



New York State
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April 12, 2021

NYS Senate Majority Leader Andrea Stewart-Cousins
Legislative Office Building
Room 907
Albany NY 12247

Dear Leader Stewart-Cousins:

Given the enactment of the final 2021–22 New York State Budget, I wanted to share with you our significant concerns.

PEF and its national affiliates – the American Federation of Teachers and the Service Employees International Union – helped New York State fight for and secure approximately \$12.6 billion in federal operating aid to help the state meet its fiscal challenges with the goal of protecting existing state programs and services and avoiding layoffs. We also supported your efforts and those of your colleagues to raise state revenue as a means to maintain and expand state services, ensure appropriate funding for public education and provide additional support to all New Yorkers as we navigate our way through this crisis.

We greatly appreciate the State Legislature's work to reject the Governor's ill-conceived proposals to close the Rockland Children's Psychiatric Center, the OCFS Youth Facilities in Brentwood and Goshen, the privatization of the NYS Office of Information Technology, unilateral cuts to retiree health insurance and the mergers of OASAS and OMH and IBR and NYS Psychiatric Institute. However, we were hopeful that this year's budget would also highlight our concerns about a fundamental lack of support for maintaining quality public services and recognizing the heroic efforts of our 'essential' state workers.

The enacted state budget provides a cost-of-living increase for not-for-profit employees and unemployment insurance benefits for undocumented immigrants, but it does not provide "hazard pay" or any other remuneration for the state's "essential" employees. We appreciate your efforts to include \$40 million in the Senate's one-house budget proposal for hazard pay for SUNY hospital staff, including PEF nurses. But we remain concerned that there was no funding for any essential workers in the final budget agreement. Throughout this crisis, New York state's essential employees risked their own health and that of their families as they worked to establish and operate the state's COVID-19 testing centers; support the state's contact tracing operation; treat infected New Yorkers at public hospitals; and prevent virus spread at the state's mental health facilities, homes for the developmentally disabled, correctional facilities, veterans homes and nursing homes. These heroic acts were performed without adequate PPE and often using inaccurate health and safety guidance provided by the state. PEF members got sick and some died while serving the state and its residents during this crisis.

Additionally, despite increasing spending by more than \$8 billion in this fiscal year, this year's state budget authorizes the closure of 200 inpatient psychiatric beds across the state, two OCFS facilities that deal with at-risk youth and several OCFS Community Multi-Services Offices that provide community-based programs to support at-risk youth. These cuts may not result in "layoffs," but they will certainly result in the displacement of PEF members who may not have other viable state employment options in these affected communities.

The reduction of the state's psychiatric bed availability is especially troubling in the middle of this mental health crisis. Prior to the pandemic, most OMH facilities were at or near capacity. The impact of the pandemic on congregate facilities is well documented and the state's psychiatric system is no different. Physicians and therapists are not referring individuals for residential care because of the threat of contracting and spreading the virus.

We understand that providing inpatient beds for New Yorkers with significant mental illness is expensive, but these services are needed. Nothing in this budget addresses the gaping hole in our mental health system these reductions will cause. Absent these beds, even more seriously mentally ill New Yorkers will be left to fend for themselves in communities around the state.

The Governor is our employer, but the State Legislature is responsible for appropriating resources to support programming, mandating the programs and services we deliver and providing oversight of state agency operations. Yet, despite increasing state spending by \$8 billion, this budget cuts existing programs and services AND does not provide any compensation to the state's "essential" workers – the very same workers so many public officials have proclaimed "heroes" throughout this pandemic.

We need the Senate's help to recognize the work of our essential workers during this pandemic; to develop a program to attract and retain nurses at our state facilities and to create safe staffing levels to maintain quality care; to protect taxpayers from state contractors who may be skirting best practices on the state's design-build construction projects like the Governor Mario Cuomo Bridge; and to establish real, transparent benchmarks for the continued contracting out of public work.

We understand that forging a budget is a difficult process in the best of times and again, we appreciate the Senate's support rejecting the items advanced by the Governor as detailed previously. However, we remained surprised by the fundamental lack of support this budget provides to our members, the services they provide and the programs on which New York's most vulnerable citizens rely.

I would welcome an opportunity to discuss these concerns with you directly.

Sincerely,



Wayne Spence
President, NYS Public Employees Federation

CC: NYS Senate
U.S. Senate Majority Leader Chuck Schumer