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THE COMMUNICATOR

Volume 39 No.5

June 2021 (0745-6514)

The Official Publication of the New York State Public Employees Federation, AFL-CIO
1168-70 Troy-Schenectady Rd., Latham, NY 12110-1006

The Communicator is published monthly, except for January and August, for members of the New York State Public Employees Federation.

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The President's Message

By WAYNE SPENCE



PEF Contract Team Delivers

After almost three years of hard work by a tremendous number of people, PEF has reached a tentative contract agreement with New York State. The Executive Board met in emergency session on June 8 and overwhelmingly approved the agreement, 91-3, for voting on by the full membership. Thanks to historically quick work from the PEF legislative team, both houses of the state legislature unanimously approved the funding bills, which puts us on track to deliver the many benefits in this tentative agreement this year if it is ratified by members.

Every member will receive a lengthy document in the mail later this month that contains three parts: Highlights of the 2019-2023 PS&T Tentative Agreement, a comprehensive look at the Gains and Trade Offs of the Agreement, and a full marked-up copy of the Memorandum of Agreement as worked on by the PEF Contract Team and negotiators from the Governor's Office of Employee Relations (GOER). There is also a timetable on the back page of the document which includes key dates in the ratification voting process. If you don't want to wait until it is delivered via mail in late June, you can access documents now behind the PEF firewall. You must login using your Member Identification Number at <https://www.pef.org/members/>. We have also posted the highlights of the agreement on our [public website here](#), which does not require you to log in.

Now let me back up and emphasize just how much work went into this process. The PEF Contract Team began training for the negotiations in the fall of 2018, long before the word COVID was in our vocabulary. As you know, when the pandemic struck the state called off negotiations for more than a year, but our preparation never stopped. That preparation paid off as the team was ready to negotiate immediately when the state finally returned to the table on April 27, 2021. They met with GOER numerous times during this period to hammer out the agreement. It was beyond frustrating at times, but thanks to the leadership of PEF Contract Chair Darlene Williams, Chief Negotiator Mark Richard and Director of Contract Administration Debra Greenberg, PEF stayed strong and delivered what members told us they wanted: Two percent annual raises retroactive to the expiration of the last contract in 2019, retroactive improvements to longevity (performance award) payments, the elimination of the four-day-per-pay-period limit on telecommuting, the creation of a new license/certification renewal fee reimbursement program, reinstatement of the Productivity Enhancement Program (PEP) as of July 1, 2021 (and for all of 2022 and 2023), and increases in the maximum annual benefit for covered dental expenses and the lifetime maximum for orthodontic expenses to \$3,000 each as of Jan. 1, 2022, with a side letter requiring the state to put the dental contract out to bid. Those are just some of the highlights. I encourage members to thoroughly review this tentative agreement and follow up with your local PEF leaders with any questions. We will be organizing meetings around the state in the weeks ahead to do just that. Stay tuned for more details on all the usual channels – email, PEF.org, social media.

Please enjoy the rest of this Communicator, which also includes a recap of our successful [Nurse Lobby Day 2021](#), and powerful testimony by PEF Vice President Randi DiAntonio and other advocates at a [Senate roundtable about the staffing and funding crisis in New York's mental healthcare system](#). We'll be back with another issue after spring gives way to summer.

As always, thanks for all that you do and please stay safe.

In Unity,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Wayne Spence". The signature is written in a cursive, flowing style.

Wayne Spence
PEF President

CNTRACT UPDATE

Tentative agreement heading to membership for ratification

By **KATE MOSTACCIO**

The PEF Executive Board approved the Tentative 2019-2023 PS&T Agreement at an emergency meeting June 8, 2021, voting to send the contract out to more than 50,000 PEF members in the bargaining unit for review and ratification.

"I am proud of the PEF Contract Team for putting in the work that delivered this fair and just contract for members," said PEF President Wayne Spence. "They have been at it for almost three years, including a long period dealing with the COVID emergency, but I am happy to say that the agreement includes the top priorities as told to us by members in the contract survey we conducted last month."

If ratified by members, the tentative agreement provides for retroactive 2 percent base salary increases for 2019, 2020 and 2021, and a 2 percent base salary increase for 2022.

PEF successfully negotiated for performance awards increases as well. Payment for five years at top of grade is now \$1,500, effective April 2019, 10 years at top of grade is \$3,000, effective April 2019, and 15 years at top of grade earns \$4,500, effective April 2020. Additionally, the tentative agreement eliminates the sunset for employees who became eligible after expiration of the previous contract.



There are no increases to the employee premium share for the Empire Plan health insurance plan; however, there are increases in out-of-pocket copays and coinsurance, which will take effect January 2022. These changes are equivalent to changes other major state unions agreed to, which took effect January 2019, and reflect industry norms where out-of-pocket increases help contain annual premium increases, which are shared by employees and the state.

Improvements to the dental plan include increases in the maximum annual benefit for covered dental expense and the lifetime maximum for orthodontic expenses to \$3,000 each, partial coverage of implants, and coverage of upgraded materials for crowns, fillings and other procedures. These would go into effect January 1, 2022. The tentative agreement also includes a side letter where the state agrees to work with PEF to issue a Request for Proposals for dental benefits, aimed at securing a wider range of participating dental providers.

Under the tentative agreement, the state agreed to restore the Productivity Enhancement Program, which the state did not extend into 2021 after the expiration of an extension through 2020. PEP would be restored for 2021 on a pro-rated basis, effective July 1, 2021, and in full for 2022 and 2023. The tentative agreement also increases the credit from \$500/\$1,000 to \$600/\$1,200.

After PEF members successfully proved the efficiency of telecommuting over the last year, the tentative agreement eliminates the four-day-per-pay-period limitation for telecommuting under normal circumstances and requires all agencies to develop and implement a policy within nine months of ratification.

Other gains include a one-time uniform maintenance allowance of \$500 for employees in nursing titles; improvements to the vision benefits; a 2 percent increase in funding for PEF Contract Committees; Juneteenth has been added as a holiday, use of sick leave credits for death or illness in the immediate family increased from 15 to 25 days; as well as improvements to numerous other articles and appendices.

“PEF members demanded, and the Contract Team delivered,” said Chair Darlene Williams. “You’re never completely satisfied at the end of a long negotiation, but we feel this agreement includes many more gains than trade offs and we’re pleased to put it forward for ratification.”

Members will receive a hard copy of the contract with markups indicating changes prior for review prior to the ratification vote. If members don’t want to wait for their hard copy, they can view the agreement behind the PEF firewall by logging into <https://www.pef.org/Members/> using their Member Identification Number (MIN). Highlights of the 2019-2023 PS&T Tentative Agreement are also posted on the front page of the website, which does not require you to log in. Meetings will be scheduled across the state this month to answer any additional questions.

Nurses tell legislators chronic understaffing puts state health services on critical list

By **SHERRY HALBROOK** and **KATE MOSTACCIO**

The pandemic has brought the crucial role of health care professionals, and nurses in particular, into sharp focus. Political leaders, including the governor, have lavished praise on these essential workers for their skill, dedication and professionalism during a year of extreme challenges. But little action has followed the rhetoric, and on May 25 PEF provided its nurses a way to tell state legislators their stories and focus on the desperate needs and challenges they face daily to save lives and care for those who are suffering.

The first-of-its-kind Virtual Nurse's Lobby Day was held last month via Zoom. PEF nurses spoke with lawmakers from their worksites, homes and cars. Divided into three Zoom rooms based on regions, lawmakers and legislative staffers heard from their own constituents and nurses statewide in a series of visits that gave unvarnished, heartbreaking insights into the lack of support and care the state gives its own health care services and the employees who provide them.

The nurses urged their legislators to support four very important bills aimed at addressing some of the most urgent issues:

1. [Enhancement and Dignity \(NEED\) Act – S.6424/A.7385](#);
2. Sanction for Violation of Mandatory Overtime – S.1997/A.286;
3. Hazard Pay – S.496/A.655; and
4. [Staff to Patient Ratios – S.1168-A/A.108-B](#)

Primary sponsors of these bills were among the 23 legislators who met or sent representatives to meet with the nurses. These lawmakers included state Senators Kevin Thomas, Elijah Richlin-Melnick Noon, Robert Jackson, Todd Kaminski, Samra Brouk, Sean Ryan, Andrew Gounardes, Gustavo Rivera, Julia Salazar, Rachel May and Brad Hoylman, as well as Assembly members Aileen Gunther, Ken Zebrowski, John McDonald, Kevin Cahill, Steven Englebright, Andrew Hevesi, Phil Steck, Peter Abbate, Karines Reyes, Jeff Dinowitz and Edward Braunstein. Cahill, Jackson and Dinowitz are former PEF members.



Nurses told the lawmakers about being exposed to COVID-19 on the job, without adequate personal protective equipment (PPE) and then being required to continue working with COVID-infected clients after they became infected. One nurse said she had COVID twice. Others told of nurses who brought COVID home to their family members, only to see a loved one die from it.

Beyond the personal suffering, many nurses said understaffing at their worksites and agencies is reaching critical mass. The lack of adequate staffing creates the problem of mandatory extra shifts and overtime, and it makes the work more dangerous for staff and patients. Nurses are sometimes forced to work double and even triple shifts, and they may be "floated" to work in hospital units with which they are unfamiliar.



Low pay is contributing to the understaffing issue, the nurses said. One nurse said she recruited three new nurses for her facility, but when they finished orientation and found they were not being paid as much as they had been told they would earn, they immediately quit.

“They are hired, they’re in orientation for two days and after they spend a short time on the floor, they run out screaming! One new nurse ran away on her lunch break and never came back,” a nurse at a psychiatric center said. “They just run away.”

PEF Region 4 Coordinator Bobbi Stafford said newer hires are in state pension Tiers 5 or 6, where benefits are too weak to incentivize retention. “We can recruit, but we can’t retain,” she said.

PEF leaders told lawmakers that nursing vacancy rates are very high. For instance, 25 percent to 80 percent of nursing positions are vacant at some state correctional facilities. And at the Office for Persons with Developmental Disabilities, about 400 of the 1,700 jobs are vacant. One reason for such high vacancy rates is that the state Division of Budget has not been releasing waivers to allow hiring, even though the hiring freeze was supposedly lifted.

One nurse said she had worked for the state for 25 years when she was finally promoted to a grade 21, but then took a demotion to go back to a grade 19 because she just “couldn’t keep going.” Nurses usually start at a grade 14 and then move to a grade 16.

“I’ve been in health care for over 30 years and there have never been enough nurses,” said a nurse administrator at a state psychiatric center. “As a nurse administrator, I’m responsible for 160 patients and 40 staff, but I’m also working the floor when there are not enough RNs. That’s unsustainable. We really need to value our nurses and show them they are important. I worked six and seven days a week during COVID and I still haven’t recovered fully mentally or physically. We need to attract people and we need to show them that they are important and they are valued.”

“Stony Brook is the lowest-paid facility on Long Island,” said PEF Region 12 Coordinator Nora Higgins. “We’re not greedy, hungry people, but on Long Island our taxes and the cost of living are phenomenal. I work in the NICU (neonatal intensive care unit) and our kids are very fragile, very sick. Their ET tubes slip out very easily. When it hits the fan you want to be able to say, ‘Hey Chris, I need you.’ But, with the constant rotation of people, you don’t know who you’re working with. Not only their job skills, you don’t even know their names. Next week, in four months, they’ll be gone. Northwell is paying \$20,000 to \$30,000 more (than SUNY Stony Brook.”

PEF urges its nurses and other members to continue to speak out now on these issues and advocate for passage of the bills to address some of these issues. [You can find the bills here](#). Remember the 2021 legislative session is scheduled to end in mid-June, so try to call or email your legislators as soon as possible. This is a critical period to make a strong impression.



President John F. Kennedy delivers remarks after signing the Equal Pay Act in the Oval Office of the White House, Washington, D.C.
Credit: Abbie Rowe. White House Photographs. John F. Kennedy Presidential Library and Museum, Boston

Fight continues to close gender pay gap despite federal, state legislation over the last 50 years

By **KATE MOSTACCIO**

This June marks 58 years since President John F. Kennedy signed one of the first federal anti-discrimination wage laws – the Equal Pay Act (EPA) – prohibiting wage discrimination based on sex.

The EPA protected both males and females and to bring a claim “[t]he jobs being compared must require substantially equal skill, effort, and responsibility and be performed under similar working conditions within the same establishment,” according to the U.S. Department of Labor (USDOL).

Since passing the EPA, Congress has expanded federal protection against compensation discrimination through additional laws. These laws also prohibit discrimination on the basis of race, color, national origin, religion, sex (including

pregnancy, childbirth and related medical conditions, transgender status, gender identity, sexual orientation and sex stereotyping), age (over 40), marital status, political affiliation and disability.

In 2009, President Barack Obama signed the Lilly Ledbetter Fair Pay Act, named after a woman who discovered her employer was paying her less than men doing the same job. She took her pay discrimination complaint all the way to the Supreme Court, and while the suit was unsuccessful on the grounds she brought the claim too late, Obama’s legislation amended the Civil Rights Act of 1964 so unfair complaints can be filed within 180 days of a discriminatory paycheck and the time resets with each subsequent check.

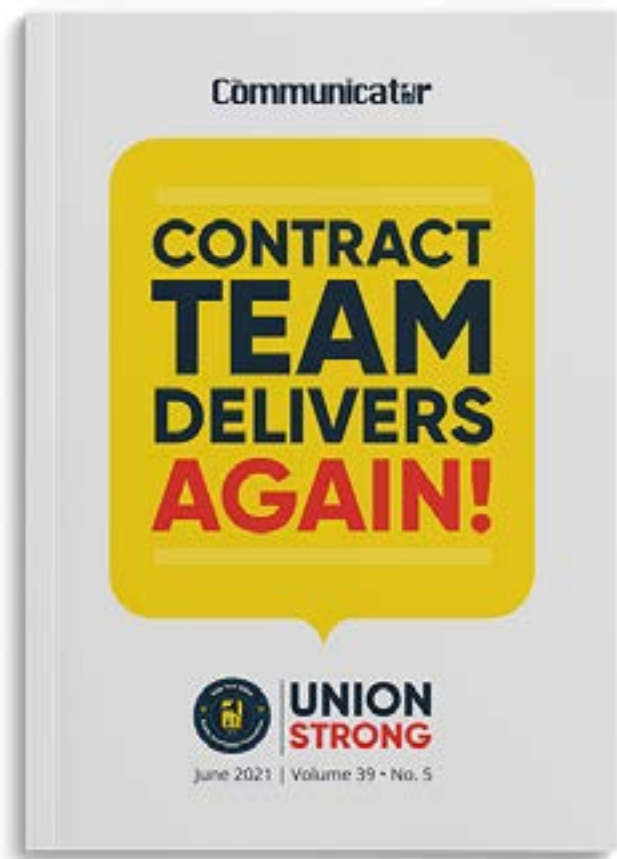


But, despite the passage of legislation over the years, the battle for equal pay for equal work still plagues the workforce.

Average weekly earnings of full-time workers were \$989 in the first quarter of 2021. Women had average weekly earnings of \$900, 82.6 percent of the \$1,089 average for men. The women's-to-men's earnings ratio varied by race and ethnicity, with white women earning 81.6 percent as much as their male counterparts compared with 92.1 percent for Black women, 80.5 percent for Asian women, and 88.3 percent for Hispanic women, according to the USDOL Bureau of Labor Statistics.

The impact of the COVID-19 pandemic widened the gap, with women's labor force participation at 55.8 percent, equal to the rate in 1987. The pandemic essentially forced many women out of the workforce to care for children amid day care closures and remote or hybrid school models, with women of color and those working in lower wage occupations hit hardest.

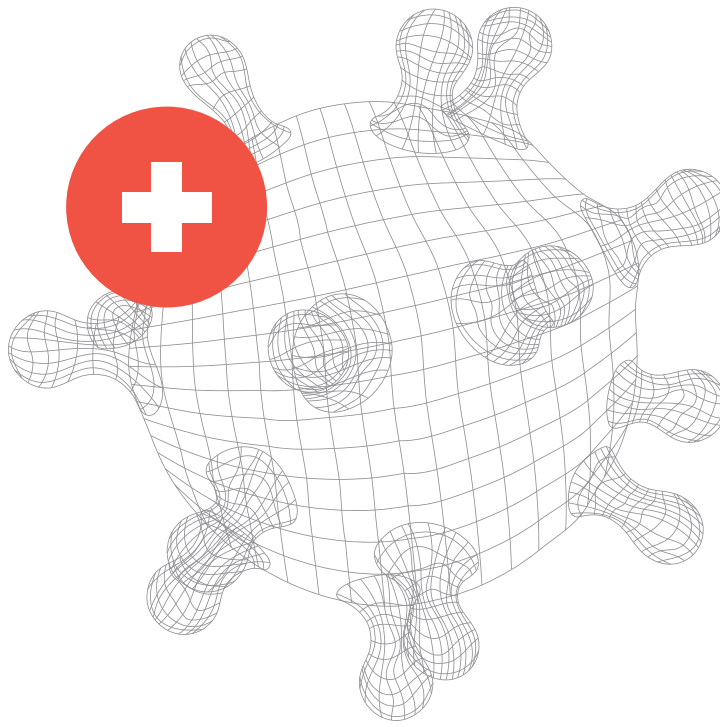
"So what can we do achieve pay equity?" wrote Janelle Jones, the chief economist for the USDOL in a blog on the state of the gender pay gap in March 2021. "There's clearly a lot of work to be done, but it is possible to level the playing field for working women by increasing transparency around wages across the board, disrupting occupational segregation, expanding access to paid leave and child and elder care, and creating more good union jobs."



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State benefits that can help you weather financial hardships

By KATE MOSTACCIO

The pandemic hit everyone hard in a variety of ways. For some, loss of employment or reduction in employment left them unable to meet rental payments and while the government instituted eviction moratoriums, that protection is set to expire August 31, 2021. Some people were unable to make utility payments or mortgage payments, or faced unexpected funeral expenses.

There are a few programs available that might help.

New York State Emergency Rental Assistance Program (ERAP)

The ERAP program provides economic relief to low and moderate-income households at risk of experiencing homelessness or housing instability by providing rental arrears, temporary rental assistance and utility arrears assistance, according to the [ERAP website](#).

New Yorkers are eligible who meet the following criteria:

- Household gross income at or below 80 percent of the Area Median Income, which differs by county and household size. [Click here for limits](#).
- On or after March 13, 2020, a member of the household received unemployment benefits or experienced a reduction in income, incurred significant costs or experienced financial hardship directly or indirectly due to COVID-19.
- The applicant is obligated to pay rent at their primary residence and has rental arrears at their current residence for rent owed on or after March 13, 2020.



- The household must be at risk of experiencing homelessness or housing instability, demonstrated by rental arrears on or after March 13, 2020.

Benefits for approved households include:

- Up to 12 months of rental arrears payments accrued on or after March 13, 2020.
- Up to three months of additional rental assistance if the household is expected to spend 30 percent or more of their gross monthly income on
- Up to 12 months of electric or gas utility arrears payments for arrears on or after March 13, 2020.

[Apply here.](#)

COVID-19 mortgage relief under the CARES Act

Homeowners with federally backed mortgages may be eligible for a COVID hardship forbearance.

Since March 2020, millions of homeowners have received forbearance under the CARES Act, allowing them to temporarily pause or reduce their mortgage payments, according to the [Consumer Financial Protection Bureau](#).

To be eligible, homeowners must experience hardship directly or indirectly due to the COVID pandemic and have a loan backed by HUD/FHA, VA, USDA, Fannie Mae or Freddie Mac loans. For loans which aren't backed by the federal government, individual lenders are generally required to discuss payment relief options with borrowers.

The deadline for HUD/FHA, USDA or VA loans requesting an initial forbearance is June 30, 2021. For Fannie Mae or Freddie Mac, there is no current deadline.

An initial forbearance typically lasts three to six months. Homeowners can request extensions.

To get the ball rolling, visit the [CFPB website](#) and find out who services your mortgage.

Emergency Broadband Benefit Program (EBBP)

With hybrid schooling and working from home, access to reliable internet during the pandemic has been vital.

The Federal Communications Commission's Emergency Broadband Benefit Program provides a temporary discount on monthly broadband internet bills for qualifying households with low income.

Households with income at or below 135 percent of the federal poverty guidelines and households that experienced a substantial loss of income since February 29, 2020, due to job loss and furlough and have a total household income in 2020 at or below \$99,000 for single filers and \$198,000 for joint filers qualify. [Check if you qualify here.](#)

Eligible households receive a discount of up to \$50 per month; a discount of up to \$75 per month for households on qualifying tribal lands; or a one-time discount of up to \$100 to purchase a laptop, desktop computer, or tablet from participating providers.

Find out if you are eligible [here](#).

COVID-19 Funeral Assistance

For funeral expenses related to COVID-19, the FEMA Funeral Assistance Program is providing reimbursements up to \$9,000 for deaths after January 20, 2020.

To be eligible, the death certificate must indicate the death was attributed to COVID-19 and the applicant must be a U.S. citizen, non-citizen national or qualified alien who incurred funeral expenses after January 20, 2020.

Documentation required includes an official death certificate, funeral expense documents and proof of funds received from other sources, if applicable.

[Learn more here.](#)

COVID caught OPWDD in perfect storm of underfunding, understaffing, no plan

By **SHERRY HALBROOK**

PEF Vice President Randi DiAntonio represented the union's members as a panelist on a roundtable discussion held via Zoom by the state Senate Disabilities Committee June 3 that focused primarily on state residential facilities for people with developmental disabilities.

DiAntonio and other panelists gave state legislators a vivid picture of the many steep challenges they face. The senators, both Democrats and Republicans, also expressed strong concerns of their own about the issue and their support and appreciation for the dedicated service of PEF members and others struggling to meet the public's needs.

Sen. Michael Martucci (R-42), ranking member of the minority party on the committee, expressed deep frustration with his largely fruitless efforts to get facts and data from the state Office for People with Developmental Disabilities(OPWDD).

"Our overworked (state) staff cannot stand any more cuts (to funding, services or staffing)," Martucci declared at the onset of the event.

Martucci was somewhat mollified when OPWDD Commissioner Ted Kastner spoke and provided some of the data and further said he would meet personally with Martucci to answer his questions.

Kastner gave the agency's view of how hard and quickly it rushed to address the pandemic and state shutdown of non-essential services that began in March 2020. As an agency with a large direct-care mission, many of its services and personnel were considered essential throughout the ensuing months. Nevertheless, OPWDD shut down its day-treatment programs on March 18, 2020, and visitation and outings for individuals in its care six days later because "they seemed to be a primary vector for transmission (of the infection). Prevention of transmission was key to all of our efforts," he said.

The commissioner said that he also reassigned nearly 100 internal affairs personnel to do contact tracing and answer the sudden onslaught of calls coming in on the agency's hotline from staff and members of the public seeking information about what was being done and what they could do to avoid infection and maintain needed services. As clients became infected and the need to isolate them grew, Kastner said



he directed 100 of the unused day-treatment sites to be converted to temporary residential housing.

In addition to limited institutional residential care, Kastner said the state funds and oversees a combined total of approximately 1,025 group homes operated in local communities by state personnel and by voluntary not-for-profit agencies. They house up to 35,000 individuals, and 85 percent of them were vaccinated by May 14, he reported. Kastner further reported that of the 10,163 residents who became infected with COVID-19, 668 have died, which calculates to a six percent mortality rate.

Martucci asked why the death rates were so high and Kastner responded that the individuals in their care are a "very high-risk population" and they often have other co-morbidities or health issues that make them more vulnerable and require frequent close contact with the persons caring for them. Also, transmission is easier in congregate care settings, even for otherwise healthy people.

The senators questioned why infected individuals continued to be housed by the state or private agencies. Kastner responded that his order included "anti-discrimination

language” and that the group homes could refuse to keep or take the infected individuals if they did not have a nurse or capacity to care for them. “We told them, ‘We’re here to help you.’” He added, “We always did the very best that we could.”

Sen. Mannion asked, “Did any workers die of COVID?”

Kastner said, “Yes, but I don’t have that number specifically.”

Kastner praised “the heroic efforts of direct-support professionals. We are immensely indebted to their dedication.”

Sen. Roxanne Persaud (D-19) asked why many staff were required to stay on duty while they were infected, and did not even receive payment for it in some cases. She said that she was told by some of her constituents that they were directed to remain with a COVID-positive patient for up to three weeks.

“It must have been the local agency’s policy,” Kastner responded.

Persaud also asked Kastner, “Are you offering any incentive to staff to be vaccinated?” He said, “We’re conducting public meetings on how to use federal funds.”

Kastner also said his agency’s data shows that new positive cases are now running about 10-15 per week for the 128,000 developmentally disabled individuals in its database.

PEF VP DiAntonio said the challenge of quickly and effectively responding to the pandemic was far more difficult because OPWDD did not have adequate infrastructure, in terms of staffing and resources, to be properly prepared for such a contingency.

“No plan was in place and coordination was very disjointed, with frequently changing guidelines,” DiAntonio said. Staff members at both the state and private agencies were constantly left “waiting for centralized decisions in Albany.”

Equally dangerous was the widespread lack of adequate personal protective equipment (PPE), such as masks, gowns, gloves, and cleaning supplies. “People were told to wear the same mask for a week, and to reuse gowns,” she said. Even now, more than a year into the pandemic, “They still have not authorized N95 masks for personal care (of individuals) and there is still no formal, consistent fit testing process in place.”

Nearly all of the panelists stressed the importance of adequate staffing to keep both individuals and staff members safe and to provide effective care.

Panelist Tom Alvanah, president of NY Disability Advocates’ interagency council on developmental disabilities, said private agencies caring for individuals with developmental disabilities were no better prepared than the state for the pandemic.

“We have an impending staff disaster. One-third of these agencies had just 30 days of cash on hand (when the pandemic struck), and another one-third have closed.”

Noting that she is a social worker who has worked for OPWDD for 23 years, DiAntonio said she has seen the agency’s workforce gradually depleted by 4,500 positions and the closure of 3,000 beds as part of “a systemic effort to shrink (the agency’s) footprint. And as it shed staff, the state has used it as a reason to suspend services, close residential beds and group homes. During the height of COVID, these shortages led to redeployments and floating of staff, which contributed to increased transmission and exposure to infections.

Peter Zummo, a member of the Executive Council of the NY Alliance for the Developmentally Disabled, said that as the parent of an individual with developmental disabilities, he has been dismayed and demoralized seeing staffing reduced at the group home where his son lives.

The direct-care staff “all stayed at their jobs throughout the pandemic, even though they are not paid a living wage,” Zummo said. “Millions of (federal) dollars are coming into the state, and OPWDD is cutting funding. My son has had no services for the last 15 months. He just sits and watches TV. He hasn’t even been allowed to have family visit him.”

Sen. Martucci shared his outrage. “Now is not the time to be making cuts to these services,” he said. “I have tremendous concerns about the abbreviated quarantine period. I’ll follow up with the commissioner.”

Kathy Bunce of the Statewide Family Advocacy Network of NYS said, “The pandemic shines a light on a very long problem of underfunded services. It was the perfect storm. Without funding and staffing, we have no future. Family members go door-to-door handing out fliers looking for staff. We need to stop these crazy cuts. Now is the time. They are essential workers. We need to fund the future.”

Panelist Karen Nagy of Eastern NY Developmental Disabilities Advocates said, “The cuts are completely opposed to the human rights of these individuals. Our workforce is in crisis. Without staff, all of the other expenses are worthless. Nothing else will matter.”

Sen. Mannion told the many panelists, “Thank you to your members for giving their lives to care for these people.”

PEF webinar provides updates on COVID vaccines; telecommuting and workplace health and safety

By KATE MOSTACCIO

With continuing concern among PEF members about COVID vaccines, telecommuting and workplace safety protocols, PEF Health and Safety and Field Services staff offered a webinar May 12 to share information and advice on those topics and more.

Health and Safety Director Geraldine Stella briefed members on the status of the virus in New York, noting there has been a downtick in the state's positivity rate, currently at a little more than 1 percent, and the seven-day average is at its lowest since October 2020, at 1.28 percent.

"The hospitalization rate has dropped to a little over 2,000 and the number in ICU has dropped to less than 500," she said. "What does that tell us? It means that more people are vaccinated and more people have resistance and less are having serious illness."

Vaccination

Stella said the Pfizer and Moderna vaccines are also working well against COVID variants.

"Some are more contagious, so it is really important for people to continue those good COVID controls, wearing masks, practicing hygiene," Stella said. "It also means we want to make sure all of the things we have been saying all along for your workplaces are emphasized, making sure they are safe as possible for members."

"We have seen some relief with the vaccine programs and the CDC has said some restrictions can be relaxed, but until the majority of the population is vaccinated, we are going to continue to fight for lower density in the workplace and better workplace controls," she said.

New York state is not requiring people be vaccinated to return to work, Stella said. And, while PEF supports the vaccine program, the union also recognizes that some people have legitimate barriers to vaccines.

"We want to make sure people who can receive the vaccine get the right information so they can make an informed

decision," she said. PEF maintains a page on its website with information and members can reach out to healthandsafety@pef.org with questions.

Precautions in the workplace

PEF Health and Safety Specialist Shawn Bobb said worksites need to be vigilant with control measures.

"We want everybody to understand, there is no one control method that is going to work on its own," he said. "It's a layered approach that we're looking at, including voluntary vaccination, ventilation, low density, social distancing, wearing face coverings and hygiene."

"It's going to take making sure everybody practices safe COVID conduct," he said. "We've been at this over a year now, there is fatigue setting in. It's important that we continue to practice safe COVID precautions and remember that we're seeing the light at the end of the tunnel."

Bobb gave a brief overview of how proper ventilation can help mitigate the virus in the air.

"Ventilation is important," he said. "We've all heard about being outside versus inside, inside the hazard is more significant. Ventilation is critical to helping reduce the spread of this pathogen. You want to get as much outside air into your space as possible, which helps to dilute and exhaust contaminants."

Members thinking of using or purchasing air purifiers should make sure they are equipped with HEPA filters and steer clear of electric air purifiers that are as yet unproven.

PEF local leaders will be working with management to ensure proper ventilation. Any members with concerns should speak to their local leaders or steward.

Bobb also touched on social distancing concerns in offices with cubicles.



"The requirement is six feet apart," he said. "We know people move around in their cubicle and, as they move, they may now be less than the six feet apart. We can look at things like scheduling around it. Have people alternate coming in so they are not sitting side by side."

PEF Region 10 Coordinator Darlene Williams said people are afraid to go back into large offices because you can't control what other people do.

"It's going to be really important to wear your face mask," she said. "It's natural to be nervous, it's natural to be scared. I have been working throughout the pandemic. I work on making sure I can control what I can within my environment. I requested hand sanitizer, latex gloves. Anything I need to keep my area safe.

"This is not going to be easy," she said. "We're going to be uncomfortable for a while. But, if you see something strange, talk to Health and Safety."

Telecommuting going forward

The temporary emergency telecommuting agreement negotiated between PEF and GOER at the start of the pandemic and extended to July 2, is more robust than the contract memorandum in the collective bargaining agreement, but it has served to protect PEF members and to highlight that telecommuting is effective.

"We learned from COVID that telecommuting works," said Statewide Director of Field Services Katie Vorwald. "Our members are productive and we haven't seen disciplinary or productivity issues."

While acknowledging telecommuting doesn't work for all titles, or for all people, PEF is committed to continued work on the issue. Downstate Director of Field Services Ricardo Cruz, a member of the PEF Contract Team, said the team is optimistic there will be improvements and enhancements to the existing program under the collective bargaining agreement.

As the temporary agreement winds closer to the July 2 expiration, members are cautioned to prepare for a return to work.

"Prepare yourself to come back to work," Cruz said. "Start preparing child care and other concerns. Be in the mindset that starting July 2, you will return to work."

Members who believe they qualify for reasonable accommodations are urged to pursue them.

"If you have need of a reasonable accommodation, submit an application," said Western Director of Field Services Eric Kasnewski. "If you have difficulties filling that out or with the appeal process, reach out to your local field rep."

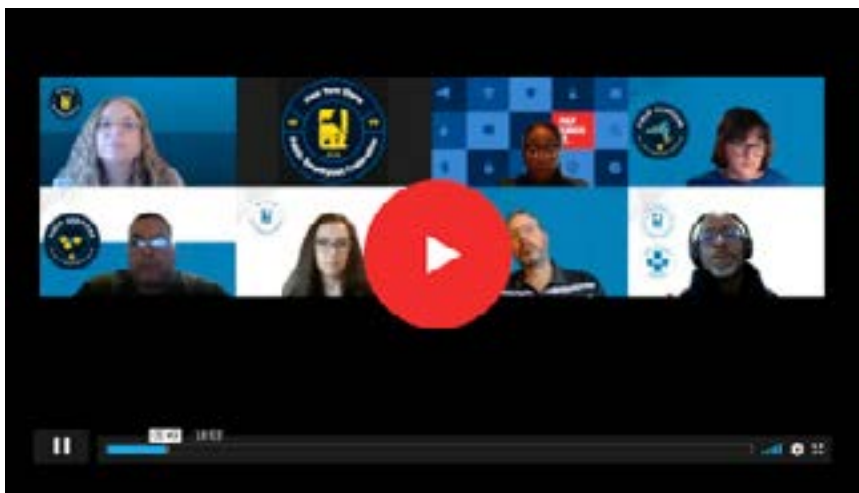
Reasonable accommodation guidelines can be found here on the GOER website.

Speak up

When concerned, PEF advises members to speak to local leaders so action can be taken.

"When we go back to the workplace, we don't expect you to be the mask police," Stella said. "We certainly don't want people to feel like they have to walk around writing tickets to people or to get into arguments with people. We don't want to create conflicts in the workplace. But we do want to make sure management is going to do the right thing and apply the rules fairly.

"It's management's responsibility to make sure people are following policy," she said. "If they aren't, you can always go to your supervisor. Or you can go to a PEF steward or local leader. Our Health and Safety people and stewards can work with management to make sure those guidelines are being followed."



Any PEF member who wishes to watch the hour-long webinar can do so here: <https://vimeo.com/549004698>



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, obtain a leave-donation form from your personnel or human resources office and submit it to that office. You may donate leave to employees at both the agency where you work and to those working at other state agencies.

To help facilitate donations, we list an HR contact number for each person needing donations on the list below.

- James Benoit is an information technology specialist 3 at the state Office of Information Technology Services in Albany. Call 518-457-4272;
- Heather Crunden is a nurse practitioner at SUNY Binghamton in Binghamton. Call 518-457-4272;
- Nora Fulton is a teaching and research center nurse 2 at SUNY Upstate Medical Center in Syracuse. Call 315-464-4943;
- Eric Huntington is a project manager 3 at the state Office of Information Technology Services in Albany. Call 518-457-4272;
- Julie Hutchinson is a nurse 2 at Rochester Psychiatric Center in Rochester. Call 585-241-1900;
- Tracy Jensen is a business services center analyst trainee 1 at the state Office of General Services in Albany. Call 518-457-4272;
- Laura Lama is a senior photographer at the state School for the Blind in Batavia.;
- Crystal Perry is a nurse 2 psychiatric at Hutchings Psychiatric Center in Syracuse. Call 315-426-3600;
- Rebecca Bezon Sando is a nurse 2 at Orleans Correctional Facility in Albion. Call 585-589-6820;
- Christine Thayer is a manager ITS 1 data at the state Office of Information Technology Services in Albany. Call 518-457-4272; and
- Paula Wilcox is a teaching and research center nurse 2 at SUNY Upstate Medical Center in Syracuse. Call 315-464-4943.

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 thecomunicator@pef.org, or call 800-342-4306, ext. 271. Be sure to provide your contact information.





PEF to state: Early retirement incentive legislation is lacking

By KATE MOSTACCIO

PEF reviewed [early retirement incentive legislation](#) recently introduced and determined it comes up short, opening the door for state agencies to cherry-pick who it applies to and providing no requirement for the state to fill the vacated positions.

While the legislation recognizes the hard work of PEF members during the COVID-19 pandemic and state hiring freeze, it doesn't address the growing vacancies at state agencies created by retirements and lack of hiring.

"There are currently about 5,000 empty PEF jobs across the state," PEF President Wayne Spence said. "PEF members are now doing jobs that used to be done by two or three people. This has been steadily strangling the state workforce and, while this proposed early retirement incentive legislation appears friendly on the surface, it is dangerous if enacted as written.

"There must be a provision that mandates each retirement position be backfilled," he said. "This bill also allows certain entities to opt in, which means agencies and managers will pick and choose who is allowed to retire early. Some state employees might think they are eligible based on their years of service and then find out that their agency or manager is not participating."

Spence said the proposal could help increase staffing, but as currently written falls short and fails to recognize the service of all PEF members.

"This pandemic demonstrated the importance of a fully staffed state workforce and the vital services PEF members provide to millions of New York State citizens," Spence said. "It's more important now than ever before that we invest in the state workforce.

"Why is the Legislature talking about providing an early retirement incentive to some workers and not others while still not talking about legislation recognizing the service of all the PEF heroes who have served as essential employees during this pandemic," he said. "This proposal as currently written would exclude thousands of eligible members — essentially giving more 'zeros' to so many deserving heroes."



See President Spence's full answer to the question about early retirement incentive bills at vimeo.com/542774650



The Triennial Election Committee has certified a list of candidates. [You can view the list here of candidates seated automatically as the only certified nominees, along with vacant Executive Board seats for which no nominees were certified.](#) Nominees to fill vacancies will be sought when special elections resume in the third quarter. There are no contested races at this time.



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PEF, SUNY Upstate reach agreement on geo pay increase

By **KATE MOSTACCIO**

With a focus on improving staff retention and keeping up with the salary market for new graduates, PEF and SUNY Upstate reached an agreement to increase the geographic rate for Upstate's teaching and research center nurses.

The agreement results in an average increase of about \$3,500 annually and is expected to affect 1,648 nurses. The increase is effective as of May 13, 2021, and should be reflected in paychecks starting June 9. Prior to a small increase that PEF also worked on in 2020, the geo rate had not increased since its inception 14 years ago. Individual letters with details specific to each PEF nurse should go out next week.

"It was high time we recognized SUNY nurses for their extraordinary work, both before and during the COVID pandemic," said PEF President Wayne Spence. "Keeping these talented nurses at our state hospitals is vital to all the patients they serve every day. An increase in geo pay brings them closer to the salaries enjoyed by their private-sector counterparts and hopefully acts as an incentive to continue or to join state employment."

Once hazard pay for the state's essential workers was not included in this year's state budget, PEF, SUNY Chancellor Jim Malatras, and SUNY Upstate President Mantosh Dewan immediately began pursuing this alternative, which does



UPSTATE
MEDICAL UNIVERSITY

not require approval by the Governor's Office of Employee Relations or the legislature.

PEF is continuing to push for the other two hospitals in the SUNY system, Downstate and Stony Brook, to negotiate geographic pay increases as well, and is focused on continuing to advocate for hazard pay.



Committee studying RN salary inequities

By KATE MOSTACCIO

The Article 44 Committee, formed to study and make recommendations on problems and issues facing nursing and other professional employees in institutional settings, is taking a deep dive into registered nurse salaries at state facilities and agencies.

Committee Chair Susan Billi approached PEF President Wayne Spence in October of last year with a proposal to study the pay gap between PEF and private sector registered nurses (RNs).

So far, their research has uncovered large discrepancies.



At SUNY Downstate and area mental hygiene facilities in New York City, PEF registered nurses coming out of school with no bachelor's degree are earning \$61,352 – that's 30 percent less than nine neighboring private-sector facilities, where the same level of skill would earn them \$88,308.

SUNY Stony Brook sees similar disparity with the private sector.

The average starting salary at Stony Brook is \$65,972. That is 24 percent less than four Long Island private facilities, where the starting salary is \$87,328.



The committee is still gathering data from across the state and invites PEF members who know people in private sector nursing to reach out to Billi if they have any salary information.

"I believe we need to get this information out there," Billi said. "RNs need to know that there is a great difference in what we're earning compared to everybody else in a geographic area. The state of New York has not kept up with what is happening in geographic regions. It's time to get the word out and let members know PEF is doing a study to address this issue."

After the study is complete, the committee will make a recommendation for action to President Spence. The committee also reviewed and made recommendations on a medication treatment for COVID and the American Recovery Act's provisions for aid to rural hospitals.



**6 FEET
APART**



**3,056
NIGHTS**
IN HOTEL ROOMS
FOR MEMBERS

**6 VIRTUAL
TOWNHALLS**



COVID SCORECARD

20,000 MASKS MAILED

5 0

**115,000 FACE MASKS
DISTRIBUTED**



**FACE MASK
DISTRIBUTION
EVENTS**

PEF.ORG/COVID

40 MEMBERSHIP APPRECIATION EVENTS



**15,000+
FRONTLINE/
ESSENTIAL
MEMBERS**

**VIRTUAL
CONVENTION
ONE**

20 COVID FAQs SHARED



**12 LETTERS TO
STATE AGENCIES**

**PEF RELIEF FUND
RAISED TO DATE**

\$361,626

DONATIONS RECEIVED FROM PEF + OUTSIDE SOURCES

**350
MEMBERSHIP
MEETINGS**

**WEAR A
MASK.**



6 FEET APART

6 VIRTUAL TOWNHALLS

3,056 NIGHTS
IN HOTEL ROOMS FOR MEMBERS

40 MEMBERSHIP APPRECIATION EVENTS

PEF RELIEF FUND RAISED TO DATE

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6 LEGISLATIVE BUDGET TESTIMONIES

YEAR IN REVIEW

350 MEMBERSHIP MEETINGS

ONE PEF

20,000 MASKS MAILED

115,000 FACE MASKS DISTRIBUTED

50 FACE MASK DISTRIBUTION EVENTS

PEF.ORG/COVID

5 SOCIAL MEDIA TOOLKITS

9 LETTER CAMPAIGNS

12 LETTERS TO STATE AGENCIES

PEF: A Year in Review

[Watch video](#)

PEF observes Workers Memorial Day; highlights importance of health and safety, safe staffing

By KATE MOSTACCIO

Under clear skies, PEF leaders gathered at the memorial outside PEF Headquarters to honor the 33 members who passed away since April 2020, reading aloud their names and observing a moment of silence.

"In 1970, the Occupational Safety and Health Act (OSHA) went into effect, promising every worker the right to a safe job," said PEF President Wayne Spence. "Workers Memorial Day is a day to reflect and mourn those who have lost their lives at work in the past year – and to renew our fight for safer jobs in the future.

"Each year, thousands of workers are killed and millions more suffer injury or illness on the job," he said. "Too many workers die from preventable hazards and many more get sick from exposure to toxic chemicals. Some are in danger due to short staffing at various levels. This must stop."

Spence noted that unions have fought, and will continue to fight, for safety measures for all workers. In the first months of the pandemic, PEF established an emergency telecommuting agreement, gathered and distributed personal protective equipment (PPE) to frontline workers, and paid for hotel rooms for members afraid to bring the virus home with them.

"PEF spent over \$300,000 to secure PPE and housing for frontline workers," Spence said. "We secured housing so members could avoid bringing home the virus to their loved ones. On a number of occasions, this happened. We had parole officers who brought home the virus and it took the lives of grandparents who were living with them."

COVID-19 shed a stark light on the importance of workplace safety.

"The pandemic has shown that much still needs to be done," Spence said. "Workplace exposures, where workers spend extended time around coworkers or the public, in crowded or poorly ventilated spaces, have been a major source of COVID-19 exposure. This is preventable.

"Our members have gone above and beyond to keep New York running during this pandemic," Spence said. "We must never forget their sacrifice and we must continue to press for safety in the workplace."

PEF's staff union, USW Local 9265, continues to work diligently to keep members safe and informed about their rights.

"Today we remember all the lives lost throughout this past year," USW Treasurer Tamara Carney said. "Although this is a sad time, we must remember the importance of unions. During this pandemic, USW Local 9265 members continued to represent, support and assist PEF members throughout New York State. This past year, we have seen unity in action."



Staff continues to meet with members, assist with questions on their contractual rights, provide PPE to essential workers, train union leaders, and interact with members regarding their available benefits.

PEF takes the health and safety of its staff very seriously, said PEF Secretary-Treasurer Kay Alison Wilkie.

“The President and I are very proud of the building improvements we’ve made here at PEF headquarters, especially in light of this pandemic, to ensure the health and safety of our staff.”

Issues with recent early retirement incentive legislation tied in with the theme of the day, as Spence noted faults with the bill, which would allow the state to cherry-pick who qualifies and which includes no provision requiring the state to fill the vacated positions.

“There are currently about 5,000 empty PEF jobs across the state,” Spence said. “PEF members are now doing jobs that used to be done by two or three people. This has been steadily strangling the state workforce and, while this proposed early retirement incentive legislation appears friendly on the surface, it is dangerous if enacted as written.

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“This proposal as currently written would exclude thousands of eligible members,” Spence said. “Essentially, giving more ‘zeroes’ to so many deserving heroes.”

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PEF seeks advancement, pay parity for boiler inspectors

By **SHERRY HALBROOK**

PEF is working to secure a title reallocation for state boiler inspectors that would result in a salary upgrade.

This effort has been underway for about two years, and if it is successful would benefit up to approximately 25 PEF members at the state Labor Department. The union is soliciting the department's support for the reallocation.

PEF field representative Michele Routi wrote to the Labor Department about the situation in January 2020.

"The boiler inspector title series, compared to the safety inspector title series, shows a major disparity to similarly situated titles," Routi wrote. "The safety and health inspectors are grade 16 and senior safety and health inspectors are grade 18, as compared to the grade 14 boiler inspectors and grade 17 senior boiler inspectors."

At that time, six positions were vacant.

"It is our position that those vacancies will remain as long as the salary is not comparable to similarly situated titles," Routi said.

Now, Routi, says, "DOL had voiced support previously to review of this disparity. We are now asking, since the pandemic is almost in rearview, that serious effort be taken to submit this request and DOL support to (the state Department of) Civil Service for the reallocation in parity with the safety inspectors as well as advancement opportunities similar to those afforded to safety inspectors."



Reallocation would be reviewed by the bureau of Classification and Compensation. If the director of classification and compensation recommended approval of the upgrade, it would still require the approval of the state Division of the Budget.

Faulty Cuomo Bridge Bolts Not the Only Crack in New York's Infrastructure

The following commentary by PEF President Wayne Spence ran in the [Albany Times Union](#) on April 27 and is republished here for our members who don't subscribe to the newspaper.

President Joe Biden's American Jobs Plan would be a much-needed shot in the arm for this country's ailing roads, bridges, and other public infrastructure. Here in New York, our drinking water systems alone need an estimated \$22.8 billion in investment.

But the growing controversy over faulty bolts on the Gov. Mario M. Cuomo Bridge reveals that state lawmakers still have work to do. More than half of New York's bridges are at least 75 years old, ranking us second to last in the nation in functionally obsolete bridges. Over 420 of our dams are considered to be high-hazard potential. New York City's subway system is only getting older. Over a quarter of New York's roads are in poor condition, costing each driver \$625 per year.

Simply put, New York's infrastructure is stuck in the 20th century. And that means New Yorkers are at risk every time we drive, turn on our kitchen faucet, or step on a subway car.

One crucial step in turning things around is reforming the way the state ensures our infrastructure is strong and safe. Right now, state agencies can hire a single company to design, build, and even inspect new construction and repairs. This means multiple billion-dollar projects are currently being built or have been completed by a single contractor, with no on-site oversight by state inspectors working on behalf of the public.

The Mario Cuomo Bridge is one such project. And we're now seeing why this approach is flawed.

A consortium of companies—American Bridge Co., Fluor Corp., Traylor Bros., Inc., and Granite Construction—built the bridge. A private engineering firm—Alta Vista—inspected the construction. According to a Times Union investigation, at least dozens of bolts broke as the bridge's girders were being assembled and even more a year after they were installed. A whistleblower alleges the companies committed fraud by hiding this from the New York Thruway Authority. Both New York's inspector general and state attorney general's office have investigated the claim. The attorney general's office appears to have agreed to settle with the consortium for a paltry \$2 million penalty and a one-year extension to its warranty on the bridge's construction.



This was allowed to happen because of the New York Works Infrastructure Fund Act, passed in 2011 and expanded multiple times since. Before the act, licensed state engineers and inspectors oversaw public infrastructure projects. They made sure contractors weren't cutting corners to increase profits. Now, like a fox guarding the hen house, on an increasing number of projects contractors inspect their own work with little to no state involvement.

Back in 2011, proponents of the change argued that it would reduce so-called "red tape" and cut costs. Yet, we have no way of knowing whether that's panned out. There is currently no requirement for these projects to undergo a cost-benefit analysis, which would determine whether it's worth allowing one company to design and build a bridge, road, or other piece of infrastructure.

Outrageously, some state lawmakers want to expand and make permanent the state's ability to enter into such "design-build" contracts. A proposed bill would allow for even more contractors to self-inspect their own projects. This would be not only foolish but also potentially catastrophic. We should be increasing—not further decreasing—our government's responsibility to keep New Yorkers safe. With billions in federal investment possible, oversight is more important than ever. That means putting the state's licensed professionals to work inspecting the infrastructure we rely on. That means more public and less private involvement in the construction of our public assets.

Who knows how many of the bolts holding the Mario Cuomo Bridge together will break in the coming years? The hundreds of thousands of drivers who cross the bridge daily surely would like to know.

Virtual expo video educates kids on fire prevention, safety

By KATE MOSTACCIO

PEF members from Division 179 worked with the Albany Fire Department, both in front of and behind the camera, to produce a segment on firefighting, fire prevention and fire safety for the Hannaford Kidz Virtual Expo.

Division 179 includes members from the Division of Homeland Security Office of Fire Prevention and Control and the Office of General Services Digital and Media Services.

"We've always participated in the kid's expo at the Empire State Plaza," Division 179 Council Leader John Buttino said. "This year, due to COVID restrictions, they took it virtual and released several different features over the last month."

Buttino narrated the video in front of the camera with members of the Albany Fire Department, teaching youth about the hook and ladder truck; equipment firefighters use to fight fires, what they wear to keep them safe; and vital fire safety facts.

"It's definitely very important to teach them to crawl low and go, escape smoke and fire, get out and stay out," Buttino said. "Many times people aren't aware they have seconds to get out of a burning building, not minutes. It's the smoke and heat that kills, not the flames."

Passion for their work and the people they serve led PEF Division 179 to ramp up its virtual presence since COVID-19 shut down the state last year.



Division 179 Council Leader John Buttino

"Preventing the fire in the first place is the number one priority," Buttino said. "That's the number one tool we communicate to state agencies and the public. Cooking is the number one cause in home fire deaths. The number one place people are killed in a fire is at home. People feel that they are safe at home, when in all reality the risk of dying of fire is greatest at home."

"What we do as public employees truly transcends the workplace and it's a passion that is with most PEF members when they are on and off the clock," he said. "It's something that is in your heart and you believe in. For many of the folks in our agency and office, there is a deep-rooted passion for our work."

Dental and Vision Student Verification Information Fact Sheet

If you have dependents who are students and covered under the NYS Health Insurance Program (NYSHIP), you may need to verify their eligibility for dental and vision coverage. Their coverage depends on verifying their full-time student status during the period after they reach age 19 and before they reach age 25.

The Student Verification Process is now an automated process for NYSHIP Dental and Vision coverage. Enrollees are required to contact the dental program administrator, Emblem Health, to submit the Student Verification Form to ensure claims are processed.

Notification responsibility

Throughout the year, it is the member's responsibility to ensure their college-aged dependents' profile and eligibility are current to the most up-to-date information so coverage is not terminated. This information needs to be relayed to your health benefit administrator (HBA) to be updated in the New York Benefits Eligibility and Accounting System (NYBEAS).

Eligibility

The federal Patient Protection and Affordable Care Act (ACA) requires insurers to offer children coverage as dependents on their parents' health insurance plan up to age 26, but that only applies to medical care, not to dental or vision care.

Dependents who are at least age 19, but under age 25 are eligible under NYSHIP to be covered on your dental and vision benefits if they are full-time students at an accredited secondary or preparatory school, college or other educational institution that grants a degree or diploma. Full-time criteria includes on campus, online or a combination of both. They must also not be otherwise eligible for employer group coverage. They continue to be eligible until the first of the following dates: the end of the third month following the month in which they complete course requirements for graduation, or the end of the month in which they reach age 25.

COBRA allows you to extend a benefit beyond the time coverage would otherwise end. You would receive a letter from the Employee Benefit Division (EBD) if your dependent exhausts the plan's age limit, becomes ineligible for benefits or undergoes a qualifying event resulting in losing the benefit. The letter notifies you of the impending loss of coverage and offers you the option to extend it through COBRA.

If you received this letter and have already submitted the updated and completed Student Verification Form for the 2021 Plan Year to Emblem, you should contact your HBA and/or Emblem to check on the status of your form.

If you received this letter and have not submitted the updated and completed the Student Verification Form for the 2021 Plan Year to Emblem, you must contact your HBA and/or Emblem to have this updated. You will need to complete the Student Verification Form in order to have your dependent reinstated with no lapse in coverage.

Emblem sends out a mass mailing yearly to all members who currently have college-aged dependents on their plan, requesting Student Verification for the upcoming year. If Student Verification was not submitted by the March 31 deadline, the dependent was dropped from coverage.

An additional outreach is done by mail for dependents who will soon be 19. If student status is confirmed, further outreach will be performed.

Removing Dependents

After the first Friday of each month, dependents that have not been confirmed as having full-time student status are removed from NYBEAS. The dependent whose full-time student status is not verified, is removed the first of the month following their 19th birthday.

If no response to Emblem Student Verification Form for the current semester is received, the dependent is removed the first of the month following a 3-month extension beyond the last semester full-time student status was confirmed.

Dependents who have confirmed full-time student status with Emblem Health since the previous monthly update, are restored to NYBEAS retroactive to the date they were originally removed with confirmation of continuous full-time student status.

The dependent is restored as of the first day of the month in which classes began.

There is a break in coverage when there is a break in student status between semesters, such as when a dependent skips a semester and then returns to student status.

Age 25 Removals

The Employee Benefit Division automated process removes all children from NYSHIP dental and vision coverage effective the first of the month following their 25th birthday. Dependents being removed from the file will automatically receive a COBRA application. You must adhere to the deadlines noted on the application. To continue coverage under COBRA, the enrollee and/or their dependent must contact the EBD at 1-800-833-4344 and select menu options for COBRA.

Contact Emblem Health

You should contact Emblem Health at (1-800-947-0101) for:

- All ID Card requests and/or replacement ID Card requests or ID numbers; and for
- Submission of the Student Verification Form when requested from Emblem.

Members are required to submit the requested “Dependent Student Certification Form” to Emblem Health each time it is requested. This form is located on Emblem Health’s website at <https://www.emblemhealth.com/resources/forms>. Enrollees should select “Student Verification Form for NYS Enrollees Only – GHI”. Once the enrollee submits this form, Emblem Health will reinstate the coverage and begin processing claims again. Emblem Health will send the update to the EBD, and NYBEAS will be updated within 60 days of receiving the information.

Contact your HBA

Contact your HBA for:

- Any ID Card requests and/or replacement ID Card requests or ID numbers;
- Any demographic, eligibility or qualifying event information for processing;
- You submitted the Student Verification Form more than 2 weeks ago and Emblem is not honoring claims;
- You submitted the Student Verification Form more than 60 days ago, and NYBEAS has not been updated.

Contact PEF

Please contact PEF if you are encountering problems getting your HBA to submit eligibility and update NYBEAS or if you are encountering any problems directly with Emblem. Keep in mind that federal law (HIPPA) does not give your union representatives access to health benefits ID numbers, replacement ID cards, updating eligibility or demographic profiles for members.



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Girl Scout troop says ‘thank you’ to nurses

By KATE MOSTACCIO

Handmade signs thanking them for their hard work and dedication welcomed nurses coming to work at Rochester Psychiatric Center (RPC) recently.

PEF member Katie Walker, a licensed clinical social worker at RPC, is the coleader of her daughter’s Girl Scout Troop and said the girls brainstormed content for posters to place around the facility and on individual units.

“The girls came up with phrases that they wanted to put on the posters that they thought were important to say to nurses for all their hard work during the pandemic,” Walker said. “They also came up with descriptive words for that they think are qualities that nurses have.”



ATTN: PEF Division 240 members

By **SHERRY HALBROOK**

PEF Division 240 at the state Insurance Fund is accepting applications for college scholarships of \$1,000, \$500, \$250, and \$125.

Applicants must be a dependent or immediate family member (mother, father, son, daughter, spouse or domestic partner) of a PEF Division 240 member. Applicants are required to provide proof of full-time or part-time enrollment at an accredited college or university for Fall 2020 or Spring 2021, or a college-acceptance letter for fall 2021 to an accredited college or university.

Applicants must submit a 600-1,000 word essay on "What Positive Effect has the COVID Pandemic had on your Work/ Job, Schooling and/or Daily Life?" Essays must be double-spaced and typewritten.

The two highest-scoring essays submitted by full-time students will be chosen as winners of the \$1,000 scholarship. All remaining essays will be submitted for a random drawing to select the winner of a \$125 scholarship.

The two highest-scoring essays submitted by part-time students will be awarded \$500 scholarships. All remaining essays will be submitted for a random drawing to select the winner of a \$125 scholarship.

The two highest-scoring essays submitted by college-bound students will be chosen as winners of \$250 scholarships. All remaining essays will be submitted for a random drawing to select the winner of a \$125 scholarship.

Scholarship applications, typewritten essays and college transcript/college acceptance letters must be received at the PEF Div. 240 P.O. Box 5191, Albany NY, 12205 by Friday, June 11, 2021. Winners will be announced shortly thereafter.

At least five entries must be received in each category (Full-Time, Part-Time, College-Bound) for the major scholarships to be awarded. If this threshold is not met, there will be up to two \$500 scholarships, up to two \$250 scholarships, and up to two \$125 scholarships awarded for Full-Time, Part-Time, and College-Bound students based on the number of entrants.

[Application forms are available here.](#)



Letters to the Editor

Tell lawmakers to keep us working from home

To the Editor:

I wrote the following to my NY State assemblyperson and senator, and I hope other folks can send similar emails to theirs. I just want to make it clear, though, that I am expressing only my own personal opinion. This is what I wrote:

I urge you to ask Governor Cuomo to keep state workers working remotely from home, as much as possible. It's good for all of your constituents.

"Since I and my wife have been working from home, we don't drive much, which greatly reduces fossil fuel consumption, which of course greatly reduces air pollution, which is good for everyone. Since we don't drive to our offices, that, of course, reduces traffic, which creates an easier commute for everyone else.

"With COVID-19, working from home also means fewer people interacting, which is a key tool to stopping the spread, which, of course, benefits everyone. We got the vaccines, and we wear masks and do physical distancing. We hope that everyone will get the vaccines, and use masks when necessary. But even so, keeping state workers at home is very useful to help stop the spread of COVID-19.

"As you can see, state workers working from home benefits all of your constituents."

GENE SHACKMAN

Albany

Editor's note: PEF continues to negotiate with the Governor's Office of Employee Relations for continued telecommuting benefits. As you may know, PEF has been able to secure this benefit until July 2, 2021.

Wants to vote on any raise offered

To the Editor:

Members deserve representation that will not screw up negotiations by making excessive demands. If the state's offer includes raises, then put that offer up for a vote by full membership.

MICHAEL HARRIS

Delmar

Editor's note: President Spence has made it very clear from day one that he will not accept a contract that does not respect the value of each PEF member. The value of raises can easily be offset by cuts in benefits, such as increasing the share of health insurance premiums that members must pay, or increasing their copays and deductibles. Offers of raises may come with demands to give up job protections. PEF looks at the entire proposal and seeks the best net value for members.



The PEF Constitution requires any tentative agreement reached at the bargaining table to be presented to the PEF Executive Board, which then votes on whether to send it to the membership for ratification.

It is extremely expensive to conduct a vote on a contract. The changes to the previous contract must be published and sent to members and the union must hold meetings to explain the changes and answer members' questions. Then the ballots must be printed and mailed, with pre-paid postage for returned ballots. PEF pays the American Arbitration Association to conduct the referendum and count the ballots.

The union always tries to send only the best possible tentative contract to the members for a vote, but even then the members may reject it and force the contract team to return to the bargaining table and resume negotiations.

When will contract talks resume?

To the Editor:

When is PEF going to negotiate?

SHERRY IZQUIERDO

Bronx

***Editor's note:** The PEF contract team continued to prepare and meet throughout the pandemic. PS&T contract negotiations between PEF and the Governor's Office of Employee Relations restarted April 27 on a virtual basis. PEF was prepared to continue negotiations throughout the pandemic, but the state refused.*

Pay not keeping up with cost of living

To the Editor:

Never in my life have I felt so cheated as I do now by your despicable representation!

Get your acts together and get us a reasonable contract. When was the last time we didn't have to take a loss? When was last time we got a reasonable cost-of-living wage increase?

I'm not sure if you've tried to buy any construction materials or groceries lately.

Over here waiting on my 276% wage increase to keep up with the cost of living and raising a family in central New York! Just out here risking my life to inspect bridges for no extra, thanks.

NICHOLAS REEVES

Skaneateles



COVID-19 adds extra level of tragedy to Workers Memorial Day 2021

Working people face difficulties and dangers in the workplace all the time. Unfortunately, with labor laws and OSHA regulations as they stand, workers are often put in dangerous situations just to put food on the table.

The last year, however, has seen this long-standing problem get considerably worse. Low-wage workers and essential workers have been especially hard hit by the pandemic and resulting economic crisis.

This year, Area Labor Federations held their commemorations of Workers Memorial Day on April 28. We in PEF Retirees join the AFL-CIO in honoring the workers lost to COVID-19. We should all take a moment to remember all workers who have died on the job or from work-related disease or injuries.

We can count our blessings to be retired with good health, quality affordable health insurance, and a defined-benefit pension.

We can continue to support our union brothers and sisters who are still working during this pandemic. And we can support our local communities by shopping local and eating at local restaurants, rather than patronizing corporate chains.

The main reason retirees can lead the quality life we deserve is because we have a pension. Every American worker should be entitled to a pension after many years of hard work. Pensions, in a broader sense of the term, have existed since ancient Rome. Soldiers in the Roman Army could earn pensions through their military service. The value of these pensions to Roman soldiers helped to maintain the power of emperors such as Caesar Augustus. Pensions for military service have continued to exist in one form or another in the 2,000 years since.

Public pensions for teachers, firefighters, police officers and other civilian public servants in the United States are a more recent development. In fact, public pensions as we know them are just over 100 years old. Governments began offering pensions because they are the most effective and cost-efficient way for working families to prepare for retirement.

Unfortunately, many people today have forgotten the true value of pensions and why they are so important.

During the pandemic, many small businesses have been economically affected by the loss of business. Business sectors that cater to the needs of retired consumers will recover. In the coming decades, industries such as health care, restaurants, and entertainment are predicted to be areas primed for growth — and retired public employees will be an important part of their customer base.

New York State and Local Retirement System (NYSLRS) retirees spend a larger-than-average share of their income on industries that benefit local businesses, and they are responsible for an estimated 76,100 jobs as a result of this spending.

Schools, roads and government services of every sort — they all have something in common: NYSLRS retirees help make them possible with the taxes they pay. In 2018, retirees paid \$1.95 billion in real property taxes — that's 3.1 percent of the total collected in New York. In some areas of the state, this figure is even higher. In the North Country, retirees pay 7.6 percent, and in the Capital District, they pay 8.9 percent of the property taxes collected.

Spending by NYSLRS retirees and their beneficiaries generated an estimated \$710 million in state and local sales taxes in 2018.

The pensions earned by NYSLRS retirees are a sound investment in New York's future. These funds don't just benefit those who receive them, but pay dividends to local businesses, build strong communities and create jobs. As the number of retired NYSLRS employees in our state grows, we can look forward to their help in building back a stronger New York.

Don't forget when you retire to join PEF Retirees, because we are growing stronger with every new member.

Sources: NYSLRS Comprehensive Annual Financial Report; U.S. Census Bureau; OSC analysis (Rev. 1/20)





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on Instagram!
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