

WHAT CAN PEF DO FOR YOU?



From COVID, to environmental issues, to worker's comp: PEF's Health and Safety team protects you on the job.

The Communicator   

July/August – Volume 40, No.6

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The President's Message

By WAYNE SPENCE



What can PEF do for you?

I've always loved that UPS slogan. So straightforward and easy to remember. "What can Brown do for you?" That's the inspiration behind [this month's cover story](#). In the months ahead, we're going to feature a different PEF department each issue, with the goal of educating new members about what their union can do for them and reminding longtime members where to turn when they need help. First up is PEF Health & Safety, which helped thousands of you during the pandemic. But in addition to their ongoing work advocating for COVID precautions in the workplace, they perform dozens of other roles for PEF members – from workplace violence assessments to ergonomic evaluations and so much more. PEF members often work in dangerous environments and PEF Health & Safety exists to help protect them on the job.

Speaking of PEF members on the job, my fellow statewide officers visited hundreds of them in [Region 5 last month](#). The Statewide Leadership Tour continues in Regions 1-3 in August and I'm looking forward to meeting many more members and hearing their concerns. Members in those regions please keep an eye on your personal email and RSVP if you can attend. That will help us make sure we have enough food and PEF swag on hand for everyone! All you need to do is bring your questions and concerns. I speak for all the statewide officers when I say these face-to-face meetings are invaluable when it comes to plotting the strategy of our union.

I'd also like to point out a profile in this issue of [Dr. Crystal Lewis](#), a PEF member at the Nathan Kline Institute in Rockland County. She is doing groundbreaking work in the field of mental health, studying the effects of stigma and discrimination on individuals in disadvantaged communities who suffer from mental health problems. It is truly an honor to lead this union of professionals.

I wish all PEF members a healthy and happy summer and hope you find some time to relax with family and friends.

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

Statewide officers continue to visit members across the state

By KATE STICKLES

PEF's statewide officers are ramping up efforts to reach rank-and-file members, visiting numerous worksites to update members on the state of the union, field questions, and listen to concerns.

In May, the officers visited Regions 10, 11 and 12, meeting members at more than a dozen locations. Most recently, they hit six locations across Region 5 – where telecommuting, upcoming contract negotiations, overtime rate agreements and geographic pay topped the list of issues.

"Depending on who we talked with, members were concerned about upcoming contract negotiations, hazard and geo pay, telecommuting," said Secretary-Treasurer Joe Donahue. "The nice part was people being able to talk to someone face-to-face, rather than send an email. We were getting first-hand information and although sometimes it wasn't the answer they wanted, they appreciated the efforts to get out and meet with them."

Vice President Randi DiAntonio echoed Donahue.

"It varied based on where we went and what agencies they worked for," she said. "At facilities and agencies with direct service to individuals, there was a lot of concern about staffing and the 2.5 times overtime agreements – about doing more work with not enough people. We heard a lot of questions about the changes to Tier 5 and 6 pensions, as well. Members were very interested in us working to continue trying to improve that."

DiAntonio said the officers also discussed ways members can participate in upcoming contraction negotiations and stressed the importance of getting involved during legislative and budget sessions.

COVID remains a concern for many members.

"Members are concerned about the uptick in the virus and being able to telecommute," said Vice President Darlene Williams. "There seems to be an understanding now that I can't stay home 100 percent, but let's have consistency. If I could stay home 50 or 25 percent and I'm stable doing that, that it's not going to up and change at the whim of the manager."

Region 5 Coordinator Dave Dubofsky said they hit a lot of agencies and members also expressed concerns about the dental insurance and health insurance.

"The majority of members did not have major concerns," said Vice President Sharon DeSilva. "Telecommuting was a major discussion at one big Department of Transportation meeting, that I addressed. COVID concerns were another."

The power of presence

Fielding questions, concerns, and input is important, but the officers agreed that getting out to worksites in person is vital and the best part of the tour.

"Members were really happy to see the statewide officers," Dubofsky said. "We went to a few facilities that didn't see them very often, and for some members it was the first time. They were incredibly receptive. It's very important to have a face to the names. If they don't see you, the union becomes something in the background instead of in the forefront. Most members don't seek out the union unless it's for disciplinary issues – we really have to engage them to let them know what's going on."

Donahue said lunch and the interactions were appreciated and morale seemed high.

"I feel that when members heard what PEF was doing for them, they appreciated it," he said. "They understand that we as a union are trying to represent all members with respect to the terms and conditions of employment."

It's critically important to engage members, DiAntonio said.

"It allows us to hear first-hand what they are experiencing at their worksites," she said. "The good and the bad. It also allows them to learn more about their union and what we do at a broader level to better their lives. Having that dialogue is not only critical, but also extremely valuable and worthwhile."

"On a scale of 1 to 10, getting out to the members is a 10," Williams said. "It's very important for us to get out to the worksites."

DeSilva echoed her fellow statewide officers.

"It's a wonderful opportunity to meet, listen and address concerns of our members, who are working diligently to service residents of New York State," she said. "I always tell members that PEF is here to help you live your best PEF life. Members love when I say and explain that statement!"

The statewide tour will continue in August in Regions 1, 2, and 3.

Confirmed dates and locations include August 2 at Buffalo Psychiatric Center, the Department of Labor, and the Rochester School of the Blind; August 3 at Rochester Psychiatric Center; and August 4 at Hornell Elks Lodge. Members in those regions and specific worksites should keep an eye out for registration emails to sign up.

More dates and locations are in the works.



Upcoming visits for PEF Statewide officers.

August 1, 2022 from 11:00am to 1:00pm
St. Paul's Episcopal Cathedral - 139 Pearl Street, Buffalo, N.Y.

August 1, 2022 from 3pm to 4pm
Western New York Children's Psychiatric Center -
1010 E & West Rd. West Seneca, N.Y.

August 2, 2022 from 6am to 9am
Buffalo Psychiatric Center - 400 Forest Avenue, Buffalo, N.Y.

August 2, 2022 from 11am to 12pm
Department of Labor - 290 Main St. Buffalo, N.Y.

August 2, 2022 from 2pm to 3pm
Batavia School for the Blind - 2A Richmond Ave, Batavia, N.Y.

August 2, 2022 from 3:30pm to 4:30pm
NYS Vetrans Home - 220 Richmond Ave, Batavia, N.Y.

August 3, 2022 from 6:30am to 9:00am
Rochester Psychiatric Center - 1111 Elmwood Avenue, Rochester, N.Y.

August 3, 2022 from 11am to 1pm
Bowl-A-Roll Lanes - 1560 Jefferson Road, Rochester, N.Y.

August 4, 2022 from 7:30am to 9:30am
Allegany County Office Building - 7 Court St, Belmont N.Y.

August 4, 2022 from 11:30am to 1:00pm
Elks Lodge - 60 Broadway Mall, Hornell, NY

August 4, 2022 from 2:30pm to 5:00pm
Elmira Psychiatric Center - 100 Washington Avenue, Elmira N.Y.

August 5, 2022 from 6:00am to 9:00am
Elmira Correctional Facility - 1879 Davis Street, Elmira N.Y.

August 5, 2022 from 3:00pm to 4:00pm
WNY Children's Psychiatric Center - 1010 E & West Road, West Seneca N.Y.

More dates and locations are in the works.





From COVID, to environmental issues, to worker's comp: PEF's Health and Safety team protects you on the job.

From A – Z (Asbestos to Zero Injuries), PEF Health & Safety staff fight for you

By KATE STICKLES

The PEF Health and Safety Department hit the ground running in 2020 when COVID-19 began its sweep across the world – fighting for on-the-job protections, securing PPE, and creating in-depth toolkits, fact sheets, and resources that were picked up nationally, all while helping members navigate the whirlwind of workplace safety issues surrounding a new, deadly virus.

With a large portion of state employees in essential job titles, the Health and Safety Department was contacted by members exposed to the virus at work. Health and Safety Specialists worked directly with thousands of members to ensure they had the protections they needed and valuable information on workers' compensation and contractual benefits.

Statewide Health and Safety Committees also tracked COVID-19 exposure trends to put in place critical control measures to mitigate potential on-the-job exposures. This included working directly with state agencies on Return-to-Work programs, pandemic plans, and often weekly meetings with State and Federal agencies and PEF Health and Safety Committees.

Department staff are leaders in health and safety

PEF's Health and Safety Department goes beyond responding to health and safety at state worksites – they also participate in statewide and national dialogues relating to health and safety in the workplace, influencing health and safety policy.

"We work with a broad coalition of national unions on federal legislation and new OSHA standards, and we continue to work on

major initiatives for issues such as workplace violence," Health and Safety Director Geraldine Stella said. "We are also working with the PEF Legislative Department on developing bills to combat bullying and protect members in the aftermath of Less Is More and HALT legislation.

"We also meet with the state at two executive-level committees each year, along with other key state agencies, on health and safety issues with statewide impact, and on workers' compensation," she said.

Department staff have testified at federal committees on workplace violence, COVID and other safety issues. They continue to stay informed and involved in health and safety in the workplace across all levels of government.

Campaign to get members involved

COVID isn't over, but as the dust settles, health and safety issues -- from ergonomics to environmental exposures, to workers' compensation, to workplace violence, and more – are beginning to reemerge through the pandemic panic.

That's when Health and Safety Committees shine.

"All the things pushed aside by COVID, the floodgates are opening," said Stella. "As COVID goes down, we are fighting to get our Health and Safety Committees back up and running to address these issues."

The health and safety field encompasses more than just the potential for illness or injury from diseases like COVID or accidents like a slip and fall – educating members on what to look for and how to advocate in their workplace is a primary function of the PEF Health and Safety Department.

“We are trying to recruit new people,” Stella said. “We want to build and solidify statewide, agency-level and local-level Health and Safety Committees and are making a concerted effort to reengage and refocus.”

Under Article 18 of the PEF contract, New York state and PEF must establish agency and local Health and Safety Committees; schedule meetings at least quarterly; refer matters not resolved locally to the agency level; and refer matters not resolved at the agency level to the statewide level for review.

“We are entitled to one Health and Safety Committee for each worksite,” explained Health and Safety Specialist Veronica Foley. While that might work for facilities, some agencies covering multiple locations or smaller offices with similar needs, like the State Education Department and the Department of Labor, may benefit from regional committees instead.

PEF offers education on advocating for your workplace

The Health and Safety Department offers myriad training opportunities for rank-and-file members to get involved and help ensure their workplace is safe.

Every other year, the department holds a three-day conference to bring together committee chairs and experts, allowing members to network and learn about different occupational safety and health issues.

Since the pandemic derailed meetings in 2020, the department hopes to bring back the conference in the Spring of 2023, as well as revitalize other recruitment efforts, such as the Plus One Program, where leaders can bring along a “plus one” who is interested in health and safety, immersing the recruit in information sessions and networking opportunities. Members involved in the Plus One Program have made great strides within the union to become health and safety advocates, committee members, local chairs and sometimes even statewide chairs for their agency committees.

The Health and Safety Department also offers training programs with mutual benefits for the State and the PEF membership. For example, state employees have significant rates of repetitive strain injuries and poor ergonomic set up. The Health and Safety Department has a nationally recognized ergonomics program which offers a full day course for state agencies to train a peer group of employees on how to conduct an ergonomic assessment of workstations and properly set them up for employees to work more comfortably and with less injury. Repetitive strain injuries can be very costly to the state, but this program has proven to reduce workplace injuries due to poor ergonomics. “The ergonomics program is also a great way for members to get involved in the union and collaborate with their agency,” said Health and Safety Specialist Paige Saakyan, who leads the PEF Ergonomics Program.

Member involvement is vital to the success of health and safety programs. Without those boots on the ground across the agencies and state, issues wouldn’t be brought to the attention of local PEF representatives.

“Sometimes one person’s issue leads to broader discussions,” said Stella.

Case in point: a new disinfectant sickens an employee, so they bring it to the attention of their local PEF steward. That begins a narrative and brings about a solution that may benefit others who were sickened in other areas or locations but didn’t say anything.

“In the fight for safe workplaces, nobody does it better than the PEF Health and Safety staff. But we can’t be everywhere,” Stella said. “We try to teach the committees how to advocate so they are empowered to do it continuously. We want to teach them to fish!”

Whether it’s reporting an issue or serving on a committee, PEF urges members to become advocates for themselves and their coworkers. Health and Safety Specialist Shawn Bobb summed it up this way: “PEF is a member- driven union – they are the ones who make things happen.”

“We are working with PEF Organizing and Field Services to re-build our committee structure,” Stella said. “COVID destroyed it. People retired or left state employment and the local committee structure fell apart. We need to get back to the stronger structures we used to have.”

“We have to make sure we have active Health and Safety Committees,” said Bobb. “We have to have volunteers participate, identify advocates who want to be involved, and get them training. Even if they can’t be on a committee, they can be involved in making their workplaces safer.”

If you’re interested in getting involved, joining a Health and Safety Committee, or to get training, reach out to your local PEF leader, Steward, or PEF Field Representative, or contact the PEF Health and Safety Department at HealthAndSafety@pef.org or 800-342-4306 ext. 254.





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PEF research scientist spearheads efforts to improve mental health treatment by addressing racism in the field

By KATE STICKLES



PEF research scientists at the forefront of the mental health field are studying and implementing community-based programs to reach underserved New Yorkers.

A PEF member since 2015, research scientist Dr. Crystal Lewis directs the Division of Social Solutions and Services at the Nathan Kline Institute (NKI) in Orangeburg, Rockland County, and serves as an associate professor in the Department of Psychiatry at NYU School of Medicine where she was recently appointed the Laurie M. Tisch Scholar for Racial Equity in Mental Health.

She is an expert in the study of stigma and discrimination, particularly among socially and economically disadvantaged communities burdened with mental illness and substance use problems exacerbated by a myriad of social and structural determinants of health.

"My work focuses on merging or breaking down the silos between policy, research and practice," she said. "I'm focused particularly on the role that racism plays in the structure and functioning of all our systems and institutions.

"Just being Black in America, you receive different and, too often, subpar treatment, especially when it comes to behavioral health," Lewis said. "How do we begin to do more purposeful work to address racism head on and not as something that is an afterthought, or not a thought at all when we see different outcomes based on a person's race?"

Community-based research

With a background in community-based research and working in a state that supports mental health research, Lewis is well-positioned to drill down into what is required to better serve communities long overdue for quality services, free of stigma and bias.

"First and foremost, the wonderful thing about working in New York as a researcher is that this is one of the few places in the country that we use our tax dollars to support research and evaluation aimed at mental health and psychiatric illnesses," she said. "When I took this job, the understanding was I'd bring a new focus on the social determinants of health, which I have prioritized in my work with community-based populations, to design and implement interventions for people disconnected from treatment and prevention services. That's what I bring to the state and our division that sets us apart. Traditionally, people think of services in clinical settings and hospitals, with people who are already connected to

care. We are trying to get people connected and create services more amenable, useful, and relevant to the needs of people who are forced to contend with racism and other forms of stigma and discrimination, both interpersonal and systemic."

Lewis also serves as a senior advisor for the new Office of Prevention and Health Initiatives at the Office of Mental Health (OMH).

"It's a new office that is dedicated to prevention," she said. "This is something OMH has not traditionally focused on, and until now, it would get shuffled around or surface in some programs or not. We were very treatment focused."

This structural change at OMH is vital to meet the mental health needs in the community at large, spanning urban to rural areas of New York State.

Mentoring award

The Department of Psychiatry at NYU selected Lewis for its Research Mentorship of Faculty Award in "recognition of her exceptional mentorship and career development contributions," according to the NKI website. "Dr. Lewis's nominations for this award highlighted her work in social justice as informing her mentoring, and her impact through her committee work and professional organizations to mentor and support the scientific research careers of many."

Lewis is proud of her work with young researchers and those who are interested in conducting research on health equity with an emphasis on community, social and structural environments.

"I've pooled researchers together," she said. "We started a disparities research collaborative, where we support each other with grant writing, federal funding, private funding, and manuscript development, focused particularly on the role that racism plays in our system that, in turn, directly impacts individual health outcomes."

Fostering the careers of minority faculty and other faculty committed to studying racialized communities is important to Lewis.

"We have been talking about the structural challenges hindering Black researchers," she said. "We're still expected to achieve the same metrics, when we don't have a level playing field and we are finding ways to bring attention to this structural barrier, while also providing support."





Contribute to COPE for a chance to win tickets to a Mets game in September

By SHERRY HALBROOK

Want to win a couple of tickets to the September 3 Saturday night baseball game between the New York Mets and the Washington Nationals? The game, which starts at 7:15 p.m., will be held at Citi Field in Flushing.

The PEF Committee on Political Education (COPE) has the tickets and will hold a drawing in mid-August to determine the winner.

To enter the drawing, you must be a PEF member or retired member who joins COPE or increases their contribution level to COPE between July 1 and August 15.

If you are a member, to be in the drawing you must join COPE at the \$5 contribution per pay period level or higher, or if you are already a regular contributor, just increase your contribution level by at least \$2 per paycheck.

Retired members who want to compete in the drawing must join COPE at the \$10 per monthly pension check level or higher. If you are already a regular contributor, then boost your level by \$4 per pension check.

Just fill out the COPE authorization form ([click here to login with your Member Identification Number to access the form](#)), then scan or take a picture of it, and email it to cope@pef.org. It's that easy.

COPE helps support PEF lobbying on issues important to members and their families such as workplace safety, paid sick leave, the right to join unions, Social Security, Medicare, bringing more federal dollars into New York and lowering drug prices.





Electric vehicle chargers at state parking lots spark issues

By **SHERRY HALBROOK**

Between the high price of gas and the need to reduce the use of fossil fuels, many PEF members have switched or want to switch to an electric vehicle. They worry, however, that they might get to work and then be stranded if they can't get the battery recharged for the commute home – a problem that can worsen in winter when cold temperatures challenge weak batteries.

Members in Region 8 have shared that concern with their parking committee and it is searching for a solution that lets everyone get a recharge who needs one, but still maintains safety and security in the lots.

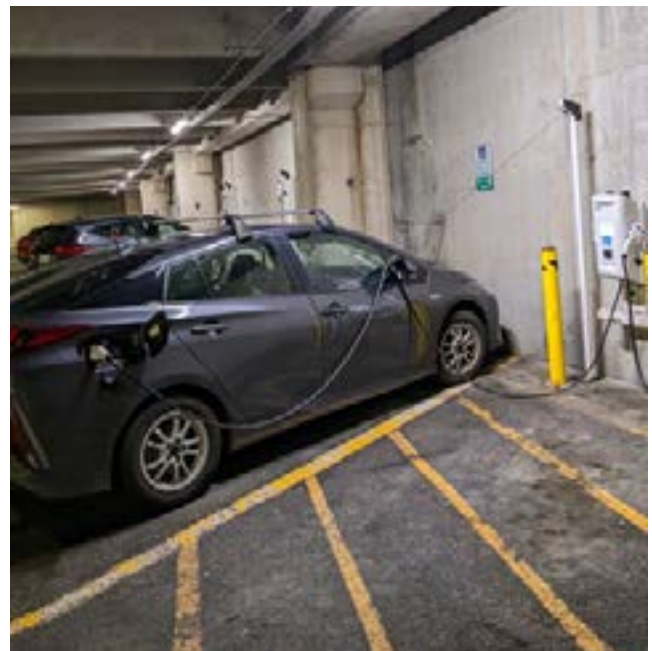
“Our Number 1 priority is keeping everyone safe,” said PEF Region 8 Coordinator Danielle Bridger, who chairs the Parking Committee. That said, the committee, which also includes Maddie Shannon-Roberts and Karen Tully and is staffed by associate counsel Ed Aluck, recognizes the recharging need is real and growing.

Bridger and Aluck discussed the issue with representatives from the state Office of Employee Relations (OER) June 30 and were pleased that they understood the issue and the need to address it.

The OER representative said parking permit holders who have problems finding available charging stations should contact the Office of General Services Parking Bureau (<https://ogs.ny.gov/parking>), which will work with them to try to locate sufficient charging stations.

Bridger said she learned that recharging stations at one of the state parking lots (the Water Street Lot) in Albany are “overused,” while the recharging stations at some other locations are under-utilized. Members at the lot where getting charging time is very competitive want to use the rechargers at the other lots, but security concerns prevent that. Only employees assigned to park at a lot may park or use the chargers there.

The security protections were strengthened after a PEF member was severely attacked and injured going to her car after work a few years ago.



One possible solution might be to have employees register the need to charge their vehicle with OGS and then assign more of those employees to lots with the under-utilized charging stations.

Bridger said she has found both OER and OGS responsive to recent parking concerns that the committee has raised, such as delays for CDTA buses moving employees from the lots to their worksites. Those delays could cause employees to arrive late for work and possibly incur disciplinary action.

“It was a very important concern, and it was rectified after we brought the problem to OER,” Bridger said. “You can’t ask for more cooperation than that.”

The Region 8 committee will stay focused on the recharging issue until it, too, is resolved, she said. And the state’s quicker response recently makes her optimistic that this problem will also be solved soon.



PEF makes headway on Tier 5 and 6 pension reform; check your account information now

By KATE STICKLES

This legislative session PEF was instrumental in securing the first improvements to the Tier 5 and 6 pension plans since their inception more than a decade ago.

In coordination with the New York State AFL-CIO, NYSUT, CSEA and other unions, PEF's elected leadership, the statewide Political Action Committee and rank-and-file members came together in solidarity to reduce the vesting time from 10 years to five years and remove overtime worked from 2020 to 2024 from the calculation of employee contributions in Tier 6.

"We have a long way to go to make the Tier 5 and 6 plans look like Tier 4," said PEF President Wayne Spence. "To that end, we will continue to work to standardize the 3 percent contribution for all members; re-establish the 2 percent calculation at 20 years of service; lower the age and service requirements for retirement to age 62 or age 55 with 30 or more years of service, among many other improvements. We will continue to fight for those changes at the earliest possible opportunity, while also protecting the retirement system to ensure it can continue to cover all promised benefits now and into the future."

While PEF works in the legislature, members are encouraged to take charge of their retirement planning by setting up an online account with the New York State and Local Employees Retirement System (NYSLERS).

"It is very important that members take a moment to set up their online account with the system so they can verify their years of service, current salary, date of membership, and more," said Spence. "If there are discrepancies with what is reported to NYSLERS by the state or if you have outstanding service credit or veterans' credit, the time to address those issues is now, not when you file your retirement papers."

Members should visit <https://web.osc.state.ny.us/retire/sign-in.php> to set up and review their account today.

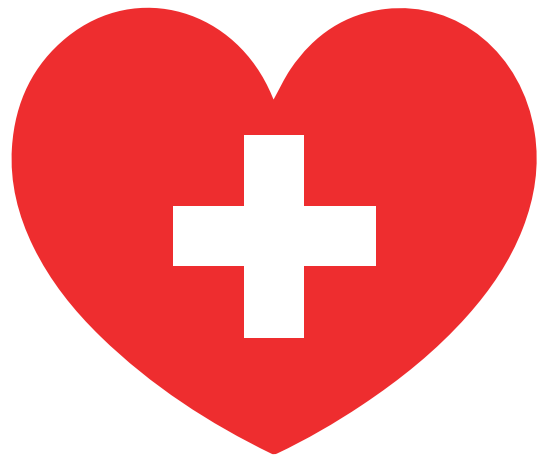
PEF Does It: Secures geo pay for additional nurses across state

On July 1, 2022, PEF announced the successful negotiation of geographic pay differentials (“geos”) for additional nursing titles statewide. This memo from the New York State Department of Civil Service Division of Classification & Compensation lays out the amount of the geos and which titles are covered at which agencies. (Note: XXXXX in the agency column denotes a title that spans multiple agencies.)

These geos, in combination with previously announced geos for PEF members at the three SUNY hospitals and OMH, will serve as a critical recruitment and retention tool for the state in a profession where private employers and so-called “nurse agencies” are paying very high wages to attract skilled healthcare professionals.

PEF worked directly with Gov. Kathy Hochul and her leadership team to get this done, along with key managers at various agencies statewide. The final push began during National Nurses Month in May, when hundreds of you answered the call and contacted your lawmakers to let them know that the compensation of New York nurses needs to be overhauled. Our Nurses Day of Action that month attracted more than a dozen lawmakers while the legislature was in session and that activism helped generate the momentum that resulted in today’s announcement.

We know there is always more work to be done to improve the lives of all the hardworking professionals in our union, but we are grateful to all the members who stepped up to let leaders and policymakers know just how overworked and underpaid healthcare professionals are. Together, our efforts have paid off in a major win for the nurses of PEF.



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PEF negotiates extensions of temporary 2.5 times overtime rate

Last updated July 13, 2022 — After negotiations with the Office of Employee Relations, the 2.5 times temporary overtime rate for PEF members in certain titles in certain agencies has been extended.

The Department of Corrections and Community Supervision (DOCCS), the Department of Health (DOH), the Office of Alcohol and Substance Abuse Services (OASAS), the Office of Children and Family Services (OCFS), the Office of Mental Health (OMH), the Office for People with Developmental Disabilities (OPWDD), and SUNY have authorized memorandums of agreement (MOA) with PEF for the extensions.

The agreements are as follows:

DOCCS: The anticipated agreement will be in effect until 10:59 p.m. on Aug. 31, 2022, unless extended again. [Click here](#) for a copy of the MOA.

DOH: The agreement is in effect until 10:59 p.m. on Aug. 31, 2022, unless extended again. [Click here](#) for the MOA and list of impacted titles.

OASAS: The agreement is in effect until 10:59 p.m. on Aug. 31, 2022, unless extended again. [Click here](#) for the MOA and a list of impacted titles.

OCFS: The agreement is in effect until 11:59 p.m. on Aug. 31, 2022, unless extended again. [Click here](#) for the amendment to the MOA. The original MOA, which lists the eligible titles, can be seen [here](#).

OMH: The agreement is in effect through Aug. 31, 2022, unless extended again. [Click here](#) for the MOA and a list of impacted titles.

OPWDD: The agreement will be in effect until 10:59 p.m. on Aug. 31, 2022, unless extended again. [Click here](#) for a copy of the MOA, which also includes a list of impacted titles.

SUNY: The agreement is in effect until Aug. 31, 2022, unless extended. It applies to Upstate University Hospital, Stony Brook University Hospital, University Hospital of Brooklyn and Long Island State Veterans Home. [Click here](#) for the MOA and a list of impacted titles.

“Our members across the state continue to work every day to ensure the people of New York get quality care and services,” said President Wayne Spence. “The union advocated with these agencies to recognize that hard work and dedication with much-deserved temporary rate increases. We are continuing to work with the state on expanding the agreements to additional titles.”

Any questions should be directed to your PEF field representative.



PEF members and staff pose for a photo before the hearing. Left to right: PEF Field Representative Anthony Rios, Leticia Rivera, Michele Rosello, PEF Council Leader Tamara Martin (NYC AG's office), and Carl Ankrah.

PEF members to AG James: Mental health services, funding should focus on state-operated programs

By **SHERRY HALBROOK**

PEF leaders testified on June 22 in New York City about the strained state of New York mental health services at a hearing held by Attorney General Letitia (Tish) James.

James was already very concerned about the gap between the need for mental health services and the availability of those services when she called the hearing.

"There is no doubt that New York is in the midst of a mental health crisis that has only worsened during the COVID-19 pandemic," James said. "For decades, New York has seen a decline of short-term inpatient psychiatric beds, which are critical to providing consistent and thorough mental health care in our communities. With this hearing, I intend to spotlight this crucial issue, explore potential areas of reform, and inform my office for future investigations into allegations of inadequate mental health treatment."

Three PEF leaders from the state Office of Mental Health testified in person and PEF President Wayne Spence submitted written testimony. The local leaders were: PEF Executive Board member Carl Ankrah, a nurse practitioner at PEF Council Leader at Rockland Psychiatric Center; Council Leader Michele Rosello of Division 241 at Creedmoor Psychiatric Center in Queens where she is a licensed master social worker 2; and Division 213 Council Leader and Executive Board member Leticia Rivera, who is an intensive case manager at Bronx Psychiatric Center. They were among many witnesses testifying, including state Senate Healthcare Committee Chair Gustavo Rivera.

No state agency commissioners spoke, but James received a brief written statement from the Office of Mental Health during the hearing and read it into the record.



Both James and numerous witnesses praised Gov. Kathy Hochul and the state Legislature for increasing funding for mental health services in the current budget, but they noted that it is just a start that will need many more years of support to bridge the existing gap.

James said since the pandemic began, approximately 400 inpatient psychiatric beds have been eliminated, converted to COVID-related or general medical use, or been completely taken out of commission. This year, it is estimated that there are fewer than 5,000 adult, short-term, inpatient psychiatric beds in hospitals across the state.



James also cited reports from ProPublica, that New York has just 274 psychiatric beds for children and adolescents.

The attorney general expressed concern that the lack of access to inpatient psychiatric care leads to increased homelessness, incarceration, and more frequent hospital visits. As COVID-related hospital visits decline, emergency departments are overwhelmed by individuals who require more intensive psychiatric services, but are unable to access necessary psychiatric inpatient beds or services in the community, which can exacerbate their illness.

The testimony of the many witnesses only corroborated James' concerns.

In her testimony, Leticia Rivera cited the Cuomo administration's "Transformation Agenda" as a key factor in the diminishment of services. She cited the "steep rise in suicides, crime and homelessness in every community across the state" as evidence of the damage that has resulted. She said the term transformation equated to privatization of services.

OMH has shed more than 25,000 positions since 1990, causing the agency's reliance on overtime to explode, Rivera said. Since 2011, OT has shot up 65 percent at OMH and cost state taxpayers \$157 million in 2020. She added the agency has reduced its patient bed capacity by 2,000 since 2016.

Not only is the state's capacity to treat inpatients greatly reduced, but critical programs such as state-operated Assertive Community Treatment (ACT) teams that provide immediate triage for persons in crisis have suffered funding cuts.

"Even with the state 'reinvesting' savings from these reductions to critical state programs into privately operated providers, the state's overall inpatient bed capacity still doesn't meet the basic minimum standards prescribed by the Treatment Advocacy Center that recommends 50 beds per 10,000 residents," Rivera said. New York is short of that standard by 1,700 inpatient beds.

That's why PEF "continues to advocate that New York 'Fund Our Future' by expanding public services for mentally ill and other at-risk individuals to ensure appropriate and continuous access to quality

care for all New Yorkers" with the goal of keeping them close to their families and other support systems, Rivera said.

Ankrah also called for the state to stop privatizing its mental health safety net system. He said the state should take four steps to improve that system:

Reject consolidating the Children's Psychiatric Unit at Hutchings Psychiatric Center in Syracuse into SUNY Upstate Medical Center;

Re-establish the planned 15 private Youth Assertive Community Treatment Teams as public entities and reallocate the \$21 million in taxpayer funding for the teams accordingly;

Establish 14 public ACT teams for adults, instead of the 14 private teams that are planned. The \$14 million in funding should be switched to support the state-operated teams; and

Expand state staffing and inpatient stabilization capacity to treat the mentally ill and those suffering from co-occurring disorders such as addiction or developmental disabilities.

Rosello added that New York must dedicate more funding to support its state-operated mental health services, and she noted that although the state-operated programs treat the most difficult cases, they still have fewer clients seeking hospital emergency room services than the privately operated programs.

"In sum," Ankrah said, "the continuing outsourcing, consolidation and closure of programs and services operated by the Office of Mental Health, coupled with the reduction of staff and the physical beds dedicated to serving the mentally ill, have been disproportionately harming low-income, uninsured, underinsured, undocumented and severely handicapped New Yorkers.

"It needs to end."

WATCH: PEF members testify before AG James on mental health services (PEF testimony starts at about 3:03:00)

<https://ag.ny.gov/livestream/public-hearing-access-mental-health-care-new-york>

READ: PEF President Wayne Spence's written testimony on mental health services

<https://communicator.pef.org/wp-content/uploads/sites/2/2022/06/MentalHealthTestimonytoAGTish6-22-2022.pdf>



Region 7 Scholarship Winners



Conor Arquiett, center, accepts the Paul Normandeau scholarship award from Region 7 Coordinator Barb Stransky, left, and Region 7 Scholarship Chair Carly Gagnon, right.

PEF Region 7 announced a pair of inaugural scholarships on June 27 honoring members who died from COVID-19. Connor Arquiett was the recipient of the Paul Normandeau Scholarship. Paul was a Region 7 member who worked at the Department of Transportation. Connor's mother, Allison Sayer, works at the Office of General Services as a junior superintendent of construction. Connor will use the \$750 scholarship to further his education at SUNY Erie Community College, where he is majoring in Building and Trades.



Emileigh Smith, center, accepts the Ellen Mainville scholarship award from Region 7 Coordinator Barb Stransky, left, and Region 7 Scholarship Chair Carly Gagnon, right.

Emileigh Smith was awarded the Ellen Mainville Scholarship. Ellen was a Region 7 member who worked at Bare Hill Correctional Facility, where she was a teacher. Emileigh's mother, Nanci Smith, works at Sunmount OPWDD as the head clerk of personnel. Emileigh is studying at SUNY Oswego, majoring in English Education.



PSWP | PUBLIC SERVICE WORKSHOPS PROGRAM

Book mark this link to keep updated with all Pubic Service Workshops Programs: <https://www.pef.org/articles/category/public-service-workshops-program/>

- [Aug. 17-18 and 24-25: Managing Multiple Priorities](#)
- [August 16: Common Pitfalls in Children's Trauma Treatment](#)
- [August 16 and 17: Project Management Intermediate](#)
- [August 9 and 10: Project Management Fundamentals](#)
- [August 1-4: Project Management for IT Professionals](#)
- [New: NACLE online CLE workshops for spring/summer](#)
- [July 26: Mental health providers: Review CBT approaches](#)

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NEW + EXISTING PEF MEMBERS

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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.

- Linda Agyemang is a nurse 2 (psychiatric) at Fishkill Correctional Facility in Beacon.
- Matthew Cassidy is a senior librarian at Woodbourne Correctional Facility in Woodbourne.
- Leanne Graf is a teaching and research center nurse 2 at Upstate Medical Center in Syracuse.
- Cherie Griffin is a taxpayer services specialist 2 at the state Department of Taxation and Finance in Albany.
- Drina Holden is a senior certification analyst at the state Department of Economic Development in Manhattan.
- Monica Kehagias-Gordon is an intensive case manager at Buffalo Psychiatric Center.
- Maria Lisanti is an intensive case manager at Bronx Psychiatric Center.
- Sharon Lynch is a parole officer in Jamaica Queens.
- Margaret Mendez is a motor vehicle referee at the state Department of Motor Vehicles in Brooklyn.
- Roxeen Mundy is an information technology specialist 2 at the state Office of Information Technology Services in Albany.
- Lydia Seales-Fuller is a nurse 2 psychiatric at Hutchings Psychiatric Center in Syracuse.
- Kyle Tomlin is a supervising offender rehabilitation coordinator at Ulster Correctional Facility in Napanoch.
- Karen Tully is a senior attorney at the NYS Department of State in Albany.
- Jennifer Zullo is a research scientist 2 at the state Office for People with Developmental Disabilities in Albany.

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 189 and 190 of the 2019-23 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 518 396-8201. Be sure to provide your contact information.





Letters to the Editor

New Emergency Pension Relief law

To the Editor: With all the various media outlets that we rely on for the news, it is often the case that important news gets lost in the mix. On March 11, 2021, the president signed the Butch Lewis Emergency Pension Relief Act of 2021. This act offers a helping hand to those who have had their pensions reduced or cut off through no fault of their own.

The Butch Lewis Act has the endorsement of the Teamsters Union, the United Steelworkers Union, the IBEW, and AARP.

TONY DiCARLO
Venice, FL

Questions endorsement choices

To the Editor: I would think that you wouldn't want someone like Hochul as our governor. Why keep going down this same path, letting criminals back out on the streets to commit more evil?

Don't you people see how bad the economy is? I just don't understand why you keep wanting these evil doers in our government.

SUE PETT
Schenectady

Editor's note: *The PEF Political Action Committees in every one of the union's 12 regions and the PEF statewide PAC recommended the Hochul endorsement. It was passed without dissent by the PEF Executive Board. The union supports her for governor because of the way she responded to PEF's issues and arguments, especially regarding funding for state services and employees in the current state budget.*



Enjoy summer, but keep protected from COVID

As we ease into summer, hopefully we are getting closer to being able to relax and start enjoying life without fear of COVID-19. It has been a long and arduous process through these past two years of the pandemic.

At PEF Retirees, we have cautiously started gathering again as an Executive Board and in our individual chapters. However, we still need to be cautious and protect ourselves from any serious complications of COVID-19. It's important to get vaccinated and boosted. Here is some valuable information from the CDC (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention).

"Throughout the coronavirus pandemic, unvaccinated people have accounted for a majority of COVID-19 deaths in the United States. But, in recent months, an alarming number of vaccinated older and disabled Americans have succumbed to the disease.

"Forty-two percent of the people who died in January and February during the highly contagious omicron variant's surge were vaccinated, compared with 23% in September, the peak of the delta wave. Most of the vaccinated people who died had not received a booster shot. This analysis was conducted by The Washington Post using data from CDC.

"While a majority of seniors are immunized, the vaccine's potency wanes over time, leaving older people vulnerable to severe infection. The highest concentration of vaccinated deaths occurred among older Americans and the immunocompromised, with those over the age of 75 making up two-thirds of the deaths from the 'omicron' wave.

"Still, unvaccinated people remain far more likely to die from COVID-19 than the vaccinated, especially when compared to Americans who have received booster shots.

"Health experts continue to stress that the overwhelming majority of the vaccinated will survive COVID-19 infection. However, they argue that the deaths serve as a reminder that high-risk groups such as older Americans should receive booster doses and exercise extra precautions during infection surges.

"Seniors remain especially vulnerable during this pandemic. The CDC has approved second booster doses for those 65 and older and those 50 and older with underlying medical conditions that increase their risk for severe disease from COVID-19, and we encourage all seniors to follow their guidance when it comes to receiving that added level of protection."

I received my second booster (4th shot) April 26. One day before holding an in person Chapter 2 Retiree meeting. It was good to meet in person rather than virtual.

PEF Retirees need your continued support. If we are to grow in numbers and in influence to be an effective voice for retirees, we need your action, participation and membership. Membership is not automatic when you retire. You can get the membership application at www.pef.org or contact PEF Retirees at 800-785-1900 ext. 288.

If you have moved, changed your email or phone number please contact us at rmango@pef.org so that we can update our contact information for you.



June 30, 2022

The Statewide Officers Tour is wrapped up... for now! On the last two Region 5 stops at the Finger Lakes OCFS facility and 201 Glendale Drive in Endicott, PEF elected leaders and staff provided updates about legislative, contract and Fund Our Future wins, in addition to feeding members and passing out some PEF gear!

The statewide tour continues in early August, with agency visits and member meetings planned across PEF Regions 1-3!



June 18, 2022

Creedmoor PC Council Leader Michele Rosello representing PEF at the Poor People's & Low-Wage Workers' Assembly and Moral March in Washington, D.C.



June 16, 2022

PEF Region 1 - Brother Owen Byrne II (with OGS Design and Construction) overseeing construction of the new Fredonia State Police Barracks (located in Dunkirk).



July 12, 2022

PEF members in Region 12 received their raffle prizes today for participating in the follow-up survey to the Statewide Leadership Tour that visited Long Island in May. Pictured in the first photo, left to right: Division 225 Council Leader Amy Pacholk, winner Cathleen Ciapetta, and Region 12 Coordinator Nora Higgins. In the second photo, left to right: Pacholk, Higgins, winner Valerie Lucas, and Kerry Northwitch.



**PEF is now
on Instagram!
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@nyspef**



July 9, 2022

Family fun in the sun at Six Flags Great Adventure!





