

VOL. 42

The COMMUNICATOR

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MAY 2024

Celebrating National Nurses Month

PEF celebrates
New York State
budget wins, vows
to keep advocating

Honoring PEF
nurses during
National Nurses
Month

PEF Community
Wellness Fair
& Book Giveaway
brings community
together

PEF members at
Kingsboro PC to
management: Stop
workplace bullying!



Florence Nightingale

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The President's Message By WAYNE SPENCE



PEF makes it happen!

The 2023-2026 PS&T contract continues to put money into members' pockets, with [dental stipend payouts](#), and the new, first-of-its-kind [higher education differential](#). I heard your call for a better dental plan and later this year, [you'll have one!](#)

With just about 10,000 nurses among PEF's ranks, we know the value they bring to their patients and their community, and we thank them for their dedication and service. May is National Nurses Month, and we've gone all out to honor them in this issue, featuring [PEF's Nurse Lobby Day](#) and the successful campaign to [save SUNY Downstate](#), as well as looking back at the creation of PEF's nurse organizer position, celebrating PEF nurses [Clara Shamatanga](#) and [Cynthia Walker](#), and remembering a pillar of nursing history, [Lavinia Dock](#).

On May 1, in a show of strength and courage, members at Kingsboro Psychiatric Center made it very clear that they are done with the bullying and toxicity at the facility. They engaged in [a Day of Action outside Kingsboro](#) in Brooklyn, with signs and chants and stories calling out management for creating a toxic work environment. Change is overdue and we made sure OMH heard us!

In this issue, we also share a [Value of the Union story](#) in which PEF fought for an employee placed on leave then terminated by her agency and secured \$50,000 in back pay for her; report on another successful [PEF Community Wellness Fair and Book Giveaway](#); and provide a roundup of [union scholarships](#) available.

Thanks for staying informed and engaged and I wish you all a restful summer.

In Unity,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Wayne Spence". The signature is fluid and cursive, with a long horizontal line extending from the end.

Wayne Spence
PEF President

Honoring PEF nurses and the nursing profession during National Nurses Month

By **KATE STICKLES** and **NAJEE WALKER**

We're going all out for National Nurses Month, featuring Nurse Lobby Day and saving SUNY Downstate, looking back at the creation of PEF's nurse organizer position, celebrating PEF nurses with profiles on Clara Shamatanga and Cynthia Walker, and remembering a pillar of nursing history, Lavinia Dock.

National Nurses Month has its roots in National Nurses Week, which was first observed in 1954 in honor of Florence Nightingale's birthday on May 12, 1820. Often called "the Lady with the Lamp" after navigating dark hospital hallways carrying a lamp while making her rounds during the Crimean War, Nightingale was instrumental in making hospitals cleaner and safer.

In addition to writing more than 150 books, pamphlets and reports on health-related issues, she is also credited with creating one of the first versions of the pie chart.

Enjoy our features this month and, as always, if you have tips on who we can feature in future issues (nurses, engineers, social workers, anyone in any PEF title), email communicator@pef.org!

Profiles

- [Clara Shamatanga: Balancing union, family, and work](#)
- [Cynthia Walker: Nurse, union leader, health care activist](#)

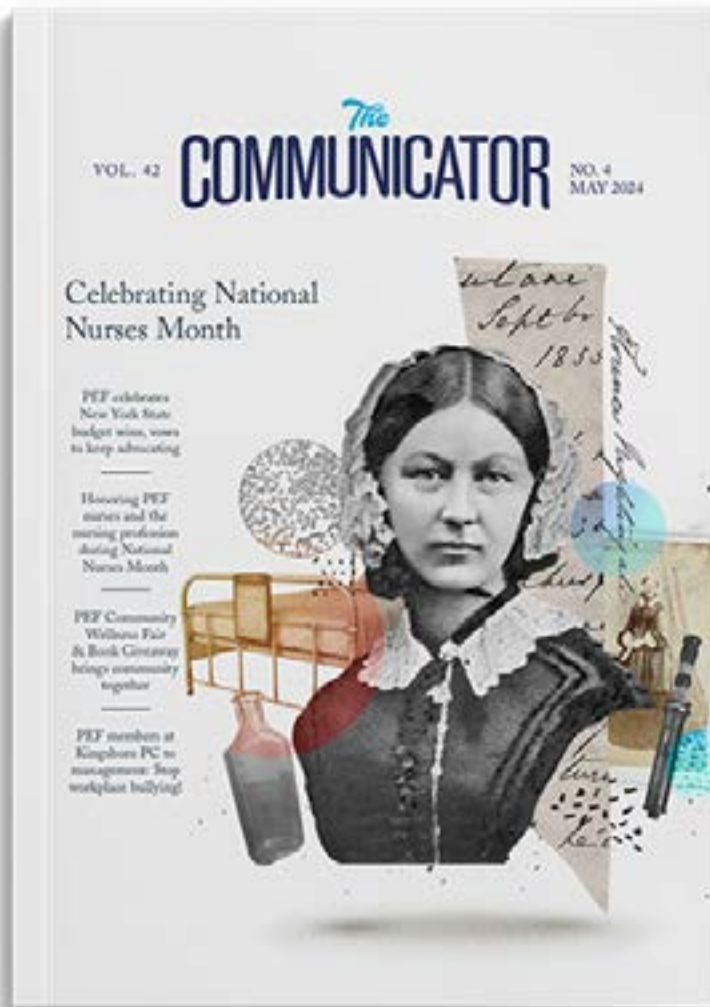
History

- [Blast from the Past: PEF Nurse Organizer position established in 1998](#)
- [Labor History: Lavinia Dock: Nurse, suffragette made invaluable contributions to the nursing profession](#)

Lobbying

- [Lobbying and advocacy help nurses make headway](#)





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HEAR US RESPECT US

PEF members at Kingsboro PC to management: Stop workplace bullying!

Nearly 100 PEF members employed at Kingsboro Psychiatric Center (KPC) in Brooklyn delivered a loud message to their bosses on the first day of May: Clean up the toxic work environment you've created, or get out of town.

PEF President Wayne Spence, VP Darlene Williams, Region 11 Coordinator Bernadette O'Connor and Division 252 Council Leaders joined rank and file members on May 1 outside KPC for a "Day of Action." It was the culmination of months of smaller-scale actions intended to show management how displeased employees are by the disrespect and unfair treatment they experience at work.

"I know it's not easy for KPC members to come out here and talk," President Spence told the crowd. "I know because I've received over 60 anonymous emails that talked about the bullying, the retaliation, the nepotism that's going on here for too many years."

Members at the facility have been agitating since February, conducting a series of "Action Days," which included wearing buttons and stickers emblazoned with the campaign logo, "Stop Workplace Bullying," as well as releasing balloons in the parking lot to symbolize letting go of the toxicity that makes their work lives difficult.

"Our message to members is: 'Do not be afraid. Do not be afraid, and stand up for what is right,'" said Region 11 Coordinator Bernadette O'Connor, who led the effort along with staff from PEF Organizing.

PEF has drafted legislation under consideration in Albany that defines workplace bullying and mandates training for employees and employers, similar to what the State does with sexual harassment. Meetings are expected to continue with top officials at Kingsboro and the Office of Mental Health to improve workplace morale at KPC.

Editor's Note: If you have a workplace bullying story to share, visit www.pef.org/toxictales. PEF will work with you to figure out the best way to tell your story so that you are protected, and it has the greatest impact.







PEF Community Wellness Fair & Book Giveaway brings community together

By **NAJEE WALKER**

A bright spring morning became much brighter for more than 1,800 members of the Albany community visiting the second annual PEF Wellness Fair & Book Giveaway on April 27. The collaboration between PEF and AFT distributed 20,000 books for readers of all ages to take home and offered nearly 40 informational booths from local New York businesses and public service agencies to educate the community on how to best utilize services offered in New York.

The free fair was created by PEF in 2022. Following the pandemic, the PEF Black Caucus wanted a way to bring health and wellness information to PEF members. However, as the idea developed and grew, the fair evolved into a way to say thank you to the community and let them know that unions and public sector workers care about them.

As they did last year, thousands of community members entered the Washington Avenue Armory in downtown Albany to find books and information suitable for their family. Families could take home up to 10 free books and educators were welcome to fill their classrooms with 40 books.

In addition to the book giveaway, the fair focuses on connecting members of the community with resources that can help them take care of themselves and their families. This year, several state agencies made their way to the Armory, including the Department of Taxation and Finance, the Office of Mental Health, and even the State Comptroller's Office of Unclaimed Funds, which helped community members find money from "lost" accounts.

Community agencies like Hannaford, CDPHP and Trinity Alliance were also on hand. Each agency offered sneak peeks at services they provide, like free blood pressure screenings.

Beech-Nut, a baby food company located in Amsterdam, N.Y., tabled at the event and donated toddler food and snacks to community members who visited their booth. The food offered by Beech-Nut focuses on delivering "hidden veggies" and probiotics for growing newborns as young as eight-months-old.

Outside the Armory, members of the community were welcomed into a mobile van run by the state Department of Homeland Security and Emergency Services. Fire Safety instructors from the department went through tips and tricks for community members to stay safe in case of a house fire caused by everyday kitchen appliances.

The fair was supposed to last only one year, according to PEF President Wayne Spence.

"When we did it last year, it was supposed to be a one and done, but you didn't let me off the hook," Spence said to Albany County Executive Dan McCoy during his kickoff remarks. "I'm glad you encouraged me to do this again."

Half of the event focuses on delivering books to the hands of children and families, as well as schools and libraries. The "Reading Opens the World" initiative is spearheaded by AFT, the international parent union of PEF and NYSUT (New York State United Teachers). The initiative travels the country and holds events.



"So far we've been able to give 2 million books to families across New York," said NYSUT President Melinda Person. "Thank you, Wayne, for providing this opportunity for families to come together to learn about wellness and literacy. Your leadership in this area is so respected."

Assemblymember John McDonald III (D-AD 108) attended the event as well. McDonald thanked PEF and Spence for bringing the event, the agencies, and many nonprofits under the same roof, but also thanked everyone for valuing something important to him: Literacy.

"Reading is probably the most important aspect for people to be able to form opinion and make their own thoughts," said Mc Donald. "I want to really thank the leadership of AFT and specifically Wayne Spence for bringing us together."

Albany County Executive McCoy championed the success of the event, and the power of unions to bring together the community while also doing their jobs as state workers.

"It just shows you how the unions are the backbone of our community," said McCoy. "Not only are they out there doing their job around the state, they're actually giving back every day doing stuff like this."

AFT's partnership with PEF helps to make this event possible, as they work to make the books available in large quantities for community

members. Amy Hickey, AFT's Assistant Director of Public Employees, thanked PEF, staff and others for their role in helping to bring the event to the armory, and a big success.

"We have done these kinds of giveaways in dozens, even hundreds of locations now, and we are approaching our 10 millionth book giveaway soon," said Hickey. "I couldn't be prouder of the work that our union does on real solutions for kids in communities to make sure that literacy is promoted, and kids have the resources they need to succeed."





PEF celebrates New York State budget accomplishments, vows to keep advocating

The Governor and the Legislature enacted the \$237 billion 2024-25 New York State budget on April 20, 2024, and it includes significant progress on many of the priorities PEF advocates for in its ongoing “Fund Our Future” campaign.

“Thanks to the unrelenting advocacy of PEF members and the amazing support of Governor Kathy Hochul and the Democratic Majorities in both the New York State Senate and Assembly led by Senate Majority Leader Andrea Stewart Cousins and Assembly Speaker Carl Heastie, we continue to make meaningful gains to support state services and the state workers who provide those services,” said PEF President Wayne Spence.

This budget builds upon the union’s work at the contract table and continues its progress with policymakers on several fronts, including:

Tier 6 Reform



PEF's top priority was reforming the Tier 5 and Tier 6 pension plans and we were successful this budget cycle on two fronts. We appreciate Gov. Hochul and the Legislature agreeing to reduce the final average salary calculation from 5 years to 3 years. This change, along with the reduction in vesting time from 10 years to 5 years that was passed

in 2022, will help the state attract and retain the workers it needs to deliver services and reduce the more than \$1 billion it currently spends annually on overtime. Lawmakers and the governor also extended the exclusion of overtime earnings when calculating Tier 6 members' contributions to the pension plan until March 31, 2026. As we work to increase staffing and address inequities in Tier 6, the continuation of this provision protects PEF members from increased contribution costs caused by working voluntary or mandatory overtime to meet the state's ongoing staffing needs. Contrary to some assertions, this provision eliminates a penalty, it does not create a "benefit enhancement."

Extended COVID-19 Sick Leave



Thanks to the advocacy of members, PEF was successful in extending this program until July 31, 2025. It continues to be a critical for protecting staff and patients, especially at SUNY hospitals as well as in congregate care facilities at OMH, OCFS, DOCCS, and OPWDD.

We are hopeful that progress against the virus continues so that we can continue to keep patients and staff safe from unnecessary infection!

Expanded State-Operated In-Patient Mental Health Beds



PEF's "Fund Our Future Campaign" helped to deliver another \$55 million in funding to support an additional 200 in-patient mental health beds at state-operated facilities. This increase builds upon the additional 350 state-operated beds added in the 2022 and 2023 state budgets. These beds

are critical to ensuring that New Yorkers with significant mental illnesses – especially who are indigent, uninsured, underinsured or undocumented — are not left to care for themselves on the streets.

SUNY Downstate Saved



Thanks to the concerted efforts of PEF, UUP, AFT, and a coalition of concerned New York City clergy, State Senator Zellnor Myrie, Assemblymember Brian Cunningham, the Majority Conferences in both houses of the Legislature, and Governor Hochul, we stopped the immediate closure of SUNY Downstate planned by SUNY Chancellor

John King. Over the next few months, a newly formed advisory board will convene to discuss the hospital's finances, the services it provides, and the health care needs of the community. PEF remains committed to engaging stakeholders on the importance of this state-operated hospital. The Brooklyn Needs Downstate Coalition will continue its efforts to educate everyone about the essential dual

roles played by Downstate – delivering essential healthcare in Brooklyn and educating the next generation of healthcare professionals.

End Lag Payroll & Salary Deferral



Thanks to PEF's advocacy through its "Fund Our Future Campaign," the Governor and the Legislature have passed budget legislation to end the arcane and counterproductive lag payroll system and salary deferral program for new hires beginning later this year. New employees hired on or after July 1, 2024, will no longer be subject to the salary deferral

program, while new employees hired after July 1, 2025, will no longer be subject to the lag payroll system. This has been a long-sought after change that we believe will remove significant and unnecessary barriers to attracting and retaining new staff.

Stop Fast-Track Prison Closures



Despite the strong advocacy of PEF and other affected unions, the NYS Senate and Assembly passed budget legislation to authorize the Governor to close up to five correctional facilities with only 90 days advance notice. PEF is disappointed that the current one-year statutory notice will not be required and that affected individuals and

communities will not receive appropriate advance notice if their facility is targeted for closure. PEF will continue to work with the Governor, the Legislature and DOCCS leadership to ensure that every PEF member is appropriately supported and has the opportunity to transfer to another position or facility if they so choose.

\$10 Million for State Culture Hubs



PEF, working with members at the State Education Department, the Capital Region legislative delegation, and the Chairs of the Senate and Assembly Education committees, secured \$10 million in new capital to preserve and improve facilities AND MORE THAN \$5 MILLION IN ADDITIONAL OPERATING SUPPORT at the New York State Museum,

State Library and the State Archives. PEF members have been fighting to improve those institutions for years. This is their first major capital support in decades.

Reject New York's Entry into Nurse Compact



Working with legislative leaders, PEF successfully prevented a budget proposal from passing that would have authorized New York to enter into the Interstate Nurse Licensure Compact. New York maintains higher licensure standards than most of the states in the compact and, as a union representing more than 10,000 nurses,

PEF opposed watering down standards for New York's health care professionals. PEF is thankful to lawmakers for listening and looks forward to working with policymakers to establish real tools to attract and retain nurses in New York, including addressing bullying

and aggressive behavior in the workplace, expanding nurse loan forgiveness programs, and establishing a tax credit for individuals to serve as nurse preceptors.

Stopped Cuts to Retiree Health Care



With the support of both houses of the Legislature, PEF successfully defeated the proposed cuts to the Income-Related Monthly Adjustment Amount (IRMAA). If enacted, this change would have increased out-of-pocket costs for Medicare-eligible PEF retirees living on fixed incomes. This win affirms PEF's commitment to protect the purchasing power of PEF retirees who live on fixed incomes.

Design-Build Expansion Defeated



PEF successfully worked to exclude design-build projects from dormitory authority projects authorized under the Environmental Bond Act of 2022; the American Rescue Plan of 2021; The Infrastructure and Jobs Act of 2021 and the Inflation Reduction Act of 2022. Absent this prohibition, those could have used the flawed design-build program that does not allow for public employee oversight or inspections.



Recommit Today!

New + Existing PEF Members

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Are you interested in a career with PEF?

The New York State Public Employees Federation (PEF) is a diverse and powerful labor union committed to creating a better working life for its members. PEF staff work in various departments in collaboration with PEF's elected union leadership to serve 50,000 members employed in professional, scientific, and technical titles across the State. Some of PEF's departments include: Communications, Contract Administration, Field Services, Finance, Health & Safety, Legal, Legislative and Organizing. If you believe in workers' rights, justice and equality, then a career in the labor movement may be right for you. To see what opportunities are available at PEF, please visit our [Careers Page](#).

www.pef.org/careers-at-pef



Photo credit: The Buffalo News

PEF member one of 3 stabbed by patient at Buffalo PC

By KATE STICKLES



Buffalo Psychiatric Center

To get into libraries, Department of Motor Vehicle offices, hospitals, and many other locations in cities across New York, you must first walk through metal detectors.

If that had been the case at Buffalo Psychiatric Center's Strozzi building on April 3, three staff members, including one PEF member, may not have been stabbed multiple times in a premeditated, unprovoked attack by a patient.

PEF member Edward Gordon, a residential program manager at the facility, suffered stab wounds to his abdomen and back, as well as a laceration to his neck, when Calvin Haskins, 34, walked freely into Buffalo PC's Soccer residence carrying multiple knives.

"He had a knife in each hand, and he started wielding his fists, stabbing people," said PEF Region 1 Coordinator Michele Iorfida. "Then he turned and walked out. He sat on the curb. He could have gone in the next building, where there is only one unarmed guard. They are allowed to walk in that building with anything."

PEF jumps into action immediately

PEF President Wayne Spence took the earliest flight to Buffalo when he heard the news.

"They have a long recovery ahead of them," said President Spence, who met with the victims, families, and members of PEF Division 180 at the Buffalo Psychiatric Center (BPC). "Ed had two extensive surgeries and was just moved out of the ICU."

[RELATED STORY: How you can help the Gordon family](#)

Spence credits several PEF staff with medical training who rendered life-saving aid to the victims while waiting for emergency medical crews.

"They are heroes and they saved lives that day," he said.

Division 180 Council Leader Vincent Ciatello said his members are dealing with grief, concern, and fear in the aftermath of the attack, and they are grateful for President Spence's immediate action.

"One of our members was involved in a brutal attack," Ciatello said. "There is a lot of fear and a lot of concern. Everybody is concerned for the Gordon family; they are beloved members. This hit our PEF family really hard."

"It really says something that within an hour President Spence is booking a flight to come to Buffalo," he continued. "That tells myself and my Division how much PEF cares. I really sense a lot of unity shined through in the wake of this tragedy."

Trouble already on the horizon

President Spence said signs of trouble were apparent before the attack.

"He started decompensating," Spence said of Haskins. "He was using drugs and had to be given Narcan, so he obviously overdosed. That alone should have told them he needed a higher level of care. There were signs he was not doing well and there were recommendations from professional staff to management that he really needed help. They ignored it."

An OMH multi-disciplinary committee documented concerns about Haskins' mental state in case notes.

"Even his mom saw it," President Spence said. "She said he was hearing voices. Management didn't listen to the concerns of staff."



Iorfida concurred, saying there appears to have been a complete lack of disrespect for safety and the clinical viewpoints of staff.

“Clinicians would make professional recommendations for a client to stay inpatient or maybe return to inpatient based on decompensation, and management would override that and tell them the client had been there long enough,” she said. “President Spence, myself, and other leaders are being very firm and very adamant about the safety of our members. We can’t wait to go through legislation. Something must happen today.”

Haskins was found mentally incompetent to stand trial after stabbing a man 17 times in 2013. He began treatment as an inpatient, but as his condition improved, his care level stepped down and he could come and go from the facility.

He is not the only client who arrives at BPC as the result of a criminal case.

“This can be a dangerous population and we’re not properly protected,” said Cicatello. “The majority of the mentally ill are good people, but there are always going to be a percentage of dangerous patients. We need safety measures to protect our members and other patients.”

Previous incidents show need for change

Incidents at Buffalo PC are notably higher than other OMH facilities, according to a state [Department of Civil Service Annual Report of NYS Government Employees’ Workers’ Compensation Claims](#).

Buffalo PC had 64 incidents in 2022-2023, and was on the list of worksites that were more than 25% above the average incident rate for all employees in NYS agencies. The facility experienced 1,746 lost workdays due to work-related incidents and more than \$1.6 million in workers’ compensation costs in 2022-2023. OMH ranks consistently in the top four state agencies with the highest injury rates and costs.

Data compiled by PEF Health and Safety indicates that PEF titles Psychiatric Nurse 2 and 3 and other direct care staff in OMH experience more than 25% above the average incident rate for titles with at least 50 full-time equivalents.

Workplace violence and assaults continue to be listed on the report as significant causes of work-related injuries.

Despite those statistics, there has been pushback in the mental health field when the idea of metal detectors is floated.

“In some places, they have been removed because of optics,” said President Spence. “It makes no sense. Metal detectors can be a deterrent. And when police are called and a person is charged, it helps our members get these people into a higher care setting.”

Spence credited Gov. Kathy Hochul with allowing PEF access to members at Buffalo PC, without the presence of management, so members could speak freely with union leaders and staff. Some of them shared incidents PEF didn’t know about and how they felt they were being disregarded. President Spence said everyone agreed on the main issue: They need better protection.

Cicatello said in addition to metal detectors installed at doors, ideas floated included use of hand-held metal detecting wands and installation of lock boxes in clinic areas to keep patients’ personal belongings confined while they visit staff.

“Division 180 is working with PEF Health and Safety and leadership to share our thoughts and concerns,” he said. “One safety officer doesn’t suffice at locations with people in and out all day and going to multiple floors.”

The bottom line: “Nobody should go to work and leave less healthy than when they showed up,” Cicatello said.

As for the assailant, Haskins was arrested without incident and remanded pending the results of a forensic examination. If convicted of the highest charge, he faces a maximum sentence of 75 years in prison.



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NYS celebrates Corrections Officers and Employees Week

[Pursuant to a resolution](#) passed by the New York State Legislature last year, May 5–11, 2024, is Corrections Officers and Employees Week. The week recognizes that the operation of correctional facilities represents a crucial part of the criminal justice system, and correctional personnel play a vital role in protecting the rights of the public to be safeguarded from criminal activity.

PEF honors our DOCCS members for their diligence in ensuring the safety of staff and incarcerated individuals in state prisons. Correctional facilities around the state are holding appreciation events this week, like one attended by PEF leaders and members at Collins CF in Erie County on May 6.



PEF leaders met with members at Employee Appreciation Day on May 6, held at Collins Correctional Facility in Erie County.

Lobbying and advocacy help nurses make headway

By KATE STICKLES

May is National Nurses Month and PEF pulled out all the stops for issues important to nurses, hospitals, and the communities they serve – from Nurse Lobby Day on April 15 in Albany to the fightback campaign staving off closure of SUNY Downstate in Brooklyn.

SUNY Downstate



After learning earlier this year about a plan to close SUNY Downstate, PEF and UUP orchestrated a fightback campaign to make sure it did not happen. The two unions, along with concerned clergy in New York City, legislators in Albany, and Brooklyn community leaders held rallies, meetings, and marches to pressure the governor and lawmakers to reject the plan.

For the moment, those efforts have paid off.

Thanks to the support of State Sen. Zellnor Myrie, Assemblymember Brian Cunningham, the Majority Conferences in both houses of the Legislature, and Gov. Kathy Hochul, a new advisory board will convene to discuss the hospital's finances, the services it provides, and the health care needs of the community.

"PEF remains committed to engaging stakeholders on the importance of this state-operated hospital," said President Wayne Spence. "The Brooklyn Needs Downstate Coalition will continue its efforts to educate everyone about the essential dual roles played by Downstate – delivering essential healthcare in Brooklyn and educating the next generation of healthcare professionals."

PEF Executive Board member and SUNY Downstate nurse Joan Rosegreen will continue to keep the campaign alive as long as needed.

"I have been going around the unit and informing our members that we are going to stay open," said Rosegreen.

She said she also shares that message with patients, letting them know Downstate is "open for business" and asks them to tell their family and friends that Brooklyn's community hospital isn't going anywhere.

[Click here to listen to a joint Town Hall held on April 10 with President Wayne Spence and UUP President Fred Kowal.](#)

Nurse/Healthcare

Lobby Day

Dozens of PEF nurses from across the state converged on Albany April 15 and 16, meeting with members of the state Assembly and

Senate to share stories and urge support for Tier 6 reform, bullying legislation, a health care preceptor tax credit program, expanding the nurse staffing committee law to other agencies, and making the Nurse Practitioner Modernization Act permanent.

PEF represents approximately 10,000 nurses in state employment, with SUNY, the Office of Mental Health (OMH), Office for People with Developmental Disabilities (OPWDD), Department of Corrections and Community Supervision (DOCCS), and the Office of Children and Family Services (OCFS) the largest employers.

[Click here for a full story on PEF's Nurse Lobby Day.](#)

Abusive Conduct and "Bullying" Prevention Law

Through the union's [Toxic Tales](#) campaign, PEF members have been sharing stories of bullying and toxic workplaces and as part of the campaign PEF is asking the Legislature to support a bill that would add a new section to the Labor Law to define "bullying," "cyberbullying," and "abusive conduct." The definitions would then enable the creation of a uniform standard of appropriate conduct in the workplace and lead to development and implementation of training for employees and employers to ensure that everyone understands those standards.

Assemblyman Harry Bronson, Chairperson of the Assembly Labor Committee, who also sponsored the bill, voiced his full support to PEF nurses on Lobby Day.

"This is on my priority list," he told the nurses who visited his office. "I have heard horror stories from your members. You should be able to go to work and not be in danger. We will see what we can do. You guys do great work."

[Click here to read about how PEF members at Kingsboro Psychiatric Center are calling out bullying managers.](#)

Nurse Compact rejected

PEF successfully prevented a budget proposal from passing that would have authorized New York to enter into the Interstate Nurse Licensure Compact.

"New York maintains higher licensure standards than most of the states in the compact and, as a union representing more than 10,000 nurses, PEF opposed watering down standards for New York's health care professionals," President Spence said.



PEF nurses met with Assemblyman Harry Bronson, fourth from right, to discuss issues important to recruitment and retention and short-staffing during Nurse Lobby Day April 16.

Nurses visit State Capitol, meet with legislators on Nurse Lobby Day

By KATE STICKLES

Dozens of PEF nurses from across the state converged on Albany for Nurse Lobby Day on April 15, meeting with members of the state Assembly and Senate to share stories and urge support for Tier 6 reform, bullying legislation, a health care preceptor tax credit program, expanding the nurse staffing committee law to other agencies, saving SUNY Downstate and making the Nurse Practitioner Modernization Act permanent.

PEF represents approximately 10,000 nurses in state employment, with SUNY, the Office of Mental Health (OMH), Office for People with Developmental Disabilities (OPWDD), Department of Corrections and Community Supervision (DOCCS), and the Office of Children and Family Services (OCFS) the largest employers.

Abusive Conduct and “Bullying” Prevention Law

Through the union’s [Toxic Tales campaign](#), PEF members have been sharing stories of bullying and toxic workplaces and as part of the campaign PEF is asking the Legislature to support a bill that would add a new section to the Labor Law to define “bullying,” “cyberbullying,” and “abusive conduct.” The definitions would then enable the creation of a uniform standard of appropriate conduct in the workplace and lead to development and implementation of training for all employees to ensure that everyone understands those standards.

Cindy, from OPWDD, said bullying happens in the workplace “and it shouldn’t because we’re all adults. Bullying can take many forms, from being passed over for a position to being afraid of speaking up for fear of discipline or retaliation.”

Assemblyman Harry Bronson, Chairperson of the state Assembly Labor Committee, who also sponsored the bill, voiced his full support.

“This is on my priority list,” he told the nurses who visited his office. “I have heard horror stories from your members. You should be able to go to work and not be in danger. We will see what we can do. You guys do great work.”

In a poignant example, Vinny Cicatello from Buffalo Psychiatric Center and co-chair of the PEF Nurses Committee, recounted how

PEF member Ed Gordon, was stabbed by a patient at the facility earlier this month. Clinicians had voiced concerns the patient was decompensating, which fell on deaf ears. Staff need to be comfortable their voices will be heard, without fearing repercussions if they push harder to be heard.

“The nurses feel like their clinical input is not heard,” said one member to Sen. Jessica Ramos. “Just being constantly threatened, you don’t do this, we can talk about counseling, or it goes right into discipline. If you have any of your own ideas or a different opinion, they kind of put you on this list nobody wants to be on so there’s a huge issue there.”

Sen. Ramos, the Chairperson of the Senate Labor Committee, agreed and indicated that this bill was also on her priority list for the end of the Legislative session.

Region 3 Coordinator Leisa Abraham concurred, referring again to Buffalo PC.

“They question our judgement,” she said. “It’s not unusual for us in this room to have other people, not clinicians, question our judgment. I don’t want to age any of you, but there’s probably hundreds of years’ worth of medical service in this room and if they’re telling me something, I’m listening to them!”

“That’s part of what we also see as part of bullying, you end up having situations like this because who’s going to stand up and say, ‘No, you are wrong’ when you know it ends up being ignored,” she said.

PEF’s bullying legislation would be an important piece to take negativity off the table and slow the exodus of people leaving state service because of conduct in the workplace.

Preceptor Tax Credit Program

In a meeting with Sen. Toby Ann Stavisky, the chair of the Senate Higher Education Committee, members made the case for instituting the Health Care Preceptor Tax Credit Program as a way to recruit and retain nursing staff and increase staffing levels.



The legislation would create a personal income tax credit to incentivize participation in various health care clinical training programs, including nursing. The credit would be available to clinicians who provide instruction as part of a clinical preceptorship in both community and inpatient facilities. The proposal is for \$1,000 for every 100 hours of community-based instruction, with a maximum of \$3,000.

"We believe this gives the opportunity for nurses who want to be preceptors to be able to," said Cicatello. "Preceptorships engage trained, experienced clinicians with students to provide intense first-hand training to help bridge the gap between classroom education and clinical hands-on training."

Christina, a nurse at OPWDD, shared that while pursuing a master's degree, she had difficulty finding a preceptor because they were in short supply. She said the credit program may ease that.

Also, in the meeting with Assemblyman Bronson, members told Bronson mandated preceptors can make new nurses feel shunned when mentors are reluctant participants. One nurse said in her facility they jokingly say they have been "voluntold" to be preceptors.

Speaking to a representative from Assemblywoman Amy Paulin's office – the Chairperson of the Assembly Health Committee - PEF member Cherie, from OPWDD, said good preceptors are vital for patient care. "New nurses, right out of college, are shaky just taking a blood pressure or placing an IV," she said. "Good preceptors can make a difference."

Assemblyman Josh Jensen, the ranking Republican minority member on the Assembly Health Committee, had a good understanding of the importance of a quality preceptorship program. When he worked at Monroe County Hospital's communications department, they recognized that one way to reduce turnover was to set up preceptor programs.

"It could make it easier for people, so when they enter into the facility they want to stay," he said. "Where your members are working, those are very high stress work locations, so anything to ease the burden on new employees so they see it as a career and want to stay in that career as long as they can."

Cicatello agreed, adding: "The ones who want to, that's how we get a really successful nursing program and staffing program when nurses come in and they feel they're wanted there and they're heard there. We think that's huge."

"Mistakes can cost you your license," PEF Vice President Randi DiAntonio said. "Help is needed at the front end. It's a no-brainer to me."

Nurse Practitioner Modernization Act

PEF is advocating for passage of a bill that would make the Nurse Practitioner Modernization Act (NPMA) permanent. The act was adopted in 2014 to increase access to health care services and eliminate administrative barriers to care. The NPMA eliminated the requirement that NPs with at least 3,600 hours of practice maintain a Written Practice Agreement or Written Practice Protocols, provided that the NP maintain a collaborative relationship with one or more licensed physicians.

Participants thanked Assemblymember Paulin for her sponsorship of the legislation to make the NPMA permanent and Assemblyman Jensen said he supports the act as well, sharing his experience with nurse practitioners.

"In the nine years that I've been with my current physician, I've never met him," he said. "I've only ever seen a nurse practitioner or a physician's assistant. So, in my personal health care decision-making, I trust nurse practitioners. If somebody who's the ranking member of the Assembly Health Committee can trust a nurse practitioner to help them make healthcare decisions, then why shouldn't we allow every New Yorker to have that option?"

"Especially where you have healthcare deserts, it allows greater access to primary care," he said. "I'm supportive of scope changes. It's been pretty good, I think."

Expand Nurse Staffing Committee Law

Staff on the ground, doing the work, know what nurse-to-patient ratios are appropriate and how staff could best be deployed. Chapter 155 of the New York State Laws of 2021 established clinical staffing committees composed of representatives from management and labor to determine these critical ratios in hospitals and nursing homes covered by Article 28 of the Public Health Law.

PEF wants it to be expanded to cover other facilities operated by the state that provide healthcare services to vulnerable populations at OMH, OPWDD, OCFs, and DOCCS.

"We need to have our nurses be able to have input and be taken seriously," said VP DiAntonio. "We just had a situation at one of our upstate DDSO locations where the nurses came up with a plan on their own to cover a staffing crisis and the plan was actually working. Management didn't like it because it didn't come from them and they basically pulled it out from under them. It left such a bitter taste in people's mouths."

"Nurses know what their patients need, what their clients need," she said. "Management may not be able to do everything we want, but there should be a respectful dialogue and they need to be treated with the professionalism they deserve. Somebody sitting in an office that never has walked into a unit or group home shouldn't be the ones making the decision."

Assemblyman Jensen opposed the bill at the time of its inception but recognized it may need reform.

"To PEF's point, about how management is able to have the upper hand in all aspects of it, well that's not what the intent of the legislation was," he said. "I think, especially now that we're out of a public health emergency, while we are still struggling with a nurse staffing crisis, especially upstate, that we need to ensure that there are ratios in place to ensure that patients get the care they need but that we also don't push more nurses out of the workforce."

He added: "When the legislation was passed it was sold as an equal partnership. If that's not what is taking place, then it does need to be reformed."

Nurse/Healthcare
Lobby Day

Nurse/Healthcare

Lobby Day



Nurses gather in the well of the Legislative Office Building before splitting into three groups to meet with Senators and Assemblymembers during Nurse Lobby Day April 16.



Cynthia Walker: Nurse, union leader, health care activist

By NORA HIGGINS, RNC, NP | PEF Nurse Coordinator

In honor of National Nurse's Month, let me introduce you to Cynthia Walker, a registered nurse who currently works at SUNY Downstate and serves as a Steward, Secretary, and a member of the PEF Statewide Nurses Committee. Most recently, Cynthia was a member of the 2023-2026 contract team and is the Region 11 Statewide Nurses Committee representative, covering Brooklyn, Queens, and Staten Island.

Cynthia views herself as a healthcare professional, who initially came into nursing after seeing how nurses cared for her mother at Buffalo General Medical Center. The care her mother received as a cancer survivor was phenomenal and inspired Cynthia to become a registered nurse.

The first five years of her career began at Long Island Jewish in the medical-surgical unit. Not long after, she felt the need to work at SUNY Downstate to serve her community. There, she was hired as a nurse in the cardiac telemetry unit.

"I like the fast-paced and high acuity work atmosphere and that's exactly what I found on that unit," Cynthia told me. "I was impressed by the dedication and determination of my co-workers in the way they cared for their patients. Many of them had families and were continuing their education, which inspired me to go back to school to get my bachelor's degree.

"I have to recognize my council leader, Joan Rosegreen, for encouraging me to go back to school and to become a steward," she said.

After accomplishing all that, Cynthia also saw the need to advocate for improvements in health care with policy and legislative initiatives.

Cynthia is the chair of the clinical staffing committee at SUNY Downstate, representing her fellow PEF members.

"I want to continue to advocate for better working conditions, staffing ratios and health care overall," she said to me. "I want to do this on behalf of the patients, my community, all PEF members, and for all nurses. I see a great opportunity to enhance the health care setting with recruitment and retention efforts that will attract newly graduated RNs."

She was also very active in the recent successful campaign to keep SUNY Downstate open.

How has she done so much?

"By being active in the union," she said. "It gives me a voice."

Cynthia keeps on top of union activity by checking the www.pef.org website often, attending Town Halls, reading The Communicator, attending committee meetings, lobbying, rallying, and meeting members one-on-one.

"When engaging with members, I usually ask, 'What's happening? What needs to be done? And, how can I help?'"

For those of you who have not yet met Cynthia in person, she is a delightful, energetic, and upbeat person. Cynthia is truly an asset as a nurse and union leader, as well as a wife, mother, and grandmother. Hope you get to meet her soon!





Clara Shamatanga, third from left in the back row, participated in PEF's recent Nurse Lobby Day in Albany.

Clara Shamatanga: Balancing union, family, and work

By **KATE STICKLES**

In honor of Nurses Month, we spoke to Statewide Nurses Committee (SWNC) member Clara Shamatanga about why she chose to become a nurse and her involvement in the union.

Clara is an RN who works as a psychiatric nurse educator at Bronx Psychiatric Center (PC). She began her state service with the Office of Mental Health in 2018 as a charge nurse at Queens Children Psychiatric Center, before applying for a higher position as a Nurse III (nurse educator) at Bronx PC a year later. She has been there ever since.

"I chose nursing because I wanted to help people in a meaningful way," Clara said. "I enjoy the direct patient care aspect of nursing, which allows me to help patients through difficult times. I also appreciate the opportunity to work with other medical professionals to ensure patients receive the best possible education and care."

"The caregiving aspect of the profession is what drew me in," she added. "I find it rewarding to make a difference in people's lives."

A six-year PEF member, Clara is the Region 10 coordinator representative for the SWNC and she sees real value in union membership.

"I became active in the union for several reasons," she said. "As a union member, I can represent the collective interests of workers. Being in a union provides a voice to protect workers in terms of job security, wages, and working conditions. Active union members can advocate for changes in the workplace, such as improved safety measures, better benefits, or fairer pay."

"Being active in a union also fosters a sense of community and solidarity," Clara said. "I became active by regularly attending and participating in union meetings and educating my colleagues about the benefits of union membership and the issues the union is fighting for."

To best serve her fellow PEF members, Clara said it's important to balance union, work, and family obligations. It isn't always easy!

"Being a union representative is rewarding, but also challenging," she said. "Some of the challenges include negotiation, conflict resolution, representation, legal knowledge, time management, political pressure, and getting time off work to attend union meetings."

"You have to have a deep understanding of the issues at hand, strong communication skills, a good understanding of labor laws and regulations, and excellent time management skills," Clara continued. "Balancing the responsibilities of family, work, and union representative duties can indeed be a daunting task. However, with proper planning and prioritization, it is certainly achievable."

Clara shared some of her keys to success.

"The first step is setting clear boundaries," she said. "Defining your responsibilities in each role and allocating specific hours for each. It's crucial to avoid mixing roles, such as doing union work during family time. Not all tasks hold the same level of importance and it's essential to identify the most critical tasks in each role and prioritize them."



As a nurse, Clara understands the importance of health in order to support an active lifestyle like hers.

“Self-care is an often overlooked but vital part of maintaining balance,” she said. “Taking care of physical and mental health through regular exercise, a healthy diet, and adequate sleep can boost productivity and stress management.”

She also highlighted using a planner or digital calendar to keep things in order, and knowing how to delegate when needed.

“At work, tasks can be delegated to team members, and as a union representative, if I cannot make it to a meeting, I let the team know, and I follow up with the meeting discussion and minutes taken.”

The support of family and friends, union and non-union, is the final piece of the success puzzle.

“Seeking support from family, colleagues, and union members can be immensely helpful,” Clara said. “They can provide emotional support, share tasks, or offer advice. It’s important to remember that balance doesn’t mean equal time for all roles. It’s about fulfilling responsibilities in each role without feeling overwhelmed.”



Know your Contract: Bulletin Boards

Editor’s note: Everyone looks at the salary schedules, the benefits information, accruals, and other monetary aspects of PEF collective bargaining agreements. In this new series, we will introduce you to some of the lesser-known articles. Look for a “Know Your Contract” feature in each full issue of The Communicator!

Article 4.3, Bulletin Boards

Did you know your agency is required to provide a reasonable amount of exclusive bulletin board space in an accessible place in each work area occupied by a substantial number of PEF employees?

This board must be dedicated to bulletins, notices, and materials issued by PEF, signed by the designated official of PEF or its appropriate Division.

In other words, PEF must be afforded a place to post meeting notices, event flyers, and other union-related information at your workplace. If your Division doesn’t have one, ask your Division Council about it!

Knowledge is power!

Lavinia Dock:

Nurse, suffragette made invaluable contributions to the nursing profession

By **KATE STICKLES**

Lavinia Dock, who studied nursing at Bellevue Hospital's school for nurses in New York City in the late 1800s, is well known for her dedication to the field of nursing; and for her participation in both the labor and the suffrage movements.

Her work took her from visiting nurse positions at charitable organizations, to supervising a temporary hospital ward for yellow fever patients, to writing *Materia Medica for Nurses*, financed by her father, which became the standard nursing school text on drugs and sold 100,000 copies.

As a member of the Women's Trade Union League, she organized events for members and walked the picket line during the 1909 shirtwaist strike, when 20,000 workers, most of them women, walked off the job to protest long work hours and low wages. They demanded a 20 percent pay raise, a 52-hour work week, additional payment for overtime hours, and improved safety conditions.

"Lavinia Dock gave her considerable ability to the development of nursing as a profession. But she did not limit herself to a narrow professional involvement. She asked nurses particularly and certainly any specific group of women to look beyond their own interests to the broader needs and benefits of all. She was an example of a socially conscience and committed individual," according to Mary Ann Bradford Burnam, a doctoral candidate at the University of Ohio.

Dock was a reformer, focused on the professionalization of nursing and the equality of women. She was among an early group of nurses committed to professionalizing nursing through development of organizations, improved educational standards, and registration.

"Some say her courageous stand for womens' suffrage and womens' rights was her greatest contribution to nursing," according to an article on the Turning Point Suffragist Memorial website "She felt if nursing was going to be the profession that the early leaders envisioned, nurses would need the power and respect that only gender equality could offer. She is quoted in the NLN publication, "Open Mind" (1996): 'We owe the existence of our profession to the womens' movement. We owe it all that we are, all that we have of opportunity and advancement.'"





PEF Nurse Organizer position established in 1998

By **NAJEE WALKER**

Nurses have always been one of the largest single job groups in PEF, working across several agencies from DOCCS to all the “O” agencies like OASAS, OCFS, OMH, OPWDD, and of course the three SUNY hospitals. However, it wasn’t until 1998 under PEF President Roger Benson, that PEF established the position of Nurse Organizer.

Today Nora Higgins holds the title of PEF nurse coordinator, but 26 years ago, Lenore Boris became PEF’s first nurse organizer.

Boris was tasked with working with the Statewide Nurses Committee and Organizing Committee to bring together PEF’s

nurses across the state and across all agencies. As Higgins does now, Boris worked to help further the union’s state and federal legislative priorities and communicated them to PEF nurses.

Though Boris has moved on from PEF, the importance of the position is still evident, as PEF nurses recently gathered in Albany for their annual [Nurse Lobby Day](#), talking directly to legislators about issues that impact their profession.

See below for *The Communicator* story from May 1998 announcing Boris’ appointment as the first PEF Nurse Organizer.

New position of nurse organizer filled

PEF to nurses: Help is on the way

By SHERRY HALBROOK

PEF is doing more than honoring and recognizing its thousands of members in nursing service throughout New York State this month, said union President Roger Benson, “it is giving them a voice and it is giving them help.”

Benson said Lenore Boris has been hired by PEF to fill the new full-time staff position of nurse organizer. She will work out of Field Services Department at PEF headquarters in Albany.

According to PEF Director of Labor Relations Roger Scales, Boris will be responsible for organizing and coordinating internal organizing campaigns aimed at empowering PEF nurses around their professional goals.

“Boris will work with both PEF’s Nurses Committee, which was recently reinstated after a hiatus of several years, and its Organizing Committee,” Scales said.

“She will help us establish goals and priorities for our nurses who face problems of understaffing, out-of-title work, erosion of professional standards and privatization,” said Nurses Committee Chair Millie Lewis.

In addition, the nurse organizer will help track federal and state legislation important to nurses, as well as changes in the rules, regulations and agency policies that affect them.

According to PEF Region 9 Coordinator Nella Cardus, who

heads the union’s Organizing Committee, Boris will also help PEF regions and divisions with nursing-related issues and organizing efforts.

A resident of Saratoga County, Boris holds both nursing and law degrees and has a wide range of professional experience from clinical nursing to professional negotiating and fiscal analysis.

She has been faculty course chair at Samaritan Hospital School of Nursing in Troy since 1994, and was a labor relations representative for the NYS Nurses’ Association in Albany from 1987 to 1992.

Boris also holds the rank of major in the US Air Force Reserve Nurse Corps.



Renewing PEF's commitment to workplace safety on Workers' Memorial Day

By **KATE STICKLES**

In 2023, there were more than 13,000 workplace incidents, with 313,000 lost days for those workers, at a cost of almost \$500 million in worker's compensation.¹

The human cost is even greater, and often preventable with proper protections.

More than 5,000 workers across the country lost their lives on the job last year. That equates to an average of 15 workers in the United States every day. There are families and workers who have suffered, and we must remember them.

The organized labor movement does that each year on April 28, Workers' Memorial Day. It's a day to honor and remember workers who were killed, injured, or sickened at their jobs, and a day for all unions to recommit to improving and expanding worker protections.

Since the memorial fell on a Sunday this year, PEF observed a moment of silence on Friday, April 26, at the memorial located at union headquarters in Latham. President Wayne Spence, Health and Safety Director Geraldine Stella, and Craig Smith from the Workers' Compensation Board, gave brief remarks to gathered staff and news media.

"On Workers' Memorial Day, we reflect and mourn those who have lost their lives at work and we renew our fight for safer jobs in the future," Spence said. "This month, one of our members and two of his colleagues were stabbed in an unprovoked, premeditated attack by a patient at Buffalo Psychiatric Center. It's a stark reminder that dangers exist in our workplaces."

Spence looked back on the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic and what employees, especially in the healthcare field, dealt with when the unfamiliar virus took hold of the nation.

"A lot of assumptions were made about what employers would do," he said. What some did, he said, was shocking. "Some of our members were told to use coffee filters as masks as a way to protect themselves."

It wasn't just health care workers, he said. During the pandemic, many of our union brothers and sisters in New York City's transit system died because they had inadequate protections at work. This year, Spence said sanitation workers in the city are being sickened by rat urine as the city battles its rodent population.

"Something as simple as eradicating rats can have unintended consequences for workers," he said. "We must learn from our past and make changes so we can have a brighter future."

Stella reminded attendees of a now-famous quote from Mother Jones, a fearless fighter for workers' rights.

"Mother Jones famously said, 'Pray for the Dead – but Fight Like Hell for the Living!'" she said. "If you don't know who she is, look her up. She wasn't some kind of muscle-bound Amazon. She didn't even look like the mine workers she fought so hard for. She looked more like Tweety Bird's Granny from the Loony Toons cartoons.

"And she was just like any of us here today, someone who believed that everyone deserves to go home at the end of the day the same way they went in to work that morning," Stella said. "Coalitions of unions fight every day. To make our worksites safer, we must come together."

The Workers' Compensation Board, Craig Smith said, doesn't deal directly with workplace safety – but accidents and deaths on the job are a major concern for them all the same.

"We encourage everyone if they see something, say something," he said. "Do anything and everything you can do to keep the workplace safe."



\$400

Dental Stipend

Second dental stipend expected be paid this month

The \$400 dental stipend for the 2024-2025 fiscal year, negotiated as part of the 2023-2026 PEF/State Agreement, is expected to be in checks dated May 22 (Administration) and May 30 (Institution).

“It took tenacity and hard work to secure the two \$400 dental stipends for 2023 and 2024, while holding the State’s feet to the fire and making sure they awarded the dental services contract to a new vendor,” said President Wayne Spence. “Dental was one of the top priorities for our members when we negotiated this last contract, and we are glad to be able to deliver.”

PEF members made their feelings clear to their elected leaders, saying that EmblemHealth was deficient and inadequate to meet their needs. Too few dentists accepted the plan, and the reimbursement rates for members who received out of network dental care were paltry.

This will be the last stipend in light of the fact that a contract with a new vendor is expected to be in place by the Fall. To be eligible, in general, employees must have been in the PS&T unit on April 1, 2024, and enrolled in the NYSHIP Dental Plan having completed the 28-day waiting period on or before April 1, 2024.

For most PEF members, the Office of the State Comptroller (OSC) will process these payments using the check dates noted above. For seasonal and temporary employees who are employed or are expected to be employed for at least six months, the agencies must submit information to OSC, and it is possible that payments for these members may be processed in later checks.

The 2023-2024 dental stipend was paid in March of this year.

More details about this payment and eligibility can be found in Payroll Bulletin 2232 or the PEF/State Agreement on page 118.



PEF Membership Benefits Program Family and Friends Day Tickets are Now Available

By **NAJEE WALKER**

The PEF Membership Benefits Program is once again offering PEF members and retirees the opportunity to chase some fun this summer at one of two special events for PEF families and friends. All members and retirees across New York are encouraged to take advantage of a special ticket price offer at two Six Flags parks.

This year, tickets are being offered for \$30 person for events at Six Flags Great Adventure in Jackson, New Jersey on July 13, and Six Flags Great Escape in Queensbury, NY on August 10. Tickets for these two popular events are selling fast.

“Every year since PEF MBP started offering these family and friend day events, members and retirees wait patiently for ticket sales to begin. They realize the tremendous savings associated with the price of the tickets for park entry, parking, and a fabulous buffet lunch,” said Stephanie McLean-Beathley, PEF MBP Administrator. “It’s a deal that can’t be found elsewhere.”

PEF members and retirees can purchase up to 4 e-tickets at the \$30 price which includes parking and a lunch buffet—featuring classic summertime favorites, like pulled pork sandwiches, veggie burgers, macaroni and cheese, and more! For Great Adventure, the price includes admission to both the park and Wild Safari. For

Great Escape, the price includes admission to the theme park and Hurricane Harbor water park. Children under 2 years of age are free. Events at both parks will take place rain or shine.

Other discount offers at both parks include special pricing on souvenir water bottles that allow for free soda and water refills throughout the park for the duration of the day. Members and retirees can also take advantage of special pricing on a 2024 Season Pass upgrade the day of the event only.

PEF MBP’s Family and Friends Day events promise to deliver some summer cheer and excitement for PEF members, retirees, family members, and friends at an affordable price. “We look forward to seeing as many members and retirees as we can, as well as the big smiles on the faces of all the children and teenagers,” said McLean-Beathley.

To get your tickets while supplies last, call the PEF MBP office at (800) 767-1840 or (518) 785-1900, ext. 243, opt. 1.

Visit pefmbp.org for all information on PEF MBP offerings.



Funding Our Future: New report from Comptroller shows support and funding for mental health

By **NAJEE WALKER**

[A new report from the Office of the State Comptroller](#) reaffirms a central tenet of PEF's Fund Our Future campaign – New York is in dire need of reinvestment in mental health services after a decade of cuts administered by former Governor Andrew Cuomo.

According to the report, statewide inpatient psychiatric capacity has decreased by almost 11 percent since April 2014, effectively cutting more than 8,400 beds available for patients with mental health needs. Nearly 75 percent of the decline in inpatient capacity was due to the loss of beds in State-run psychiatric centers, where many PEF professionals work. In the OSC report, those alarming statistics are juxtaposed against the growing need for mental health treatment, with 900,000 New Yorkers seeking treatment in the last decade, up 23 percent since 2014.

The Comptroller details in the report how the \$1 billion to expand access to mental health services has already resulted in increases in capacity, but stresses the importance of more funding to deliver more inpatient and outpatient mental health services.

The 2024-2025 State budget is expected to be finalized this week and PEF has lobbied for it to include additional inpatient psychiatric beds and additional resources and staffing to address the State's mental health crisis, priorities shared by several legislators.

"Access to mental health resources is vital for the wellness of our children and young adults," said Assemblymember Aileen Gunther, chair of that chamber's Mental Health Committee.

"What we know is that our greatest resources are our human resources, and they are the individuals who come in every day to do this work for our loved ones, and right now, they're simply not paid even close to the value that they bring," State Senator Samra Brouk said during an interview in February.

The Comptroller's report states that the work is not over and recommends policymakers continue working with community

hospitals, increase compensation for mental health professionals, and strengthen the system overall to address all aspects and risks associated with mental health.

"Ensuring the availability of inpatient mental health services is a critical component of the State's effort to address the ongoing mental health challenges facing the State and improve the lives of vulnerable New Yorkers," concludes the OSC report.



[Download Comptroller's report \(PDF\)](#)





PEF fights for employee placed on leave & terminated by agency; secures \$50,000 in back pay

By **NAJEE WALKER**

Natasha Pecue started working as a Vocational Rehabilitation Counselor in 2012. Her job was helping people with disabilities find employment. As a worker with a disability herself, she found fulfillment in her job. But nine years into her career with the Adult Career and Education Services-Vocational Rehabilitation (ACCES-VR) office in Clinton County, New York, she was suddenly placed on involuntary leave. What followed was a long, arduous journey that would ultimately end with victory, thanks to the support of PEF Field Representative Martin Blair.

In 2001, Pecue suffered injuries that caused physical disabilities which made mobility difficult, forcing her to use a motor scooter to get around. Pecue was hired by the state under a N.Y. Labor Law section 55-b appointment, which facilitates state employment for individuals with disabilities.

"I worked as a field counselor for my area," Pecue said. "I was very proud of the agency I was hired with. I was very proud and very good at my job."

Pecue worked in largely rural Clinton County, part of PEF Region 7. Her work assignments were always within 30 minutes of her home, close to the city of Plattsburgh. The closest ACCES-VR office was in Malone, an hour-and-a-half journey for Pecue, who uses a special vehicle to drive and has difficulty driving for more than an hour.

"Before the pandemic we were expected to come in once a week to the office," Pecue said. "After the pandemic, for some reason, they changed it to two days a week."

Driving to the office those two days a week became difficult for Pecue, especially when her condition worsened. In 2021, after surgery to address her symptoms, she returned to work with a temporary reasonable accommodation: That she be allowed to report from an established worksite in Plattsburgh, instead of the Malone office.

Although she was given the accommodation until the end of August 2021, when Pecue asked that it be extended and made permanent, she encountered resistance from the agency.

PEF fights back on her behalf

Decisions on reasonable accommodation requests at ACCES-VR must be rendered within 10 days of receipt of materials, according to agency policy. Pecue submitted her request on Aug. 31, 2021, and was still awaiting a decision in October of that year.

The response from the agency not only denied, but also placed her on involuntary leave under Civil Service Law section 72.5. Pecue was ordered to seek an Employee Health Service examination, forcing her to travel to Albany from her home in Plattsburgh.



The Civil Service Law cited by the State Education Department (SED, under which ACCES-VR falls) allows an agency to place an employee on an involuntary leave of absence if there is “probable cause” to believe that the employee would present a potential danger to others, to property, or would somehow interfere with operations.

Section 72 also provides that, if requested by the employee, a hearing can be scheduled following a motion to appeal the decision. For that, Pecue turned to PEF Field Representative Martin Blair.

“I remember feeling frustration and anger with the agency after she explained her case to me,” said Blair. “They mishandled this case from the beginning. They could have allowed her to keep working. We had just come off COVID where employees were working remotely, and she was doing fine.”

Blair said the accommodation process is supposed to be fluid, and subject to negotiation. He said SED put Pecue in a tough position by placing her on unpaid leave while seeking the examination and awaiting the hearing.

Since Pecue was already placed on leave when Blair and PEF got involved, his mission was to appeal the decision and prepare for the upcoming hearing.

The case took another negative turn when, pursuant again to Section 72, Pecue was terminated while awaiting the hearing.

PEF fought hard during the hearing, not only against SED’s assertion that Pecue was unfit to perform her duties and that she was a potential danger or interference, but also to prove that SED improperly handled her request for a reasonable accommodation.

“We did our best to pick apart the rationale that said she’s unfit for work,” Blair said. “We tried to expose the fact that the exam did not go in depth enough. They did not ask enough questions about the scope of her work. It was a ‘fast food’ examination.”

Hearings for Section 72 cases are not legally binding. Instead of a court order, hearing officers provide recommendations and typically the agency follows those recommendations.

While the hearing officer sided with the agency and recommended Pecue not return to work, he disagreed on the application of Section 72.5, stating that the law was inappropriately applied and Pecue deserved back pay.

“The hearing officer did seem to agree with us that she could have kept working at the satellite office at least while the hearing was going on,” Blair said.

SED did not fully agree with the decision, and said in concluding arguments that Pecue could not prove she was fit to continue working for SED. They did not award her backpay, and even asked that Pecue pay SED “an amount equal to the cost of the hearing and the resources expended.”

“This is one of the cruelest things I’ve ever seen an agency do,” Blair said. “She is a single mom, with a disability, in a wheelchair. We’re talking about an amount of about \$5,000 to \$7,000 after all the hearings were done.”

Time to appeal

Blair and Pecue did not take no for an answer and appealed to the Civil Service Commission (CSC).

In April 2023, Blair sent the appeal to the CSC arguing that Pecue was still fit for duty and the hearing officer’s decision should be upheld. Additionally, Blair argued that by improperly applying Section 72.5, improperly handling Pecue’s reasonable accommodation request, and using both as a means of termination, underscored Pecue’s entitlement to back pay and a restoration of accruals. PEF also argued that Pecue should be returned to work, as was Pecue’s wish in the first place.

The CSC maintained SED’s recommendation that Pecue was “unfit” to return to work. However, they did agree with PEF that SED’s overreach and misuse of laws and regulations should result in restitution.

“I’m glad they agreed with our position,” said Blair. “We were able to secure approximately \$50,000 in back pay for Natasha. We also got service credits and accruals back, about seven months worth. And the credits go back to her pension, too.”

Pecue said while she isn’t sure if she would return to work at SED at this point, she was glad for the time she spent working and to have the union by her side during this ordeal. The union, she said, is important to her and always will be.

“When I was looking for work in this field, I had offers from different states. All over the country,” Pecue said. “The only reason I moved back to New York state is because I knew I would find a union.”

“I am honored that Martin invested so much time with me,” she said. “He earned this win. Martin is a wonderful asset to PEF.”



Looking for college scholarships? PEF and Union Plus have options for you!

By **KATE STICKLES**

Do you have a college-bound student this year? They might be able to apply for several [scholarships offered by PEF](#) or other union organizations.

The cost of college is daunting and sometimes even prohibitive.

Full-time resident students at public four-year colleges spend an average of \$24,840 per academic year, while non-resident students spend an average of \$46,730. Those attending private nonprofit four-year institutions pay even more: an average of \$60,420 per academic year, according to Bankrate.

A few options, for specific PEF Regions and Divisions:

PEF Region 7: PEF Region 7 offers two \$1,000 scholarships to children or legal dependents of dues-paying members, in honor of Ellen Mainville and Paul Normandeau, PEF Region 7 members who lost their lives to COVID. Click [here](#) for an application and [here](#) for an information flyer. Deadline is June 1, 2024.

PEF Division 167: Division 167 is offering four \$400 scholarships to a child or grandchild of an active PEF member from Division 167 working at Western New York Children's Psychiatric Center or the Western New York DDSO/DDRO entering as a freshman or continuing higher education up to and including a doctorate degree OR an active PEF Division 167 member in pursuit of a degree. Click [here](#) for the application and [here](#) for the information flyer. Deadline is July 10, 2024.

PEF Division 206: Division 206 is proud to offer two \$250 scholarships to help two deserving students pursuing higher education in honor of Vicky Stockton. [Click here for more information.](#)

PEF Division 240: Division 240 is conducting its annual Prashant "Pete" Singapura College Scholarship Contest, with up to nine scholarships awarded (two for \$1,000; one for \$500; three for \$350; and three for \$150). Eligibility requirements include: applicant must be a PEF member of Division 240 or their dependent or their immediate family member (Mother, Father, Son, Daughter, Spouse or Domestic Partner) OR applicant must provide proof of fulltime or parttime enrollment at an accredited college or university for spring 2024, or a college acceptance letter for fall 2024 to an accredited college or university. Click [here](#) for the application and [here](#) for the informational flyer. Deadline is July 19, 2024.

Check with your PEF Council Leader or [Regional Coordinator](#) for information on local scholarships in your area.

Division 343: The Division is conducting its first Annual College Scholarship Contest and will be awarding one \$1,000 scholarship to the winner.

Applicants must be the child and/or family member of a PEF Division 343 member and be a high school graduate or soon-to-be graduate who is enrolled in an accredited New York state college for the fall of 2024 term as a freshman.

Fill out the form [here](#) and email it to Division Secretary Christine Thompson at Namena@yahoo.com and cc: Steward Kathleen Pepper at RSC90@aol.com, along with the typewritten essay and proof of enrollment. Include PEF Division 343 Scholarship Fall 2024 in the subject line.

Application deadline is July 5, 2024. The winner will be announced July 19, 2024.

Prepare for the next round of Union Plus scholarships

While the deadline for this school year has passed, applications for the 2025 Union Plus Scholarship Program will be available in mid-June and it can't hurt to get an early start on the process.

Since 1991, the program has awarded more than \$5.4 million to students of working families who want to begin or continue their post-secondary education, helping more than 3,800 families.

Eligibility: Current and retired members of participating unions, their spouses and their dependent children (as defined by IRS regulations). At least one year of continuous union membership by the applicant, applicant's spouse or parent (if applicant is a dependent). The one-year membership minimum must be satisfied by May 31 of the scholarship year.

Applicants are evaluated according to academic ability, social awareness, financial need and appreciation of labor. A GPA of 3.0 or higher is recommended. The required essays can account for up to half your total score. Scholarship applicants are judged by a committee of impartial post-secondary educators.

Amounts range from \$500 to \$4,000.

Other PEF scholarships

Make sure you take note of deadlines and applications for other PEF scholarships, such as the Joseph Scacalossi and the Judi Scanlon scholarships, which are complete for this year, but will be available again for 2025. All scholarship information can be found on the PEF [website](#).



Sign up **TODAY** for the Communicator

Keeping PEF members current on PEF news, emailed to your monthly. Make sure we have your personal email address. PEF will never email at your work address.

<https://www.pef.org/emailme/>



PEF Telephone Town Hall: April 9, 2024

Thank you to the thousands who listened in on the PEF Telephone Town Hall on April 9. If you missed it, a full audio recording is now available below. Here are some general time codes indicating what was discussed and when:

- **01:30 to 8:40:** Higher Education Differential submission of proof deadline extended from March 29 to May 3, 2024. Answers on timing of degrees and licenses; when to expect payments if you submitted under original deadline; and review of the benefit basics.
- **08:45 to 18:00:** Information on New York State's new dental contract with Anthem Blue Cross Blue Shield, including a brief overview and history of PEF's advocacy; and information on implementation. Note: The effective date will not be until September or October 2024.
- **18:00 to 18:40:** Update on dental stipend for 2024.
- **18:45 to 19:35:** Update on dental plan as it impacts retirees.
- **20:20 to 27:15:** Contract money you should have gotten already and when to expect upcoming payments, including longevity, dental stipend, Higher Ed Differential, raises, and more.
- **27:15 to 29:00:** Closing remarks by PEF President Wayne Spence, highlighting the need to follow through on Higher Ed Differential and PEF's pledge to stay on top of the dental contract changes.



Are *you* prepared for the election season?

Retirees and PEF members, we are entering a period where we must make some tough, informed, and serious decisions based on what's important to us. The political season is in full swing and before we know it, we will be asked to make some choices that will have long-lasting consequences on our lives and country.

There will be many factors and information available to assist us in making the right decisions. Retirees are most concerned with maintaining health care at an affordable and meaningful level; keeping Social Security alive and financially secure; and maintaining pensions at a level which allows us to live a meaningful life in our retirement.

As for our union brothers and sisters, families, and friends, some areas of concern, in no particular order of importance, include student debt, a living wage, earned benefits, a woman's right to control her personal health care, fair and free elections, and global warming, just to name a few. Most important is the need to preserve the various structures of our democratic republic created and built by the Founding Fathers.

Hard working Americans are bringing us back from the pandemic and we need to elect leaders who will get things done for us by creating good paying jobs and lowering costs. Working people are the engines of the economy. When workers get a raise and have more money, they are able to spend that money in their communities, which helps local communities thrive!

Ask yourself if you support Medicare having the ability to negotiate lower drug prices for seniors or limiting the cost of insulin to \$35 a month. How about enhanced health care and disability benefits for millions of veterans or saving pensions for hundreds of thousands of retired workers whose pensions were at risk?

In my opinion, any candidate who supports retirees and working Americans deserves my support! As plans are formulated to endorse these kinds of candidates, we may be seeking volunteers to write post cards, make phone calls, send text messages, attend meetings, rallies, and/or town halls, talk to your local representatives, or engage neighbors and family members in discussions.

Most importantly - vote!



Decide what topics are important to you and seek information about those issues from candidates you are considering. Ask yourself if you know what the position of the candidate you support is on our democratic institutions and structures? Do you know if they support free and fair elections and the peaceful transfer of power from one administration to another? How do they feel about maintaining access to a good, affordable Medicare program and Social Security? What is their stance on the pension you receive, is it an earned benefit or an entitlement?

Immigration is a much more difficult topic to solve. Is your candidate willing to work to resolve these problems in a mutually beneficial way? Are you getting your background candidate information from a reliable, unbiased source which provides various points of view? Are you on the alert for misinformation and/or can you sort that information into facts versus opinions?

Now is the time to prepare for the election, so you can cast an informed vote and support the issues that are most important to you, your family, and your fellow Americans.

Taking the mystery out of leave donations

If you know of a state employee with a long-term illness, you may be able to help them out by donating some of your unneeded annual accruals through the Leave Donation Program, which was negotiated as part of your PEF contract.

The program was developed to assist employees dealing with long-term illness who have exhausted their accrued leave credits and need to remain out of work. Over the years, PEF improved on the benefit and now members can donate to fellow State workers in any other agency.

Eligibility

Donations may be made by PEF-represented employees to other employees who meet the following eligibility requirements:

- Being a member of a negotiating unit eligible to participate in the Leave Donation Program, including all Executive Branch employees;
- Subject to the attendance rules of the Department of Civil Service, or agency attendance rules, and eligible to earn leave credits;
- The recipient is absent due to a non-occupational, personal illness or disability for which they have submitted (and continue to submit as requested) medical documentation satisfactory to management;
- The recipient has exhausted all leave credits;
- The recipient is expected to be absent for at least two bi-weekly payroll periods following exhaustion of leave credits or sick leave at half-pay; and
- The recipient must not have any disciplinary actions, or unsatisfactory performance evaluations within their last three years of state employment.

Additionally, recipients do not earn leave credits or accrue eligibility for sick leave at half-pay while they are using donated credits.



Donations

The requirements for donation include:

- Donations can be made from annual leave only;
- Donations must be made in full-day (7.5 or 8 hour) units;
- The employee, coworkers or local union representatives may solicit donations; the employing agency does not solicit donations;
- Donor identity is kept strictly confidential;
- Donors must retain a minimum balance of at least 10 days of annual leave standing to their credit after making a donation. Donors cannot donate vacation that they would otherwise forfeit.
- Donations made across agency lines shall be used prior to donations made within an agency. Donated credits not used by recipients are returned to donors, provided the donor is employed in the same agency as the recipient. Donated credits from employees outside the agency will not be returned;
- The personnel/payroll office of the employing agency or facility is responsible for verifying medical documentation, reviewing eligibility requirements, approving, and processing donations, confirming employee acceptance of donations, and transferring credits; and
- The program will not be subject to the grievance procedure.

PEF maintains a list of members in need of donations here.

Other bargaining units, M/C

The following provisions allow for PEF-represented employees to participate in the voluntary donation or receipt of accrued vacation credits with other bargaining units or M/C employees:

- Vacation credits may only be donated, received, or credited between employees who are deemed eligible to participate in an authorized leave donation program, provided that there are simultaneously in effect a Leave Donation Exchange Memorandum of Agreement between the Office of Employee Relations and the employee organizations representing both the proposed recipient and the proposed donor, or applicable attendance rules for managerial and confidential employees.
- Donations are governed by the provisions of the program applicable to the donor; receipt, crediting and the use of donations are governed by the provisions of the program applicable to the recipient.





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.

Barbara Bertucio is a curatorial visitor services specialist 1 at the Office of General Services in Albany.

Cassandra Bradford is a registered nurse 2 at SUNY Upstate Medical Center in Syracuse.

Kevin Bromley is a registered nurse 1 with the Office of People with Developmental Disabilities in Norwood.

Rhonda Carroll-Eldridge is a dairy products specialist 1 at the Department of Agriculture and Markets in Steuben County.

Brian Cellery is an information technology specialist 3 at the Office of Information Technology Services in Albany.

Kimberly Ernst-Harris is a supervising offender rehabilitation coordinator at the state Department of Corrections and Community Supervision central office in Albany.

Heather Farthing is a registered nurse 2 at Capital District Psychiatric Center in Albany.

Sally Fontana is social work supervisor 1, LCSW at Mohawk Valley Psychiatric Center in Utica.

Cherie Griffin is a taxpayer services specialist 2 at the state Department of Taxation and Finance in Albany.

Rishona Haynes is a registered nurse 1 at SUNY Stony Brook on Long Island.

Drina Holden is a senior certification analyst at the state Department of Economic Development in Manhattan.

Ann Krenn is an Offender Rehabilitation Coordinator at Groveland Correctional Facility in Sonyea.

Roxeen Mundy is an information technology specialist 2 at the state Office of Information Technology Services in Albany.

Rose Niang is an investigative specialist 1 at the Department of Education in Manhattan.

Darlene (Gemma) Rose is an employment counselor for the state Labor Department in Amsterdam,.

Vexilla Quinlan is a registered nurse 1 at Bronx Psychiatric Center in the Bronx.

Vicki Sweet is a business systems analyst at the Worker's Compensation Board in Menands.

Christine Ward is a senior Worker's Compensation Examiner at the Worker's Compensation Board in Menands.

Roslyn Williams is an economic development program specialist 2 at the Department of Agriculture and Markets 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 174 and 175 of the [2023-26 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 communicator@pef.org, or call 518-785-1900.



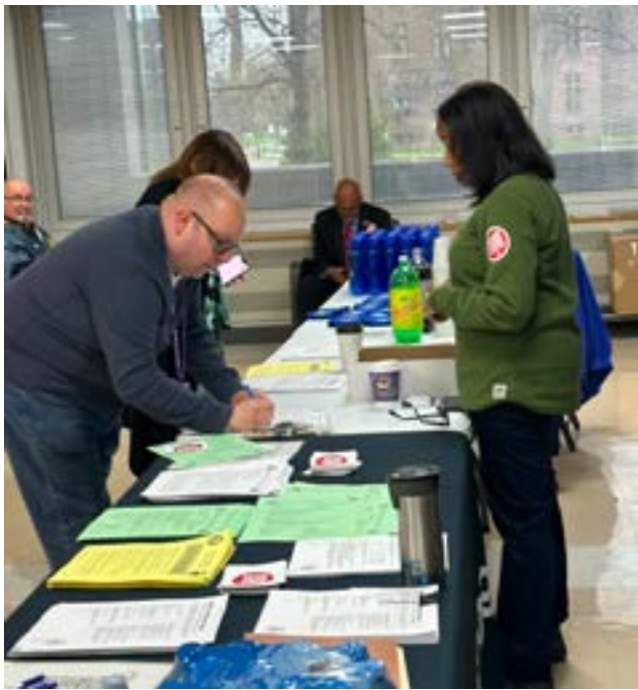
April 24, 2024

It was a night of solidarity at Lenox Road Baptist Church in Brooklyn as PEF leaders and members joined our union siblings from UUP, concerned clergy, and members of the community for a prayer rally and march from the church to SUNY Downstate. Thank you, Brooklyn, for lifting up your voices and declaring, BROOKLYN NEEDS DOWNSTATE! For the moment, those efforts have paid off. Thanks to the support of State Sen. Zellnor Myrie, Assemblymember Brian Cunningham, the Majority Conferences in both houses of the Legislature, and Gov. Kathy Hochul, a new advisory board will convene to discuss the hospital's finances, the services it provides, and the health care needs of the community.



April 19, 2024

A night of solidarity at Lenox Road Baptist Church in Brooklyn on Thursday, as PEF leaders and members joined our union siblings from UUP, concerned clergy, and members of the community for a prayer rally and march from the church to SUNY Downstate. Thank you, Brooklyn, for lifting up your voices and declaring, BROOKLYN NEEDS DOWNSTATE!



April 17, 2024

Members at Buffalo Psychiatric Center received updates on PEF's response to the April 3 stabbing of three staffers, including PEF member Edward Gordon (link to GoFundMe) and learning about counseling and other resources available to them.



April 16, 2024

Dozens of PEF Nurses descended on the Capitol in Albany for an annual union tradition – Nurse Lobby Day – talking to their local elected officials about issues concerning their profession – from recruitment to mandated overtime to safe staffing ratios. You can read all about it in this issue, [here](#).

