaders with any concerns to ensure that workplace issues are being presented to management at local labor/management meetings. These meetings can and should be ongoing and may be conducted via tele-conferencing.

This is an update to the FAQs that were originally distributed on March 18, 2020, which have been updated regularly since that date. It is intended to help guide you through the ongoing and evolving public health emergency caused by the COVID-19 Virus.

Since the last update to this FAQ, guidance and regulations have been issued by the U.S. Department of Labor regarding the Families First Coronavirus Response Act (FFCRA). More detailed information about the FFCRA can be found here (link to our FFCRA Advisory).

This FAQ will continue to be updated as needed.
AFT purchases $3M worth of PPE to distribute to frontline workers, including PEF, NYSUT and UFT

By KATE MOSTACCIO

When the government can’t fully supply frontline workers with vital personal protective equipment, labor unions step in to protect their members.

The American Federation of Teachers, one of PEF’s parent unions, recently purchased 500,000 N95s, 50,000 face shields, and more than 1 million surgical masks to help protect its members fighting the COVID-19 pandemic, according to a press release from AFT.

“The items, totaling a nearly $3 million investment by the union, will be distributed over the next several weeks to healthcare providers in facilities across the country, including in New York, Washington, Oregon and New Jersey, in consultation with leaders from each state and using a formula to get the PPE to the highest-need areas,” AFT’s release stated.

PEF Region 10 Coordinator Darlene Williams said she was floored when she saw the magnitude of AFT’s purchase and learned PEF would be receiving 40,000 of those supplies.

“Going in, I was just aware that we were going to receive some PPE,” Williams said. “So I cleaned out my car to take a couple of boxes. I went to Bronx UFT (United Federation of Teachers), I walked in this room, and there were thousands of boxes of surgical masks. And then I found out that there were also faceshields.

“I was blown away and overwhelmed with what was going to happen,” she recalled. “I became emotional because I knew what this would mean for our members. The day before I was at work and we are given a mask a day. Many of us are working 12 to 16 hour shifts and we only have one mask. We were told we are running low so be careful.”

During a regular flu season, staff at her facility is instructed to change masks after each patient intervention, Williams said, poignantly highlighting how the current shortage of PPE is impacting frontline workers.

Williams said AFT’s support and dedication to members was apparent that day.

“[AFT President] Randi [Weingarten] and I had a conversation about how much this meant,” she said. “She informed me that AFT used union dues because the federal government is not able to take care of the employees so the unions have to step in and take care of the employees.

“Randi is so proud of the work that PEF is doing and how we really are holding the state of New York up during this crisis,” Williams said.

“Union dues are now being devoted to protect the protectors and save lives, because the federal government won't do its job,” Weingarten stated in a press release. “We have filed complaints, we have signed petitions, we have demonstrated, and we have run ads — and now, we've become supply clerks, negotiating equipment purchases around the world — because our members are getting sick, our colleagues and loved ones are dying, and our government has failed to protect them. If they won't do it, we will try to get them what they need.”
Sign up TODAY for the eCommunicator

Keeping PEF members current on PEF news, emailed to your mobile device or home computer monthly. www.pef.org/ecommunicator-signup/
DOL staffing decline, aged computer infrastructure hindered COVID unemployment response

By KATE MOSTACCIO

The COVID-19 pandemic and the resulting “NY on PAUSE” left many New Yorkers without jobs and scrambling to claim unemployment benefits.

As of May 19, the New York State Department of Labor (DOL) had processed claims amounting to $9.2 billion in benefits since the beginning of the pandemic, including $290 million in back pay processed in the preceding two weeks.

To handle the massive volume of new claims, the DOL was forced to hire hundreds of staff, rely on volunteers from other departments and state agencies, and outsource computer infrastructure upgrades to outside vendors to keep up.

Even then, the public outcry over processing delays was prevalent.

DOL staffing levels have been in a decline over the last 10 years. In 2010, there were 650 PEF-represented labor services representatives. That number dropped to 522 in 2015, and further to 459 in 2020.

Staffing decline

PEF Executive Board member Helen Esposito, a longtime DOL employee, has seen the drop in staffing over the years – and with it, a drop in skilled labor services representatives.

“It was an impact when they closed the New York City office down in 2006,” she said. “We lost a huge amount of staff – over 200 PEF members. They haven’t rebuilt that number with permanent staff. It has hurt and it has continued to hurt.”

Since the closing of the New York City office and the staffing drop that came with it, New York has faced a number of disasters, though none as bad as the COVID pandemic.

“We’ve been through several disasters,” Esposito said. “9/11, the airline industry crash that followed shortly after, Sandy, the 2006/2011 upstate floods, the recession of 2008 thru 2014- it hasn’t been easy. They try to bring in some staff. It’s difficult in the upstate regions because you’re not getting the people. We’re having trouble to even get hourlies in Endicott. It’s not an easy thing.”

Previously, even with declining staffing, DOL has been able to weather disasters but the magnitude of COVID has been the problem.

“We were always able to handle them but all other disasters were concentrated disasters,” Esposito said. “You didn’t have the amount of people that were filing. This affects New York, as well as cities and states with residents that work in New York. We have not only New York but also New Jersey, Pennsylvania, Canada, Massachusetts, Vermont, Connecticut and Ohio, the states surrounding New York that people come from along with those who nationwide actually work remote for NY based employers and must file with NYS.”

Losing experienced staff has also affected the foreign language lines.

“New York City staff had experience,” Esposito said. “Every language was available. Language lines have been a problem and we don’t have the staff to do the translations.”

Esposito said DOL is only bringing in hourly staff, rarely any permanents, and hourlies don’t get the full benefits offered to permanent staff. “They’re one of the main things we’re fighting for in the contract,” she said. “The union is doing a lot.”

State workers who volunteered to help process claims during the pandemic to help overwhelmed regular staff have stopped helping because of pay issues.

“It’s not DOL, it’s the state itself and it’s the new payroll business center that’s hurting people,” Esposito said. “Those volunteering to help us out are no longer volunteering. Who wants to get paid at a lower grade to do work? They weren’t told about that.

“I’m mandated overtime right now, but what’s going to be happening two weeks from now?” she said. “We are losing people and volunteers to process these cases. With the lack of staffing, we are starting to come into a whole lot of issues. DOL does its best to help us. They’ve been trying their hardest, working with us side by side.”
Bringing in hourlies and CSEA clerical staff might fill the seats that have been left empty with declining staffing levels, but it requires a skill set and knowledge to process claims to their end.

“We’re pushing to the best of our ability,” Esposito said. “You need the experienced staff to finish out claims. The new people can take a claim but you need the experienced to look over a claim. Computers can’t look at missing information. If employer information isn’t completed or if a work location isn’t completed. Claims that have issues where people are getting severance pay, we have to explain to them why they aren’t getting certain weeks. These are things that only humans can do.”

After 9/11, DOL staff were working on cases for a several years following the disaster. With three centers, that workload was manageable. With New York City long shuttered, the fallout from COVID remains to be seen.

**Outdated IT**

Aged computer systems have exacerbated the problems New Yorkers faced trying to file claims online as COVID ravaged the job market. The need for upgrades isn’t a new thing and has been on labor/management agendas for many years.

PEF Retiree Chapter 3 President Angel Cook, who worked for DOL from 1987 to 2018, said when she started working for the state, computers ran on a mainframe system and the base coding was COBOL. She said COBOL, which was popular from the 1960s to the 1990s, is outdated and hard to learn but it is still in use at DOL.

“The COBOL mainframe programming seems outdated to me,” she said. “Most people are not taught COBOL in college anymore.” She pointed to a 2013 article that backed up her point, stating that colleges are failing to teach old programming languages despite continued usage in the business sector.

“A poll … of academic leaders from 119 universities worldwide found that 73 percent of academicians running IT courses do not teach the COBOL programming language on their curriculum, despite 71 percent believing that today’s businesses will continue to rely on applications built using COBOL for at least the next 10 years,” the article stated.

The lack of a user-friendly interface has made pulling staff from other DOL departments and volunteering from other state agencies that much more difficult, as the learning curve for the antiquated systems is high.

DOL staff from other departments report the system isn’t easy to use or navigate. Cross training that took place years ago between different departments has fallen by the wayside as the agency changed.

“When the unemployment offices were local, the Labor Service Representatives (LSRs) in both the employment offices and unemployment offices were cross trained so both could handle unemployment, if needed,” Cook recalled. “Since unemployment is now a call-in system, the employment office LSRs are no longer trained to assist with unemployment.”

DOL has been slowly updating systems along the way before the pandemic but a complete overhaul was far from reality. Cook said the agency had been modernizing unemployment systems piecemeal by contracting out sections throughout her tenure with DOL. Esposito concurred that updates have been coming albeit slowly.

“They have been working on a modernization program since I worked in the city,” Esposito said. “They finally have gotten most of it completed and approved. A lot of the delay deals with budget cuts, finding the right vendor, trying to figure out the system, and modeling on other states that work really well.”

Esposito gave her agency and her commissioner credit for working tirelessly during extraordinary circumstances.

“It’s driving people crazy but we’re doing what we can do with what we’ve got,” she said. “When this happened everybody was caught off guard. Yes, our systems crashed. NYSDOL was one of the fastest states to get this done. Our commissioner, I give her credit. They got a vendor in there and they are doing their best to fix the problems with the system.”

“It’s going to be a long process because they don’t have the manpower,” Esposito said. “But the system is running way easier and people are getting through. There are going to be kinks. There are going to be growing pains. This has never happened before.”

At the end of the day, Esposito’s goals are simple.

“My goal is just to make them smile and I do not let them off my phone until they do. We may not be on the frontlines but we are keeping people in their homes and food on the table,” she said. “The people of New York rely on us.”
Unions across the nation have taken their duty to protect members to the next level amid the COVID-19 pandemic, gathering and purchasing personal protective gear and advocating for the safety of their members.

PEF’s Relief Fund has been a vital part of that endeavor, providing financial means for the union to serve its members in need.

For nurses throughout the state, but particularly in hard-hit areas like New York City, Long Island and Rockland County, those who benefited from the program have dubbed PEF’s hotel initiative a “lifesaver”.

“Since the start of this in March, we have obligated $349,244.67, providing housing for 119 members for a total of 3,049 nights,” said PEF Assistant Coordinator of Special Events Mike Favata, who worked closely with hotels to set up the room blocks. “Around $166,000 was spent in Region 12, $116,000 was spent in Region 11, about $12,000 in Region 9, $41,000 down on Long Island, and about $7,000 in Region 4.” Other regions also saw use of the program.

Favata said PEF’s hotel initiative had a major impact on members.

“It really has significantly reduced the stress,” he said. “Multiple members had folks with various conditions and comorbidities at home and were terrified to go home and possibly expose their families.”

PEF nurse Elise Roth, whose wife is immunocompromised and whose doctors said would not survive a COVID infection, was reployed to a COVID+ floor at Stony Brook University Hospital on Long Island and was immediately sent into a scramble to find a place to stay.

“It’s a very real and very big risk for me, for my family,” Roth said. “I had to figure out someplace else to live. Thankfully PEF was right there and they made availability for me and I couldn’t be more appreciative.”

Roth’s six-week stay in a hotel room was vital to her wife’s safety. It was also very isolating.

“It was very difficult,” she said. “I’m not just married, I’m very happily married. I had to leave my wife, my dog, my home. At least when you’re out of work and everything is shut down you can see the people that you love. I was literally stuck in those four walls.

“Not having my wife by my side was tough,” she said. “The hotel was great and it provided me what I needed at the time. But I couldn’t be happier to be home.”

Roth said the floor she works on is now clear of COVID and she is hopeful she’ll be returning to her own unit soon.

“I cannot stress enough the huge relief that having this room was for me,” she said. “Not just for me but for my wife as well. The fact I had somewhere to go and we knew it was a safe place. A nurse friend is sleeping in a popup camper outside her house.”

Many PEF members said the program was a “lifesaver” and a “godsend.”

“I can’t think of anything more worthy to spend their dues money on,” Favata said. “This is what you belong to a union for.”
In hard times, heroes emerge.

Thank you, PEF heroes for your work, your dedication and your continued commitment to PEF and the residents of New York state.

RECOMMIT TODAY!

NEW + EXISTING PEF MEMBERS

SIGN NOW!
Job security is important

To the Editor:

Let’s consider ourselves lucky for the protections that we have as civil servants protected by a collective bargaining contract and New York state laws.

On May 5, Rebekah Jones, a Geographic Information Systems manager for the Florida Department of Health, was fired from her position. According to Florida Today, she was terminated because she was ordered to censor some data related to COVID-19, but refused to “manually change data to drum up support for the plan to reopen.”

I’m confident that a civil servant in New York cannot be terminated for refusing to falsify data.

TONY DICARLO
Tampa, FL

Take better protections against virus

To the Editor:

Every PEF member and retiree should make a point of wearing a mask, staying 6 feet from others and wearing gloves.

Wherever I look from Clifton Park to Salem, New York, half the folks aren’t doing these things.

This virus stuff is still as deadly as ever.

We should have seen a harder wind down of cases by now.

GEORGE ETTA
We must help each other get through this crisis

We are currently practicing social distancing to fight the spread of the coronavirus. New Yorkers have been on “pause” because this virus is no joke. It’s not a “hoax.” It has drastically changed our way of life and devastated our economy.

I try to stay informed, so every day I watch Gov. Cuomo’s morning briefing where he gives New Yorkers the facts and most current data on the virus and “New York Pause”. He is careful to separate the facts and data from personal opinion. He is following the science and the data that is available.

I also tune into the national news around 5 p.m. every day to listen to President Trump. I find it very hard to be reassured by him when he is sending mixed messages, blaming governors and contradicting the experts and scientists.

In this time of record pandemic, economic and personal struggles, we need to all work together, take responsibility for our actions and help each other. We are New York Tough and we are all in this together. We need to help those who may be less fortunate than we are, we need to stay home, stay safe, stay informed and connect with others via social media networks until the pause is ended. We are all feeling some relief and more hopeful now as the state is beginning to reopen businesses and services.

Regular connection with aging friends and family are more important than ever before. This crisis has shown just how vulnerable our aging population is, physically, psychologically and emotionally. The social isolation makes a bad situation worse. We have more communication tools than ever before in history to provide for remote contact, but many isolated elderly individuals may not have ability or the knowledge and skills to access and use the technology for contact.

Additionally, communication technology is no substitute for the human touch. With many health care facilities barring visits, even from close family, there is great concern about the impact the sheltering in place requirements have on the well-being of many individuals.

Do whatever you can to stay in touch with elderly friends and family in these difficult times. If they can manage the technology, by all means use email and video conferencing in these difficult times. At the very least, however, send them kind written notes and make regular sympathetic phone calls.

We are in the midst of one of the most serious crises in our lifetimes. Other than 9/11, this is the most serious crisis many of us have seen.

The coronavirus pandemic challenges us to both survive and to ensure our humanity. This challenge is especially concerning to our retirees, because 70 percent of the deaths from this virus occurred in those over the age of 70 and many of those people have underlying health conditions, and 80 percent of the deaths of those under the age of 70 occur in people with underlying health conditions. So, seniors are in a group of highest risk for death from COVID-19 (coronavirus). Retirees, as the wise Americans that have experienced life for longer than most, must resist the urge to panic. We must ensure the weakest among us are taken care of. Payments of pensions and Social Security are continuing unabated. Retirees received direct payments from the federal stimulus. So, if you have plenty and don’t need the stimulus money, please consider donating it to someone less fortunate or to your community food bank.

Please remember during this New York on Pause time to practice social distancing at all times even as things begin to reopen. Don’t gather in groups, don’t panic, don’t hoard. Continue to wash your hands often and use hand sanitizer if you have it when soap and water are not available. Stay safe. Stay informed and help one another because, “Together we are Stronger!”
Ailing members need your leave donations

The following PEF members have reported a need for leave donations due to the need for medical treatment or recuperation from illness or injury.

Donations are made from annual leave and donors must retain at least 10 days of annual leave after donating. To donate leave to a specific person listed below, call the number after their name.

- **Stephen Bailey** is an information technology specialist 2 at the state Office of Information Technology Services in Albany. Call 518-457-4272;
- **Kimberly Benware** is a teaching and research center specialty nurse at SUNY Upstate University Hospital in Syracuse. Call 315-464-4943;
- **Marco Cardenas** is a parole officer at the state Department of Corrections and Community Supervision parole office in Peekskill. Call 914-654-8690.
- **Linda Deserto** is a nurse 2 at Wallkill Correctional Facility in Wallkill. Call 845-895-2021;
- **Brooke Dimare** is a social work supervisor 1 at Mohawk Valley Psychiatric Center in Utica. Call 315-738-4424.
- **Theresa Fernandez** is a utility consumer assistance specialist 3 at the state Department of Public Service in New York City. Call 518-457-4272;
- **Marco Cardenas** is a parole officer at the state Department of Corrections and Community Supervision parole office in Peekskill. Call 914-654-8690.
- **Marlene Garrett** is a teaching and research center nurse 2 at SUNY Upstate University Hospital in Syracuse. Call 315-464-4943;
- **Michael Mansky** is an offender rehabilitation coordinator at Greene Correctional Facility in Coxsackie. Call 518-731-2741;
- **Joseph Mbotchahawo** is an information technology specialist 2 at the state Office of Information Technology Services in Albany. Call 518-457-4272;
- **John Morano** is a vocational instructor 4 at Wende Correctional Facility in Alden. Call 716-937-4000;
- **Roxeen Mundy** is an information technology specialist 2 at the state Office of Information Technology Services in Albany. Call 518-457-4272;
- **Katherine Neely** is an associate psychologist at Buffalo Psychiatric Center in Buffalo. Call 716-816-2554;
- **Osayame Osemwegie** is a licensed master social worker 2 at NYC Children’s Center’s site in Brooklyn. Call 718-221-4500 ext. 3045;
- **Lucas Rathke** is an information technology specialist 2, programming at the state Office of Information Technology Services in Albany. Call 518-457-4272; and
- **Brian Squadere** is a senior accountant at the state Gaming Commission in Schenectady. Call 518-457-4272.

The rules for making and receiving leave donations (such as leave recipients may not have had any disciplinary actions or unsatisfactory performance evaluations within their last three years of state employment) are set forth on pages 181 and 182 of the 2016-19 PS&T Contract. If you, or a PEF member you know, need leave donations because of a medical issue, you may contact The Communicator to request publication of that need. Send requests to thecommunicator@pef.org, or call 800-342-4306, ext. 271. Be sure to provide your contact information.
Thank you PEF heroes!

Watch video
GREAT day with members Bronx Psychiatric Center, Bronx Children’s Psychiatric Center and Bronx Addiction Treatment Center.

Hardworking professionals at Jones Beach site.
#PEF law enforcement officers stand for Justice for George Floyd. #JusticeForFloyd #ICantBreathe #BlackLivesMatter