

Vol. 43

*The*  
**COMMUNICATOR**

No. 1

FEBRUARY 2025



Next round of Higher  
Education Differential  
payments in April

Thousands of members  
took advantage of  
trainings provided by  
the PEF contract in 2024

Health and Safety  
success stories earn  
members Buffalo  
Sabres tickets

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## THE COMMUNICATOR

Volume 43 No. 1  
February 2025 (0745-6514)

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

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

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# The President's Message By WAYNE SPENCE

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## PEF firing on all cylinders as 2025 gets off to a fast start

This is my 11th year as PEF president, and I can truly say that we've never started out a year quite this fast before! Your union is hard at work responding to it all – from the State [budget hearings](#); to signs that Washington may reduce federal funding of various New York State agencies; to our efforts to curb workplace violence. We couldn't fit every story in this issue of *The Communicator*, so keep checking our [Facebook](#), [X](#) and [Instagram](#) accounts the rest of this month, as well as [PEF.org](#), for the very latest.

In this issue, we have reports about the recent meeting of the [Civil Service Commission](#), at which PEF cautioned against using the NY HELPS program as a long-term solution to the State's staffing crisis, and pushed for an update on the status of the comprehensive statewide salary review Gov. Hochul called for a couple years ago. We also summarize a webinar I was proud to participate in with the Worker Institute at Cornell University, about the [negative impacts of privatization on the State's mental healthcare workforce](#).

On the Health & Safety front, please visit a new section on our website dedicated to [workplace violence](#). We are launching an ad campaign this month on highway billboards, CDTA buses and the Amtrak station in Rensselaer to bring attention to the growing problem, and are pushing for budget funding of body scanners at OMH, OPWDD, OCFS and OASAS to help prevent dangerous weapons from being brought into facilities.

I welcome Scott Staub to the Statewide Officers team. Scott was elected [Region 5 Coordinator](#) following in the footsteps of David Dubofsky. He is an experienced union leader from OTDA and will represent PEF members in the Southern Tier well.

Lastly, a pair of retiree stories to recommend: First, [Erna Blackman](#), a former parole officer who retired in 2012, is finding success in retirement by helping kids who are experiencing hair loss due to cancer and other medical conditions. And a hat tip to reporter Najee Walker, who found out when he accepted a job at PEF that his [grandmother](#) was with the union at the beginning. Just try not to be too jealous that she's Tier 1.

In Unity,

A handwritten signature in blue ink that reads "Wayne Spence". The signature is written in a cursive, flowing style with a long horizontal line extending from the end.

Wayne Spence

# PEF testifies at Civil Service commission meeting

By **NAJEE WALKER**

When the HELP program was introduced in 2023 by the Department of Civil Service (DCS), it was meant to be a temporary initiative to support hiring at agencies that urgently needed staff. The program focused on specific titles and waived exams to fast track the process. In 2024, the program was expanded to become NY HELPS and extended to include additional titles.

In 2024, PEF voiced concern that NY HELPS would focus only on hiring and that priorities around hosting examinations and re-examining competitive salaries would no longer be a focus for DCS. Part of PEF's careful support for the program, however, was to place a one-year time limit on the program.

On Feb. 12, the Civil Service Commission approved an extension of NY HELPS through June 2026. The Commission also added new titles to the program.

While PEF supports the overall goal to transform the hiring process, PEF Acting Director of Civil Service Enforcement and Research Veronica Foley told Civil Service Commissioner Timothy Hogues that while DCS is working to improve recruitment, there are still concerns about ongoing retention efforts.

During the 2023 – 2024 legislative session, PEF advocated for DCS to increase the number of promotion and transition exams within the state system in order to retain institutional knowledge and support state employees who are already in the system. However, data obtained by PEF shows a decrease.

"The Department provided PEF data on January 10, 2025, that demonstrates a decrease in the total number of promotion and transitions exams since NY HELPS was first implemented," testified Foley. "In 2022, a total of 568 promotion and transitions exams were held, in 2023, 527 were held and in 2024, 448 were held."

Hosting promotion exams helps keep promotion lists robust. As the program exists now, promotion lists must be exhausted first and then the direct line promotion field canvassed before candidates from outside of State service can be hired. Without the increased number of exams DCS committed to establishing, lists are exhausted quickly, and outside hires can be made faster.



Additionally, 230 PEF members are currently serving under provisional titles, an issue which more promotional exams could remedy.

Jessica Rowe, the Deputy Commissioner for Merit System Operations at DCS, said that there is still a focus on retention at DCS, because of variables such as the type of examinations being held each year and the number of candidates who can apply to a title, the number of exams can take a hit.

"The priority for the agency was to ensure that while we are able to recruit individuals through NY HELPS, that we also have a focus on retaining that talent through the holding of promotion examinations and transition exams," Rowe said. "That will continue if the program is extended. We will continue to focus on ensuring that we can retain the high-quality candidates and the other state employees who have already provided service and dedication to the New York State workforce."

PEF's other concerns are with the ability to test overall. As DCS continues to work on opening 12 new testing centers, PEF has learned that two of the centers will open as "pilots." However, no dates about when tests will be held has been provided.



"PEF shares the Department's enthusiasm regarding these centers. They will help remedy longstanding concerns from our members regarding access to testing sites with the expectation that computer-based tests will speed up the hiring process and ensure more accurate test scoring," said Foley. "There remain questions about how the Department will build a completely new computer-based system for the centers and how they will staff them."

During the meeting PEF also pushed for details about a promised comprehensive statewide salary review that has been in the works for more than two years. The DCS Division of Classification and Compensation was allocated \$2.2 million to begin work on the studies.

Commissioner Hogues shared some good news on that front, but admitted that it's coming along slowly.

"The compensation study kicked off last week," said Commissioner Hogues. "The plan, as I am told, is that it should run through the end of this year. The job evaluation RFP (request for proposal) was put out last week as well, so we're looking for a response in the coming months."

Still, PEF members say that they cannot wait for an increase in their salaries as prices across the country continue to skyrocket. PEF is hopeful that the results of these studies show a need for higher compensation for state workers, but asked DCS and the Commissioner to continue to work on increases.

"We are still waiting for the studies to begin, however when they do, we hope that these investigations do not interfere with the Department's regular work of processing requests for salary differentials and reallocations," said Foley.

PEF is grateful and supportive of the work done by DCS and pledged to provide the Department any resources within the union's power to help with opening the regional testing centers, examining competitiveness, and increasing promotional exams.

"We know that if they are allocated the necessary funds and resources to transform the civil service system, New York will be able to hire the talent needed to provide the critical public services New Yorkers depend on," said Foley. "We understand there are difficulties in meeting these goals, but NY HELPS is not a long-term solution."

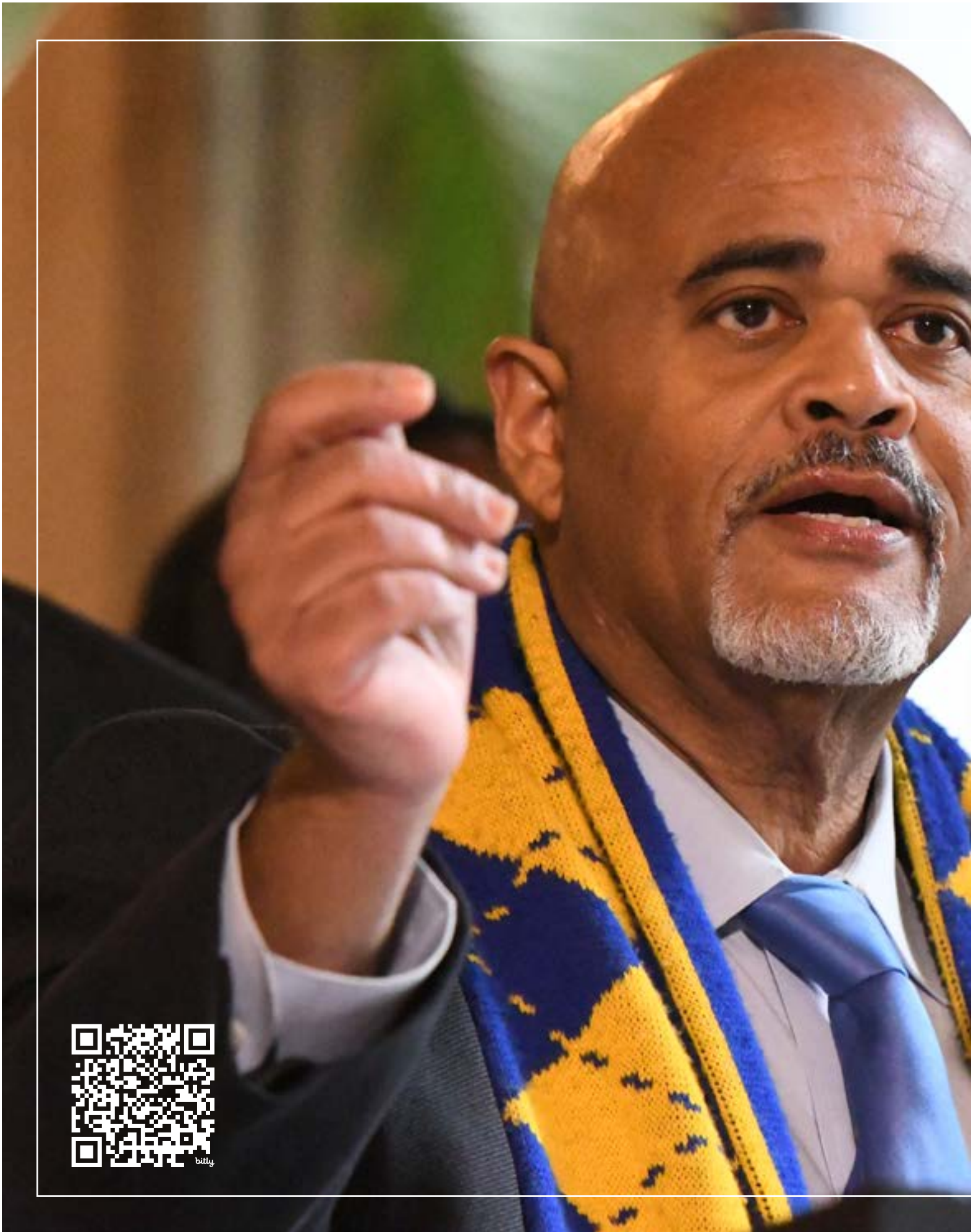


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New + Existing PEF Members

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بیتنا



SUNY Downstate Press Conference  
February 4, 2025

# Coalition of unions, clergy and legislators seek transparency and investment for SUNY Downstate

By **NAJEE WALKER**

A coalition of labor unions, Brooklyn clergy and community leaders spent the day in Albany on February 4, visiting with legislators and holding a press conference, calling on the SUNY Downstate Community Advisory Board (DCAB) to be more transparent about their plans for SUNY Downstate Hospital in Central Brooklyn. Among the demands from the coalition is an injection of \$250 million into the only public hospital serving Central Brooklyn.

On January 22, members of the coalition and other members of the community attended the first of three scheduled public hearings held by DCAB. During the hearing, the community learned that Governor Kathy Hochul planned on adding \$450 million to an already allocated \$300 million for the hospital. However, after the hearing, the community felt that they were still being left in the dark and that more could be done.

Bishop Orlando Findlayter, a pastor at New Hope Christian Fellowship in Brooklyn, attended the hearing and helped lead the coalition through lobbying visits and a press conference in Albany on Feb. 4. He said that more needs to be done to make sure the community is being heard.

“Downstate is in crisis because the state of New York and SUNY neglected our hospital and has not invested in it,” Bishop Findlayter said. “Now, the Downstate Community Advisory Board, which is charged with recommending what our community hospital should look like in the future—and must base that decision on public input—is holding closed-door meetings and has scheduled just three public hearings before it makes its decision.”

During the coalition’s first meeting with State Senator Toby Stavisky, members of the coalition urged the senator to push for two major priorities when it comes to Downstate’s future. The first demand is extra time for DCAB to be able to review findings, meet with the community and deliver a report. Currently, that deadline is set for April 1.

Fred Kowal is the President of United University Professions (UUP) and represents organized labor on the DCAB. He said that an extension until at least June 1 would be helpful.

“The Governor is aware of this demand, we understand she is amenable to that push,” said President Kowal. “It would give us more time to have public input and to hear from stakeholders like

[Brooklyn For Downstate](#), which has drafted a plan filled with detailed recommendations from the community.”

Much of the community is concerned that plans to downsize the hospital will still go forward. While the coalition, and even some community members, do not completely disagree with closing some beds in the hospital, they do not think that inpatient services should be outsourced entirely.

There are also concerns about Downstate remaining a public teaching hospital. As one of the only public teaching hospitals in the area, Downstate treats patients regardless of insurance and almost 60% of students studying medical sciences at the university are people of color.

“For Downstate to operate as a teaching hospital, in order for the college and for the physicians to remain at Downstate, there has to be a minimum of 250 beds,” said Acting PEF Director of Downstate Field Services Debbie Egel. “Otherwise, they will not be able to certify.”

At the press conference, the coalition gathered with members of the legislature, including Assemblywoman Monique Chandler-Waterman and Assemblyman Brian Cunningham, and other union members and leadership, like NYSUT President Melinda Person.

They each called on the governor and fellow legislators to focus on the future of Downstate and to involve the community every step of the way, especially as more staff at the hospital worry about their careers at Downstate.

“We want to make sure there’s no confusion. Downstate is open,” said Assemblywoman Chandler-Waterman. “Downstate has to be invested in and we need to have that official announcement and make sure that the community is sure of what is happening.”

PEF President Wayne Spence was around the first time SUNY Downstate’s future was in jeopardy. He is grateful that the fight was won in 2011, but said now it’s about more than just keeping the hospital open. It’s time for Downstate to thrive.

“It should flourish, it should be invested in, it should be a place for excellence,” said President Spence. “The future of Downstate is just



too important to rush. It is too important to the tens of thousands of New Yorkers who have received quality care there these last few years. I am asking the legislature to fund it properly.”

While Governor Hochul delivered operating and capital funds in last year’s budget and has pledged more in her current budget proposal for a combined total of \$750 million, the coalition believes adding another \$250 million in would help renovate the hospital to today’s standards after years of neglect and lack of investment.

“We came to Albany not to ask, we came to demand. We came to demand of the Governor. And while we say thank you, we say we need more,” said Bishop Findlayter. “To the legislature we are saying you should not vote on any budget that does not include \$250 million more for SUNY Downstate.”

Members of the coalition are preparing to attend the second DCAB hearing on February 27 at CUNY Medgar Evers College in Brooklyn. Details will be announced on the Brooklyn For Downstate [website](#).



Bishop Findlayter and the coalition urged the Legislature and Governor to invest in SUNY Downstate.



Assemblywoman Monique Chandler-Waterman gives address at press conference with the coalition in support of additional funding to SUNY Downstate.



Coalition members with Assemblywoman Alicia Hyndman following lobbying meeting to urge investment in Downstate.

# Region 5 elects Scott Staub as new coordinator

By NAJEE WALKER

Scott Staub, a Disability Analyst 3 at OTDA in Endicott, was elected by Region 5 members in January to be their new regional coordinator.

Staub succeeds David Dubofsky from the State Insurance Fund, who stepped down in December 2024 after nine years of service as Region 5 coordinator.

Staub has taken on various PEF leadership roles throughout his career. He served as a Division 399 steward for 10 years, and at various times has held the positions of council leader and secretary. He's been a PEF Executive Board member since 2021 and co-chairs the Region 5 Political Action Committee (PAC) with Dubofsky.

Staub believes in trying to get people as involved as possible in the union, making sure that anyone who wants a seat at the table, gets one.

"I believe in the idiom 'many hands make light work,'" he said. "I think that people should get involved in the union however they can. I've always wanted to make sure members get the information they need to make good decisions while being a part of this union."

Staub comes from a union household. As a child, he watched his father, who was a member of a local ironworkers' union, go on strike and advocate for safety at the workplace. He credits his own union philosophies to the work he saw his father do as a union member.

"Everyone wants to be able to go to work and be safe, and also come home safely," said Staub. "A lot of the things we advocate for, the social contract aspects of our benefits, we do great on as a union. But I know that right now even that seems to be a challenge and we must work to keep those good parts of our benefits."

During his time as co-chair of the Region 5 PAC, Staub was able to work with members outside of his division and agency and was glad to get to know what other agencies need. He believes that Region 5 members are concerned with a lot of issues, but that top of mind for most members is safety.

"I know that we do our best to make sure Region 5 members know what PEF is doing to address their issues," he said. "As the PAC



co-chair, I have had a chance to see those issues and grievances among the different divisions. I want to continue that connection as coordinator."

Although Staub was the only one who petitioned for the seat, he is grateful that his relationship and work with other divisions was reflected in the final tally. He believes that petitioning should reflect all divisions, not just his own.

Staub believes in PEF, and in all unions, and the good they can do for all New Yorkers and Americans. Even as unions and civil service come under fire, Staub is hopeful for the future.

"I understand that unions often have defined benefits packages that other employees, especially in the private sector, may not have, but we should be advocating that they get those, not trying to take it away from those who do," said Staub. "With civil service under attack, especially at the federal level, and with the demonizing of public service, we have a lot of work to do. But I am ready to do it."

*Editor's note: Members in Region 5 who want to get to know Scott or join any regional committees are encouraged to call the Region 5 office at (607) 785-1699.*





# Tell your lawmakers to address PEF's budget priorities!

With the FY 2025-26 State Budget cycle in full swing, it's important that all PEF members make their voices heard about union priorities! We have 10 letter writing campaigns this year, ranging from pension reform to workplace violence to healthcare in retirement. Please use the links below to send issue-specific emails to your State Senator and Assemblymember.

- [New York should not join the Interstate Nurse Licensure Compact](#)
- [Preserve the Income-Related Monthly Adjustment Amount \(IRMAA\) for retirees](#)
- [Increase funding SUNY Downstate & Upstate](#)
- [Expand ACT teams at OMH](#)
- [Support a capital plan for OPWDD facilities](#)
- [Expand the use of body scanners at OMH, OPWDD, OCFS and OASAS](#)
- [Better protect public employees from attacks on the job](#)
- [Fix Tier 6 – New York's pension plan must be improved](#)
- [Funding for the New York Cultural Education Center](#)
- [Opposition to the expansion of the problematic Design-Build program](#)

Together, our collective voices really do make a difference. If you read the PEF "Fund our Future" campaign literature, you will see that many of our ideas were once again incorporated in the budget. Those Fund Our Future materials were provided to the governor and our voices were heard.



# PEF retiree's work honored as Nonprofit of the Night at Barclays Center

By **NAJEE WALKER**

During the Brooklyn Nets vs. New York Knicks game on January 21, 2025, Erna Blackman and her team were brought onto the court to celebrate her nonprofit Butterflies By Blaq Inc. What was already an exciting evening turned into something monumental for the PEF Retiree, as her now 13-year-old nonprofit was given a spotlight.

"It was amazing to be honored," said Blackman. "I had no idea that this little nonprofit I had was going to grow the way it did. I started this out of my own pocket, as my way of giving back. And it took off and grew wings."

Blackman was a parole officer and PEF member from 1994 until her retirement in 2016. During her State service, she found moments in her busy work schedule to volunteer with the American Cancer Society, where she fitted wigs for people who were affected by the disease.

"I got involved with the Cancer Society because I saw so many people who were affected by it, and I've always had a passion for cosmetology," said Blackman. "This is such a horrible disease, and I wanted to do something to help. This was the way I felt I could do it and I felt led to it."

While she was happy to provide for people who needed it, she noticed a disparity in wigs for people of color.

"A lot of the wigs for people of certain ethnicities were in short supply, and there really wasn't much variety," said Blackman. "There was even less variety for children from underserved communities."

This gap sparked the inspiration for her to start Butterflies By Blaq Inc., a 501(c)(3) nonprofit organization that provides free hair replacement and hair solutions for children who are dealing with medical conditions that cause hair loss.

Now, 13 years later, Blackman's mission has exceeded expectations, and she's delivered wigs to hundreds across the New York Tri-State area. Having the opportunity to share information on the Jumbotron at Barclays and spread awareness of the work being done to empower underserved children of diverse ethnic backgrounds made her feel special.

"This was an unforgettable milestone," she said. "The recognition affirms the importance of our mission, and the love and support we received inspires us to continue making a difference for children in need."

As a PEF member, Blackman always felt that the union had her back. Parole officers, she said, work a difficult job and a dangerous one. Having PEF behind her during her time as an officer helped her feel part of a community.

"I've always felt like the union was standing behind us, and parole officers need that kind of support," said Blackman. "And I've always felt like PEF was with us when we needed them."

Butterflies By Blaq Inc. is always looking for donations, including hair donations. Their [website](#) includes details about how to donate and support the business as well as how to request services. Blackman also maintains an [Etsy store](#) whose profits are put back into the nonprofit.

"We are also launching Blaq Butterflies Wellness Boutique, again as a way to help people and also help boost the nonprofit," said Blackman. "We plan on having items that help with one's wellness as well as artwork for sale with a regularly changing inventory."

Thanks in part to being welcomed onto the court during the January 21 game, Blackman now feels that there is even more room for Butterflies By Blaq Inc. to grow and expand, including into more states than just New York.

"I've had mothers from all across the country find us here in New York," she said. "They've all said that they felt like there was no door open to them, no access. But we've held that door open for them and now I feel like we can really reach them."





Erna Blackman and her Butterflies by BlaQ team are recognized at center court of Barclays Center on Jan. 21, 2025.





# Health and Safety success stories earn members Buffalo Sabres tickets

By **NAJEE WALKER**

The health and safety of members is PEF's top priority. And while horrific stories of stabbings or assaults earn the headlines, there are many ways that PEF members work within the labor-management system to solve problems. That's why PEF President Wayne Spence asked PEF's Membership Benefits Program (MBP) to help run a sweepstakes for members in Western New York asking them to share their health and safety success stories for a chance to win tickets to a Buffalo Sabres hockey game.

"We have been hearing from members about all kinds of health and safety issues from infrastructure to lack of equipment and more," said President Spence. "We've also been hearing from people who said that they've been able to use the union, or come up with ideas, that solve some of those issues. I wanted to highlight that."

Ahmad Rashid is a registered nurse at Roswell Park. Rashid's story centers around the cancer center not having enough staff, especially following the COVID-19 pandemic. Rashid said that while the institution has been working on the issue, he saw a chance to do something.

"We've addressed this by advocating for increased staffing levels and implementing strategies to improve workflows, such as streamlining communication through technology and adjusting assignments to balance workloads," wrote Rashid in his response to MBP.

Rashid said that Roswell Park is not any different from other hospitals that experience short staffing, with sick calls, medical leaves and other unexpected absences being the main culprits. He believes that while Roswell Park is making efforts, it can do more to shore up its defenses by hiring more Patient Care Technicians (PCTs).

"PCTs are vital team members, assisting with patient mobility, hygiene, and other essential tasks that directly impact patient outcomes," said Rashid. "Yet they are often paid close to minimum wage while working under high-stress conditions. I firmly believe that PCTs should earn at least \$20 per hour or more, given their contributions to patient care."

Revenue Crimes Specialist Trainee at the Department of Tax and Finance Alex Scalone grew concerned about the frequency of



fruit flies in his office building. While fruit flies are typically more annoying than they are dangerous, Scalone felt that the issue was getting out of control.

“Every day there would be fruit flies buzzing around our heads at our desks, in the break room, and everywhere in the office,” said Scalone. “The issue was not dangerous to anyone’s health, so we could not get approval for an exterminator to come in and remove them.”

When Scalone researched how best to get rid of fruit flies, he learned that mixing everyday ingredients like vinegar and honey attracts and traps fruit flies when put into a cup and left out. Today, Scalone said, there are no more fruit flies in the office and without harmful chemicals which may have made the situation worse.

Philip Reinagel is a Medicaid Integrity Specialist 1 at the Office of the Medicaid Inspector General, but his story came from when he worked for the New York State Retirement System.

As an avid Buffalo Bills fan, he was devastated on January 3, 2023, watching cornerback Damar Hamlin go into cardiac arrest after a hard hit during a football game. Watching the drama on TV as medical personnel employed an Automated External Defibrillator (AED) to keep Hamlin’s heart beating made him realize his office building had no such device.

“We would often meet with older individuals simply based on retirement age or people with disabilities that may have been forced

into exploring retirement options, so our office tended to deal with people that might be of higher risk of heart problems,” recalled Reinagel. “If someone were to suddenly go into cardiac arrest, we did not have the ability to help them to the fullest.”

So Reinagel contacted the Emergency Preparedness Team at the Office of the Comptroller and after several months he was able to secure an AED for the 8th floor of the Ellicott Square Building and arrange for training on how to use it effectively.

In an ideal world, Reinagel said more people would have CPR and AED training throughout his workplace.

“I would welcome the opportunity to be re-certified in CPR/AED so I would feel more comfortable acting in an emergency,” he said.

Each of these stories highlights how PEF members can be proactive in their workplace to ensure the health and safety of themselves and their co-workers. The PEF Health & Safety Department is always available to assist members who notice something unsafe at work. Contact them at [HealthandSafety@pef.org](mailto:HealthandSafety@pef.org).

*Editor’s Note: Reinagel, Scalone and Rashid will be watching the Sabres take on the Edmonton Oilers on March 10 at the KeyBank Center in Buffalo. We’ll include a center ice photo in a future issue!*

# PEF begins setting priorities for 2025 following executive budget release

By **NAJEE WALKER**

Affordability and safety were the key talking points for New York Governor Kathy Hochul during her January 14 State of the State address. The governor spoke directly to New Yorkers, asking them to believe that she will fight for them.

“My fellow New Yorkers, as we reflect on the State of our great State, the Empire State, two things are very clear to me. Our future depends on the ability of every family to afford the essentials of life, and our ability to protect the safety and security of our residents. But we will not achieve these goals without a fight,” said Governor Hochul. “So, my commitment to every New Yorker is this: Your family is my fight. That has been the inspiration and impetus for everything we have done for the last three years.”

During the address, the governor pledged tax cuts for New Yorkers making less than \$323,000, an increase in the Child Tax Credit program, investment in New York City’s MTA, industries that reduce carbon emissions, and strengthening laws like Kendra’s Law and reshaping mental health systems to help reduce crime across the state and in the NYC subway system.

The details behind her proposals came a week later, when the [Executive Budget](#) book was released. PEF’s Legislative Department immediately went to work identifying what to support and what to oppose in the budget proposal.

“Governor Hochul has advanced an Executive Budget that puts money in the pockets of hard-working New Yorkers who need it through middle class tax cuts, an inflation rebate and the expansion of the child tax credit,” said PEF President Wayne Spence. “The Governor’s proposal provides needed capital investments in the SUNY Downstate and Upstate hospitals, the State Museum and the Institute for Basic Research and makes important investments to fortify treatment in the state-operated mental health system. We look forward to working with her and the Legislature to improve upon this blueprint.”

Several of the governor’s proposals are supported by PEF, like the proposal to require the Commissioner of Education to submit a report to the Governor and Legislature with information regarding activities, funding and initiatives for the New York State Museum. PEF believes that as long as staff at the museum are included in any decision making, the report and any recommendations could improve working conditions and expand the state museum.

There are also some proposals that PEF is against, such as another attempt to enter New York State into the Interstate Nurse Licensure Compact, which could undermine the quality of patient care in this state.



PEF is focused on making sure that the budget and the eventual legislation that results from it reflect the needs of public employees.

At the top of the list is safety and security for front-line state employees. PEF is requesting appropriations to increase staffing at the Office of Mental Health (OMH), Office for People with Development Disabilities (OPWDD), Office of Children and Family Services (OCFS) and the Department of Corrections and Community Supervision (DOCCS). Additionally, PEF is calling for \$50 million to install body scanners at the State’s secure and forensic facilities in an effort to prevent weapons from being smuggled in that can be used in violent attacks, as well as increased penalties for individuals who assault public employees.

PEF is also calling on the Governor and Legislature to invest \$25 million in Assertive Community Treatment (ACT) and Intensive Case Management staff at OMH facilities. ACT aims to reduce reliance on hospitals by providing service to those who need it most in a community focused setting. Out of 30 state-operated facilities, only 12 have ACT teams and there are no teams in several major cities, including Syracuse, Rochester, and Albany.

PEF Legislative Director Pat Lyons said that the Governor has committed money to mental health in the past, but critical investments in key areas are needed now.

“Governor Hochul has made a strong, \$1 billion commitment to repairing and improving the state’s mental health service network. PEF appreciates the investment in re-opening mental health beds closed under Governor Cuomo and establishing new forensic beds for the increasing number of incarcerated individuals or other potentially dangerous individuals being diagnosed with mental illnesses,” said Lyons. “However, more resources and more emphasis must be placed on state-operated mental health services, which serve as the safety net provider for uninsured, underinsured, indigent or undocumented New Yorkers.”

PEF will be reviewing more priorities once budget amendments are made and released by the governor on February 11.

Editor’s Note: PEF Vice President Randi DiAntonio will testify in person at the Joint Workforce Development/Labor hearing on Feb. 26 and the union will submit written testimony to other committees. All the testimonies will be accessible on [PEF’s website](#).



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# PEF partners with Cornell ILR School to discuss report about the impact of privatization on New York's mental health workforce

By **KATE STICKLES**

President Wayne Spence and Vice President Randi DiAntonio made the case against austerity and privatization of wages and employment of New York's public mental health workforce during a webinar hosted by The Worker Institute and ILR School at Cornell University on Feb. 6.

"In the last decade, New York state mental health agencies have outsourced work traditionally done by public sector employees to private sector contractors," said Patricia Campos-Medina, the executive director of The Worker Institute. "In this webinar, we will discuss how changes in the investment in this workforce have impacted the quality of mental health care provided to New York state residents."

The Institute's director of research presented the key findings of a report that focused on the mental health care sector, exploring the changes in the size of the mental health care workforce over time, changes in the composition of that workforce by employer type, and worker demographics. The study also delved into wages by employer type.

[Click here to view the full report.](#)

"I'm not surprised by some of the data," President Spence said. "I knew, as PEF President since 2015, under the Cuomo administration, public sector jobs in mental health were drastically cut. What was surprising to me was the impact on African Americans. I didn't expect to see such a dramatic impact on those workers."

Between 2013 and 2023, the state lost 1,600 employees at the Office of Mental Health, he said, and facilities like Riker's Island, which aren't meant to be in the mental health business, are being forced into that role.

PEF fought against the closure of Western New York Children's Psychiatric Center and Rockland Psychiatric Center – both campaigns highlighting the need for data to back up the union's arguments.

Vice President Randi DiAntonio spoke about how reviving mental healthcare statewide is a key goal of the union's Fund Our Future for a Thriving New York campaign.



"The purpose of this campaign was not to focus on the jobs that we do, but on the services that are critical to New Yorkers, especially vulnerable New Yorkers," she said. "When we looked at what we were seeing, this undercutting of the workforce, we realized it had ramifications that really magnified through the course of COVID-19."

DiAntonio discussed the impact of losing thousands of inpatient psychiatric beds, the lack of job security and good benefits and wages for private sector employees, and how it all adds up to gaps in continuity of care.





"This study shows many communities were harmed by the transformation," she said. "From just a civil service standpoint, these jobs are legs up to the middle class. Civil service jobs allow for advancement. This data has helped us make the case that these jobs are not just about the employees, but also about the impact on services."

The union is already hard at work helping shape the State's 2025 budget, pushing for additional forensic beds and staff at mental health agencies, as well as a more Assertive Community Treatment (ACT) teams, and further changes to Tier 6 of the pension plan, to improve staff recruitment and retention.

That's why partnerships with legislators and agency commissioners are so vital.

Sen. Robert Jackson, a former PEF member himself who chairs the Senate's Civil Service & Pension Committee, said this is not just a crisis, it's also a political failure that is hurting communities all over the state.

"You watch the news, you listen to the radio, and you see this person is being pushed on the train tracks without any warning," he said. "People are basically having some mental health issues, and they are around the communities without the help that they need. Austerity is a choice. Privatization is a choice. And both are failing the people who need the services the most."

Sen. Jackson heralded state-operated mental health services as the most effective at delivering care.

"Positions in state psychiatric centers, hospitals, community clinics, and crisis response teams have been cut and outsourced to private entities," he said. "And this shift has led to lower wages. Precarious employment conditions for health professionals who once had job security and union representation now face temporary contracts."

Sen. Samra Brouk, chair of the Senate Mental Health Committee, said additional data will be key as she and Senator Jackson push for change.

"Anecdotes cannot change policy alone," she said. "So, seeing data, irrefutable data around trends that have occurred because of privatization, because of divestment from our mental health sector, from our public sector here in New York, is absolutely crucial so that we can be thoughtful and deliberate about how we move forward."

Sen. Brouk added it was the wrong time to be cutting services.

"It seemed so contradictory to me to be cutting the mental health budget in the midst of not just the COVID pandemic, but a mental health crisis," she said. "The truth is government is there to serve. We are there to serve regardless of profit, regardless of margin. When you take away those supports, when you close facilities, when you don't invest in that workforce, you end up with large groups of people who will not be served."

Aspiring to work toward a solution, Department of Civil Service Commissioner Timothy Hogue said his agency aims to bolster the ranks of the state workforce and has seen some success.

"Building the New York State workforce has been one of Governor Hochul's top priorities," he said. "Right along with making sure that mental health was something that she continued to invest in and fight for."

Commissioner Hogue talked about the New York Hiring for Emergency Limited Placement Statewide (NY HELPS) program, and said it has brought more than 22,500 individuals into State service, some of whom work in the mental health sector.

"These positions are a great pathway into the middle class and they support the economy," he said. "I'm excited about the direction we are going. I agree that mental health is a priority."

You can view the entire webinar [here](#).

View PEF's Legislative and Political Action page [here](#), where you can send emails to your local lawmakers to support PEF's budget priorities, including additional mental health resources.



PEF Vice President Bruce Giddings addresses the crowd at the Share Our Wealth rally at the Capitol in Albany on Jan. 27, 2025.

# PEF stands with NYS AFL-CIO, NYSUT, CWA and other unions to urge leaders to Share Our Wealth

By **NAJEE WALKER**

PEF Vice President Bruce Giddings journeyed to the State Capitol on January 27 to stand in solidarity with other union leaders, faith leaders and community activists as part of a new coalition to push New York State to increase taxes on the highest earners and wealthiest corporations. The revenue realized would then help fund the critical public services PEF members and others provide.

The [Share Our Wealth](#) coalition is advocating for tax reform in the 2025-2026 State budget. The number of New Yorkers and corporations that earn between \$5-25 million has grown over the past few years, and the coalition says that a tax increase of just half a percent on individuals and 1.75 percent on corporations would generate as much as \$3 billion that could be invested in the lives of working- and middle-class New Yorkers.

State Senator Andrew Gounardes (D-Brooklyn) said that this is simply about basic fairness.

“If you buy gold bars in the state, you get a tax break. If you have maintenance on your private plane, you get a tax break,” said Gounardes, who chairs the Senate Committee on Budget and Revenue. “But what do working-class New Yorkers get? They get high childcare costs, they get high housing costs and they get a pittance of money in terms of child tax credit.”

The coalition is pushing back against the narrative that a tax increase on the wealthy would push those earners and corporations out of the state. Instead, the coalition said that it is working-class and middle-class families who are looking for a way out of the state as costs continue to skyrocket.

Assemblymember Michaelle Solages (D-Queens) said it is not too late to stem the migration and reinvest in communities that need it most. Currently, there are several bills working through the Budget and Revenue committee to address tax inequality.



"When we talk about the price of eggs, when we talk about the price of child care, we're talking about building a tax code that is fair for all," said Solages. "I am advocating for this bill because I want to ensure that we are being fair and smart with our tax dollars and our budget and ensuring that New Yorkers are able to stay here in this state."

This increased revenue stream would also help PEF do their jobs. Vice President Giddings urged the Governor and Legislature to make fair taxation a priority so that the services provided by state employees can be better funded.

"Why do you think these amazing and successful New Yorkers stay here and flourish? Because of things like our great public schools, and our fantastic public universities," said Vice President Giddings. "And because of the proud professional, technical and scientific state employees like me who work every day to do things like make sure our air and water are clean and our roads and bridges are safe, treat the mentally ill and provide supports to get them off the streets, and rehabilitate and support at-risk youth and incarcerated individuals looking for a better tomorrow."

Ahead of the rally outside the senate gallery, PEF President Wayne Spence signed on to a letter to the governor and legislative leaders making clear that this is a priority for many New Yorkers and PEF members.

"Governor Hochul has advanced several important proposals to put more money in the pocket of middle-class working families in this budget," said President Spence. "We need to build upon those initiatives with sensible changes to our tax code to ensure the state has sufficient resources to provide SUNY Downstate the capital and operational monies it needs, to keep New York's public employees safe on the job and to enhance state-operated mental health and other services for all who need it."



NYS AFL-CIO President Mario Cilento, Assemblymember Michaelle Solages (D-Queens), and concerned community members at the Jan. 27 rally.



# Next round of Higher Education Differential payments in April

By **KATE STICKLES**

Eligible members will receive their next Higher Education Differential (HED) lump sum payment of \$600 in their April 23 (Administration) or May 1 (Institution) paychecks, though there may be some variation due to agency processing of eligibility information.

In order to receive the 2025 HED, new employees, newly eligible employees, and employees who submitted proof last year that is no longer current, such as an expired professional license, must submit proof to their agency by March 31, 2025 in accordance with agency instructions, of a college/university (associate's or higher) degree, or a valid and current professional license issued by the State Education Department. Photocopies are acceptable. Employees who received the differential last year will generally not need to submit proof this year, except as noted above.

"This benefit is the first of its kind that PEF negotiated in the 2023-2026 PEF/State Agreement," said President Wayne Spence.

"The Higher Education Differential highlights the level of education and skill required of the professional, scientific, and technical workers in our unique union."

In the rare situation that a copy of a degree cannot be obtained after good faith efforts, such as it was destroyed and the institution no longer exists, members should reach out to their field representative for assistance.

The higher education degree can be from a foreign or domestic college or university and there is no requirement that the institution be "accredited."

More details can be found in this [Payroll Bulletin](#) or in Article 7.8 of the [2023-2026 PEF/State Agreement](#).



## HEALTH BENEFITS

# Highlights of NYSHIP 2025 Empire Plan preventative care coverage

Preventive care can help you avoid potentially serious health conditions, obtain early diagnosis and treatment, and is covered by the Empire Plan. Preventive care includes annual exams, screenings, and immunizations.

Common examples of this type of care include annual wellness visits; cholesterol checks, high blood pressure and diabetes screenings; and cancer screenings, such as mammograms and colonoscopies. Preventive care is important because it can help discover otherwise undetectable issues early, which can help you stay healthy. Accessing prompt treatment when recommended may also help reduce your overall medical expenses.

Well-child visits for younger members of families are also covered. They include height, weight, and body mass index measurements, developmental screenings, behavioral assessments, and medical history, as well as any associated screenings, tests, counseling, and vaccines. This includes developmental/autism screening up to age 3, counseling for interpersonal and domestic violence, and COVID-19 vaccines. A full list of covered preventative screenings, tests, counseling and vaccines for children can be found at [MyNYSHIP](#)

Adult yearly preventive care physical and well-woman exams are covered, as well as the associated screenings, tests, counseling and vaccines. This includes depression and anxiety screening, cancer screening, skin cancer counseling, and certain over-the-counter medications. A full list of covered preventative adult screenings, tests, counseling, medications and vaccines can be found via [MyNYSHIP](#).

### How to Minimize Out-Of-Pocket Costs

- Choose a participating provider and network facility
- Stay up to date on preventive care (annual checkups)
- Stay informed about your prescription drug benefits (CVS Caremark)
- Understand key health insurance terms
- Review your Explanation of Benefits (EOB) statements

If you have questions about coverage, benefits, or need assistance, call The Empire Plan toll-free at 877-7-NYSHIP (877-769-7447), choose the Medical/Surgical Program and then press or say "1" to speak to a representative. The Empire Plan NurseLine is also available for health information and support, 24 hours a day, seven days a week by calling 1-877-7-NYSHIP (1-877-769-7447) and press or say "5."





# Blast from the Past: PEF's generational impact

By **NAJEE WALKER**

When I applied to work at PEF in 2023, I admittedly knew very little about the union. While preparing for my job interview, I learned about the union's work and who PEF represents, but it wasn't until I joined the communications team that I found out my family had a PEF connection.

Whenever I start a new job, I call my grandmother. In 2023, when I told her I was hired as a writer for the Public Employees Federation, she reacted with surprise.

"Oh, PEF!" she said. "My union! I love PEF."

My grandmother, Barbara Pizarro, began working at Bronx Psychiatric on September 22, 1966. The hospital was only three years old. She started as a housekeeper and retired as an intensive case manager after 30 years of State service.

"I stayed on the ward as an aide for many years," she told me. "But I have always been a learner and I've always sought more."

On the job, Pizarro learned how to give injections, administer medications and other typical nursing duties. It wasn't long before she was invited to join a "Family Studies Unit" where she worked to assist families with therapy treatment.

"It was an evening clinic, so it was often the whole family," she recalled. "I always felt my rapport with the families was good, too."

The unit eventually dissolved, and she moved to a medication research unit, then the education and training department and later a file management position. In 1983, encouraged by her co-workers, she earned her bachelor's degree from the College of New Rochelle.

A management shake-up at Bronx Psychiatric increased her job responsibilities. She recalled being asked to file an important report, something she had never actually done.

"I told my supervisor that I'd never put together a report like that before, but that I knew where to find all the information," Pizarro said. "He told me to do my best."

"Do your best" is a philosophy Pizarro has always followed. Her grandmother instilled it in her, along with the value and dignity of work.



PEF Communications Reporter Najee Walker with his Grandmother Barbara Pizarro together at his wedding day celebration on May 2, 2024

"She always said to just do your best and be proud of the work you've done," Pizarro said.

Ultimately, the report filed by my grandmother would exceed expectations. Eventually, after being urged by her supervisor, she went back to school and earned a double Master's degree in Social Work and Administration.

During her career, she rose from a Grade 7 to a Grade 19. When she first entered State service in 1966, she was a member of CSEA, which was considered an “association” and not yet a union. When she reached the professional ranks at Bronx Psychiatric, she joined PEF.

“They called those of us at Tier 1 (of the State pension plan) dinosaurs,” she laughed. “But when I saw what I could potentially get after my years of state service, I knew it was for me.”

Pizarro recalls going to Queens to attend an informational membership meeting about her pension benefits. The promise of retiring at 55 impressed her.

“They had someone there who would tell you how much you’d make if you stayed,” she said. “I remember a colleague was unsure about the pension. But they came around once they saw the numbers.”

Later, when Pizarro needed help paying her mortgage, she learned that PEF was a part of the AFL-CIO, who had a benefit to help negotiate mortgage rates. She dropped hers in half thanks to her union membership.

Today, as a PEF retiree, Pizarro is still benefiting from her union.

“Recently, I found out about the Sun Life Insurance through MBP. I signed up because I needed [dental](#),” she said. “Now I have a good dentist that isn’t too far from my home.”

It was at a work reunion last year when she got to tout one final achievement to her old colleagues from Bronx Psychiatric.

“I told them that my grandson works for PEF, and they were all shocked and happy for me,” she said.

My grandmother is hopeful about PEF’s future, and while she knows there may be a difficult road ahead, she says members need to find strength in the fact that they aren’t traveling it alone.

“I know sometimes people do not talk about what is going on at their workplace,” she said. “But I hope, and I know, that PEF can find a way to figure out what is going on in places where people feel afraid to speak up. PEF does a tremendous job based on how many people they represent.”



## New Region 5 coordinator, 1 Executive Board seat elected

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PEF Special Elections held in January 2025 filled the Region 5 coordinator position and one Executive Board seat.

Scott Staub, a Disability Analyst 3 at OTDA in Endicott, was seated as Region 5 coordinator, and Patricia O'Toole, a Physical Therapist Assistant at the Helen Hayes Hospital in West Haverstraw, N.Y., will fill Seat 200 (Health Main Office).

There are six vacant seats on the PEF Executive Board:

- Seat 15: Civil Service – Statewide
- Seat 65: Education Main Office
- Seat 90: Higher Education – Statewide
- Seat 161: State Police, Criminal Justice Services
- Seat 165: Housing & Community Renewal, Veterans Affairs, Justice Center, Office of Cannabis Management
- Seat 445: Office of Temporary Disability Assistance

"A full Executive Board ensures that the interests of all our members are represented when we conduct the business of the union every quarter," said President Wayne Spence. "All interested members are encouraged to get involved."

PEF will hold another special election in April. Petitioning will begin April 7, 2025, and end April 28, 2025. Ballots in contested races will be mailed May 19, 2025, and will be returnable June 10, 2025.

Visit [www.pef.org/elections](http://www.pef.org/elections) for more information.





## PEF leader interviewed at People's March

PEF leader Michele Rosello, chair of the Statewide Women's Committee (SWC), was the first person at Foley Square in New York City on January 18, preparing her sign and getting ready to step off in the name of justice as part of the annual People's March. She was interviewed by the CW affiliate, PIX11.

A contingent of PEF members joined thousands of New Yorkers in solidarity as they took to the streets of New York City to fight for reproductive rights, climate action, justice for Black and brown communities, sensible gun laws, LGBTQIA+ and immigration rights.

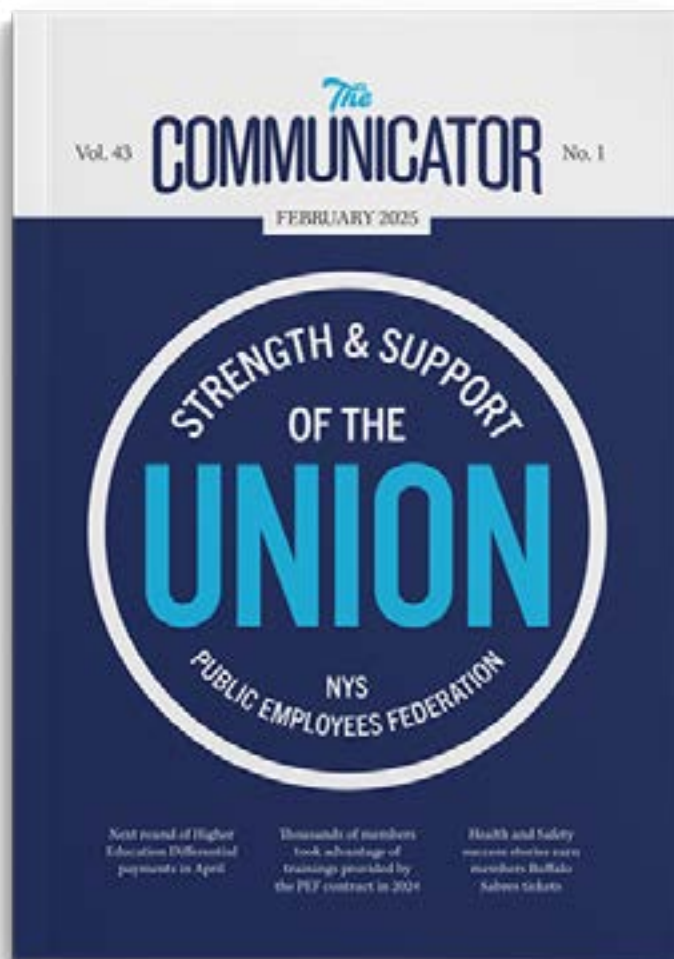
"It was a very organic group, a nonviolent group," Rosello said. "We need to support each other now more than ever. We need to pay attention to our rights. We rallied about what is going to happen going forward and how we need to be strong and brace ourselves and work together."

Rosello said there was a lot of networking among the groups participating and PEF came out to represent not only the communities at risk, but also the labor movement.

"I'm grateful it was so calm and moved so smoothly," she said. "It was a good day."

The People's March evolved from the Women's March, a worldwide protest on January 21, 2017, the day after the first inauguration of Donald Trump as president of the United States. This year, the march took place two days before Trump's second inauguration.





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## PEF Division 196 (Rosewell Park) awards scholarships to students

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Division 196 at Roswell Park Comprehensive Cancer Center awarded \$500 scholarships to 20 students pursuing higher education. Applicants had to be dependents of active PEF members.

The winners included:

Sonya Strong (Cindy Strong), who will attend Buffalo State College;

Bengamin Yoerg (Lara Voerg), who will attend SUNY Alfred State College;

Aniyah Ramadan (Bekkan Vance), who will attend University at Buffalo;

Olivia Gajewski (Mary Pat Gajewski), who will attend SUNY Brockport

Maeve Garvey (Lisa Garvey), who will attend SUNY Fredonia;

Jaime Dickinson (Amy Dickinson), who will attend SUNY Albany;

Madison Gaglione (Lea Dachs), who will attend Grand Canyon University;

Marissa Meyer (Jennifer Meyer), who will attend Clarkson University;

Ava Grady (Lori McDonald), who will attend SUNY Albany;

Lindsey Kitchen (Jennifer Kitchen), who will attend University at Buffalo;

Sadie Anne Omilian (Angela Omilian), who will attend University of Rochester;

Julia Pilski (Rose Wehner), who will attend Daemon University;

Asha Kartha (Govindan Kartha), who will attend Case Western Reserve University;

Jayden Taylor (Melissa Taylor), who will attend SUNY Alfred State College;

Ryan Venohr (Kim Venohr), who will attend Canisius University;

Aiden Forti Hong (Chi-Chen Hong), who will attend the Culinary Institute of America;

Katelyn Tighe (Sheila Tighe), who will attend John Carroll University;

Andrew Beck (Amy Beck), who will attend Syracuse University;

Armand Elfante (Anjana Elfante), who will attend SUNY Buffalo; and

Jersy Nowak (Annmarie Nowak), who will attend SUNY Erie.



PEF members show their solidarity during the hearing on Jan. 22 inside the Alumni Auditorium at SUNY Downstate.

# Community rallies for positive change and investment at first SUNY Downstate advisory board public hearing

By **NAJEE WALKER**

Over the past year, unions, community members and staff at SUNY Downstate have worked to deliver on a promise to keep Downstate open for the people of Brooklyn and New York. In January 2024, the SUNY Chancellor announced plans to “transform” the hospital by moving many of its services to Kings County hospital just across the street.

Thanks to the efforts of unions like PEF and UUP, as well as a strong showing from NYC-area clergy and the community, the state backed off that plan last year and the Governor established an advisory board to review findings and come up with a plan to imagine the future of Downstate.

The first public hearing was held on January 22, 2025, at the Brooklyn hospital. Hundreds of PEF and UUP members, along with members of the community, doctors and patients attended the hearing to deliver remarks and recommendations on how to keep the hospital from closure.

Before the hearing started, a video message from Governor Kathy Hochul welcomed the newly formed advisory board.

“After decades of disinvestment, we’re finally moving toward building a modernized SUNY Downstate facility that will deliver high quality healthcare to the central Brooklyn community,” said Governor Hochul. “That is why today I am proud to announce that in my budget, we’re allocating an additional \$450 million on top of the \$300 million that was awarded last year.”

Debbie Louis is the Assistant Secretary for Downstate Intergovernmental Affairs. Louis said that this work is personal, as someone who wishes to see SUNY Downstate stay open and as someone who has been working with the advisory board since its members were chosen.

“Let me be clear,” said Louis. “We’re changing the narrative. This hospital is not closing down. We are reimagining this hospital. We are going to make sure we come together and come up with creative and innovative ways to utilize the dollars that our leaders in this great state have allocated to this hospital.”

Following that news, the community was invited to speak. Many expressed frustration with how the State acted last year, rushing out a plan to transfer services without seeking any community input. Others made the case that the hospital’s future should be determined by its history of quality care for underserved communities and the innovative research it has always conducted.

The main thing community members urged was a commitment to making sure that any funding, especially the promised \$750 million, is accounted for and used where it is most needed.

Cynthia Walker, a registered nurse at Downstate for almost 20 years as well as the assistant council leader for PEF Division 198, told the advisory board that simple everyday things like showers are near impossible for patients as the water is constantly cold and the building is in dire need of renovations.

“There are things here that could be fixed, the building needs renovating,” said Walker. “The patient’s rooms and all this infrastructure here that has been neglected, it needs to stop.”

Walker also said there are not nearly enough nurses at SUNY Downstate, forcing the ones who do work there to work more than ever, leading to burnout.

“We are always above the staffing ratio,” said Walker. “We do not have enough staff on the units, people call out, and we should have back up for when people call out. When I do not have enough staff to do the work, the patients suffer.”



Don Morgenstern, a PEF Retiree and former researcher at SUNY Downstate, agreed with Walker.

“During my time, my job classification was research scientist. There were a hundred research scientists in that category here at Downstate,” said Morgenstern. “When I left, 10 years ago, there were six. The nurses here during my time totaled 550. Now, there are barely 400.”

Morgenstern argued that while the hundreds of millions of dollars now allocated to Downstate are welcome, it appears to be a small fix for a big issue.

“What this place needs, more than anything else, is for the Dormitory Authority of the State of New York to announce that they are sending out a \$1 billion request for proposals to build up a brand-new hospital,” Morgenstern said. “When you get a modern hospital with modern facilities, that would be the end of any problems with Downstate.”

Bishop Orlando Findlayter, who serves as a pastor at New Hope Christian Fellowship in Brooklyn, told the advisory board that they have a responsibility not only to make sure that the report includes the voices of the community and staff, but also to demand more money.

“We thank the Governor for \$750 million, but that is not enough,” said Bishop Findlayter. “The budget of the State of New York that the Governor just put out is \$257 billion. You need to tell them that we need more money. And do not worry, because you will not be alone. We’re going to Albany on [February 4](#), to fight for more money.”

Findlayter said that other hospitals, like SUNY Upstate, do not face the same critical neglect as SUNY Downstate, and that he and the community are tired of the fight—though they will press on.

“We will not allow the State of New York or SUNY or anyone else to continue to disrespect us and give us crumbs,” said Findlayter. “The Governor and the legislators need to go and find \$1 billion to invest in Downstate.”

The Downstate Advisory Board has scheduled another hearing on Feb. 27, with exact location and time to be announced.



Pictured clockwise, left to right: SUNY Downstate RN Cynthia Walker; former Downstate research scientist Don Morgenstern; PEF Downstate Field Director Deb Egel, PEF Division 244 (OPWDD Brooklyn) Council Leader Carrie Saunders, and Morgenstern; and State Senator Zellnor Myrie, who represents the District that includes SUNY Downstate.

# COPE

Year in Review

## Record COPE contributions in 2024

By **KATE STICKLES**

PEF members, retirees, and PEF's M/C staff broke records with their contributions to the Committee on Political Education (COPE) in 2024. Active members gave \$203,587, an almost 16% increase; retirees contributed \$72,659, a 21% increase; and M/C PEF staff contributed \$2,056, more than double the amount they gave in 2023.

"Our members, retirees, and staff are recognizing the importance of fighting for the right to be in a union, fighting for safety on the job and fighting to preserve Social Security and Medicare, as well as to lobby to bring more federal dollars into New York," said COPE Coordinator Don Morgenstern. "In 2024, we set PEF records for the amount contributed to COPE and for the number of members, retirees and M/C staff who participate."

The total number of members and retirees giving rose more than 9%, from 2,650 in 2023, to 2,895 in 2024. The highest contributing Divisions were:

- Division 407: Metro NY DDSO – Bronx, with 65.7% of members contributing
- Division 207: Bernard Fineson – Queens, with 32.6% of members contributing
- Division 167: Western NY DDSO – West Seneca, with 31.8% of members contributing
- Division 351: Law Department – Regions 10, 11, and 12, with 30.8% of members contributing.

The total PEF COPE income for 2024 was \$283,487 (AFT and SEIU each receiving \$141,744). For the first time, PEF is on pace to surpass SEIU's goal in 2025.

"Fully 40% of the New York State budget comes from federal dollars and many of our agencies rely on those dollars to serve the people of New York," said President Wayne Spence. "It is imperative that we have a seat at the table when it comes to advocating on behalf of that funding and COPE gives us that power."

COPE contributions help PEF advocate for federal legislation, funding and policies that support union priorities such as fair labor and wage laws; healthy and safe workplaces; Social Security, Medicare and pension protections; and other issues important to PEF members and their families.

Active PEF members can sign up for COPE electronically by [clicking here to log into the Member's only section of the website](#). Retirees can email [COPE@pef.org](mailto:COPE@pef.org) and request a signup form be sent to them.



# Books for babies: PEF's staff union hosting book drive for Project: Cameron's Story

By **KATE STICKLES**

"Before I could hold him, before I could touch him, I read to him ..."

When Cameron Jace Quartiers was born in February 2009, he weighed only 530 grams and was 10.2 inches long. His parents were unable to hold him for the first several weeks of life and struggled to find ways to bond with him.

Enter books.

Cameron's parents read to him throughout his 213 days in the NICU/PICU, building a bond with their baby through the power of words. Cameron sadly passed away later that year, but his family founded "[Project: Cameron's Story](#)" to share his story of strength, hope, and love, and to support other families as they bond with their premature babies.

"We strive to empower parents to form unique and profound connections with their babies within an environment that is often uncertain and intimidating," Cameron's parents wrote on their website. "Our mission is to place a brand new, quality, children's book in the hands of every parent of a premature baby upon admission to the NICU."



The Women's Committee of PEF's staff union, USW Local 9265, is hosting a [book raiser](#) now through February 19, which will help Project: Cameron's Story deliver books to hospitals across the state. This is the Committee's second year participating. You can order books on Amazon and have them shipped to the charity here or you can participate by filling out the [Scholastic/Book Outlet Book Order Form](#).

Any questions can be directed to [mchadwick@pef.org](mailto:mchadwick@pef.org).



# UNION LEADER SPOTLIGHT:

## Keith Browne

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### **How long have you been a PEF member?**

Since 1989, so 36 years. Time flies when you're having fun!

### **Briefly, what do you do in your state role?**

I work for the NYS Department of Environmental Conservation, which is known as the DEC or Encon. I'm an environmental engineer. My first 12 years I worked in the Hazardous Waste program, managing cleanups of hazardous waste sites in PEF Region 9. The remainder of the time has been with Spills Response, where I respond to environmental emergencies, including petroleum and chemical spills and other significant environmental impacts. I manage cleanups, which includes petroleum spills in people's homes.

### **What positions do you hold in PEF?**

Currently, I'm chief shop steward of the Mid-Hudson Valley DEC office. I'm also Division Leader for Division 169 PEF/Encon; I sit on the PEF Executive Board representing DEC PEF members in the Albany, Mid-Hudson Valley, NYC and Long Island areas; and I am part of the DEC Labor/Management committee and DEC Health and Safety committee. Recently, I became chair of the Caribbean-American Committee.

### **Why did you get involved in the union and as a leader?**

I was fortunate to be in an office with a great union leader, Jonah Triebwasser. He was the PEF Shop Steward (later became Chief Shop Steward). We met my first week on the job. He introduced himself and then he asked are you in the union? I said no and then he said come to my office for a talk. And I was in PEF from that time on. A few years later I became a shop steward, and several more years later management offered a promotion to Jonah but with one catch - he had to give up union activities. He took the promotion, which I understood with two kids, a mortgage and all the financial burdens of being a state worker. I told him I would be the Chief Shop Steward. I have been the Chief Shop Steward ever since.

### **Please comment on the value of public employees.**

It is service to the community. In my position, it's service to both the people and the environment of New York State. My degree is in Chemical Engineering and after graduating, some of the companies I was seeking employment with didn't have the best environmental records and some of the plants had high risks to my health. My mother guided me to civil service - instead of being the issue, try to fix the issues. So, I applied and took tests for NYC, EPA and NYS. DEC was the first to respond and that's where my life with DEC started.



### **Anything else you want to include?**

My father was in a garment union. He worked long, hard hours and as jobs dried up in NYC, his commute got longer and longer, until it was subways, trains and buses for him to get to work. I didn't see the point of the union. My father always said the union is helping us fellow brothers and sisters against the boss. When I started working with the state, I finally understood what he meant. Sitting in meetings with Jonah, seeing how some managers/supervisors treated employees, literally throwing the contract out the window. That is why I'm part of PEF - to stand up against the bosses for fair treatment.



# Caribbean American Committee charts new future

By **NAJEE WALKER**

For PEF member Keith Browne, leading the Caribbean-American Committee means more than just business as usual. It is a chance to show members of the union what it means to be Caribbean-American and a state worker. A chance to give members of the committee a voice, a role and a duty to one another.

“My father is from Barbados. There is a very different culture there than in the United States,” said Browne. “Here, we can face the discrimination of being Black while also facing the discrimination of being from a foreign land.”

It is with that discrimination in mind that Browne is grateful and excited to lead the Caribbean-American Committee.

Browne has been a PEF member for 36 years. He works for the New York State Department of Environmental Conservation and has held shop steward and chief shop steward positions at the Mid-Hudson Valley DEC office, is a Division Leader for Division 169 and is a member of the PEF Executive Board.

He is a strong advocate for the union and the members he represents as a leader. However, when he was asked by PEF President Wayne Spence to lead the Committee in November 2024, he said that he knew it would be a challenge, but that he was happy to take up the position.

“Right now, I am working on getting the committee back up and running. I would really like to have an accountable group of chair and co-chairs and to form a very tight knit committee,” Browne said. “It’s really important to me to make sure that we are communicating often and avoiding miscommunication so we can keep moving forward with our plans.”

Since November, there have been two meetings, both of which were well-attended, and that Browne said were promising. Since the committee is statewide, it can be a challenge to make sure that everyone is on the same page, but he has kept his spirits up as interest in working with the committee grows. The committee hopes to have one chair and up to three co-chairs spread across the downstate area, Albany and Western New York.

“As of our second meeting, we have drafted bylaws. We have plans to create presentations and visit schools to talk about Caribbean culture and state service. We want to contribute to the community and set up a scholarship for students,” said Browne. “And I have encouraged everyone in the committee to come to the PEF Convention. It can be hard for us all to meet in-person, but meeting at convention would give us a chance to get some familiarity with one another.”

Browne wants to revisit the Multicultural Awareness Showcase event at Convention that brings together multiple cultural committees, including the Caribbean-American Committee, to make it a bolder presentation—and bring more food to the celebration.

Ultimately, Browne said that this committee is a chance to show all of PEF and the entire state the fantastic culture and hard work that Caribbean-Americans bring to New York.

“Our community makes strong bonds and pushes for education and prosperity, which often leads us to move from our countries to America,” said Browne. “It is important to me to be able to showcase that to everyone inside and outside of PEF. We are here, we are in your communities, and we work hard.”

# EMPLOYEE SPOTLIGHT:

## Vincent Cicatello

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**You are currently celebrating 25 years of NYS state service. 24 years which have been at BPC. Are there any words of advice you'd like to share with staff that might be just starting out?**

I remember being in NEOP in the summer of 2000, when the instructor had mentioned the great "career ladder" and at that point he called BPC/NYS "The land of opportunity". Working hard, having a good attitude and being willing to make sacrifices, can pay off in the interim and certainly the long run. I encourage the newer staff to continue and further their education. Align yourself with extraordinary employees/co-workers. Doing so will help to theatrically open several doors and help to have employees promoted into good jobs and, a potentially rewarding and satisfying career.

**What goals are you particularly proud of accomplishing while you have been at BPC? What goals are you still working towards now?** Being the 1st BPC CMHN to take part in the Skilled Nursing Facilitator (SNF) initiative and getting that profound and extremely important program up and running and successful, felt like a huge accomplishment. There is so much satisfaction in seeing our patients who are in their senior years and/or are medically compromised, get the chance to be discharged into a nursing home setting where they can live out their lives in a more accommodating and less restrictive environment, while having an opportunity to pass away with dignity. Now, my main goal is to be a good influence on all staff and I hope that I can guide the newer employees to better their self and their careers. I try to be accessible and to share my knowledge that I have with them.

**What have you learned during your time here that as had the biggest impact on your personal and professional growth?** I have been influenced by the leadership of some of past BPC greats (Paul Shea, Linda Fonti, Jimmy Jacobs, Rudy Dawkins and some that are still currently working here. However, I won't reveal that until they retire. I, to this day, keep my eyes and ears open and gravitate to the employees/ leaders, which can be both new employees or veterans who bring a hardworking and at times a unique approach to how they perform their duties and conduct themselves on a day-to-day basis. Because of this, I have appreciated the journey and have yearned to better my career and professional development. Sometimes all it takes is to have a person(s) believe in you and realize your true potential. Of course, that and hard work together, can give you the opportunity to put yourself in position to climb that "career ladder".



**What do you like best about your work?** Simple, the people. Of all the jobs/positions that I have held at BPC, the ones I remember and appreciate the most are being a unit based MHTA (6 years) and a charge nurse (6 years). The teams/families I grew with on the inpatient setting and serving the patients provided the most satisfaction. I have learned so much about not only myself, but the many co-workers I was privileged to work with throughout the years. So many that were here with me when I began, have retired or passed away. I carry them with me to this day and always will. The impact that they had on me, I share with my co-workers, which I hope in turn, could be beneficial to the newer employees.



**Where did you grow up?** I grew up in the City of Buffalo's RIVERSIDE section. A true blue collar-working class town. It is one of the poorest and most diverse areas of the city. Because of that I always appreciated everything I had and could relate and communicate with folks from various backgrounds, morals, ideation and faith. I feel comfortable mostly with anyone and anywhere I travel because of this. I am proud to say where I am from and who I am. I believe my appreciation through my life and work span, has continued to be a motivating factor in bettering myself and my career.

**Where did you go for your education?** I went to Daemen College (now University) to obtain a B.S.N. in nursing. Prior to that I went to E.C.C. where I got 2 associate's degrees in nursing and in recreational leadership.

**Interests/hobbies have you developed over the years?** My interests include, appreciating architect (Buffalo is loaded with great buildings and projects. Look no further than across the lawn). Educating myself and others about the history of anything that interests me. I love attending concerts and sporting events. I don't have many hobbies, but I am an avid BILLS (NYS only NFL team), Sabres, Celtics, and NY Yankees fan. I also collect enamel pins (mostly horror).

**What are you passionate about?** I am passionate about my work and being a union leader for the Public Employees Federation. I am proud to say that I am the Co-Chair for the PEF Statewide Nurses Committee, Assistant Chair for OMH/PEF Labor Management, sit on the PEF Executive Board, Local Council Leader for PEF DIV.180, and perhaps the greatest achievement is in being named to the PEF Contract Team. I have so much pride in serving the PEF membership. I believe unions have a real positive impact on the employees and the workplace.

**Family?** I am 1 of 3 siblings (my brother who works for the BFLO Municipal Housing Authority and my sister Michele who also works at BPC on the MIT team). Hi Baby Chel! HAHA that's what we called her in those early years. Man was she spoiled. I was raised by the greatest and most loving mother. She smiles and laughs almost every time I see her. The support that she gives is so meaningful. I have 2 children (Vinny Jr. and my daughter Stailea Autumn Cicatello who works here as a MHTA. I believe that Stailea will achieve greatness here or wherever her career path takes her.

**When not working, what do you like to do?** I enjoy nature and camping in the Adirondak's. I also like to be home doing things around the house, occasionally cooking or relaxing. Sunday is for the BILLS!

**Best vacation you've ever taken?** My favorite place to vacation to is the North Shore in Massachusetts. Especially in October. I love Boston, Salem, Rockport, Cape Cod, Gloucester, Mass, and Maine. I have traveled to that area several times over the past 20+ years.



# Recommit Today!

New + Existing PEF Members

**SIGN NOW!**

# Thousands of members took advantage of trainings provided by the PEF contract in 2024

By **KATE STICKLES**

In 2024, more than 4,900 PEF members took advantage of 283 workshops through the [Public Service Workshops Program](#) (PSWP), a statewide professional development program that is part of the union's collective bargaining agreement. PSWP utilizes private and public colleges and universities, professional associations, consultants, and for-profit companies to develop and deliver workshops to help state employees maintain and increase professional competency and enhance preparation for promotional opportunities.

"As professionals, keeping up with our skills and learning new skills is vital to our success on the job," said PEF President Wayne Spence. "There is no cost for members to attend these workshops and anyone interested is encouraged to check out the [Training and Education page](#) on the PEF website for PSWP information and other contractual benefits."

Workshops are offered in person or virtually and determining members' educational needs within each agency should be an agenda item for Labor-Management Committees so they can jointly coordinate what programs would be most helpful, including educational requirements for licensed or certified employees. Release time is given for courses that fall within an employee's work hours and supervisor approval is needed.

The most popular workshops offered in 2024 were called Aspring Leaders Program, Managing Multiple Priorities, Structured Query Language (SQL) Basics, and Adapating to Change.

Members should bookmark the [PSWP page](#) for the most up-to-date courses and links to register. 2025 trainings will post as they are announced.





## 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](http://www.pef.org/careers-at-pef)



# Stay informed during the budget season; be ready to take action!

**By JIM CARR**

Dear Retirees and PEF Members,

As we enter a new year with budget negotiations happening from now until April, I believe it's important to keep ourselves informed about what's being discussed! As an advocate for retirees, I am grateful that the Governor plans to invest in programs for older adults.

This is also the time of year when you need to pay attention to your mail because between September and February you received information on insurance updates! Please read the below op-ed by Greg Olson, acting director of the Office for the Aging, and stay informed during budget negotiations, because there will be actions that we will ask you to take! Actions to support our budget priorities for members and retirees!

In Solidarity,

Jim Carr  
PEF Statewide Retirees President

## Governor Hochul’s Budget Investments a Game Changer for NY’s Older Adults

By Greg Olsen

New York’s population is aging. Today, 1 in 4 New Yorkers is over the age of 60 – and counting.

At this moment of demographic change, it’s now more important than ever to fund services and programs that allow older New Yorkers to maintain their independence, and stay healthy in their communities.

As Director of the New York State Office for the Aging (NYSOFA), I’m proud to say that Governor Hochul’s FY26 executive budget proposal recognizes this through historic investments in aging services while advancing an affordability agenda that provides vital relief for all New York families, including for older adults.

The Governor’s FY26 executive budget proposal includes an additional game-changing \$45 million to help Offices for the Aging meet locally determined needs for older adults who need services like personal care, home-delivered meals, case management, and more.

The Governor’s bold affordability agenda for New York families presents opportunities at all levels for New Yorkers to age successfully in the community. Middle class tax cuts will also put more money back into the pockets of older adults, particularly those on fixed incomes. Inflation rebates will provide a payment of \$300 to \$500 for 8.6 million tax filers, including millions of older adults. These measures build on thousands of dollars in benefits assistance already available to income-eligible older adults through the Governor’s past expansion of the Medicare Savings Program, nutrition and home energy assistance programs, and others.

The Governor’s proposals for consumer protections and increases in victim-services claims will also help those harmed by scams and restore dignity to many older adults who face cumulative losses of \$28 billion annually due to financial exploitation across the U.S.

Housing remains among the most serious concerns for older New Yorkers. The Governor has advanced an historic five-year plan to create or preserve 100,000 affordable homes statewide while pursuing housing innovations that will provide older adults more opportunities to potentially downsize while opening up more housing stock for larger families.

Seventy-two percent of older adults consider their overall health to be excellent or good, according to New York’s first-ever community assessment survey of older adults issued by NYSOFA. Our job is to keep it that way and make even greater progress by prioritizing preventive health services that avoid higher-cost service use while maintaining independence. The Governor’s agenda achieves this by expanding access to community emergency services, obesity drugs, dental care, and air conditioners for individuals with chronic conditions, while also reducing health disparities and prescription drug costs.

These are among the Governor’s many historic investments and bold ideas for older New Yorkers and families. More is yet to come with the upcoming release of the state’s Master Plan for Aging, a blueprint to help all New Yorkers age successfully.

As the first state in the nation to achieve an Age-Friendly designation from AARP, Governor Hochul’s FY26 executive budget proposal and State of the State agenda accelerates this commitment and puts New York on a truly transformational path for the state’s 4.8 million older adults, their families, and the people who care for them.

*Originally published in [The Empire Report](#) Jan. 25, 2025.*

# Your fellow members need your leave donations

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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.

Jolene Bariteau is a rehabilitation specialist 2 at Capital District Psychiatric Center in Albany.

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.

Elizabeth Newman Cable is a patient access supervisor at Roswell Park Comprehensive Cancer Center in Buffalo.

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.

Lori DeVito is an administrative specialist 1 at the Office of General Services in Albany.

Maritza Echevarria is an ICM at Bronx Psychiatric Center in the Bronx.

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.

Ilianna Fermin is a Social Worker at Bronx Psychiatric Center in the Bronx.

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

Wayne Green is a maintenance supervisor 3 at St. Lawrence Psychiatric Center in Ogdensburg.

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.

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

Gerard Mazurkiecicz is a fire protection specialist 1 at the Department of Homeland Security and Emergency Services in Buffalo.

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

Danielle Newell-Emory is an investigative specialist 1 at the Office of Cannabis Management in Albany.

Cecilia O'Shea is a legal assistant 2 at the Department of Tax and Finance in Albany.

Rosemary Oduh is an information technology specialist 2 at the Office of Information Technology Services in Albany.

Danielle Porter is registered nurse 1 at SUNY Upstate in Syracuse.

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

Kathleen Vonk is a veterans education program representative 2 at the Department of Veterans' Services in Albany.

Nicole Welch is an auditor trainee 1 at the Department of Tax and Finance in Syracuse.

Jennifer Wells is a registered nurse 2 at SUNY Upstate in Syracuse.

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](mailto:communicator@pef.org), or call 518-785-1900.





**January 22, 2025**

Division 189 OPWDD CNY held an engagement event at Utica Comets Night on Jan. 22. Members that attended enjoyed the evening and engaging with some of their local Stewards..

**January 24, 2025**

PEF Division 407 hosted a tabling event where they celebrated the retirement of Dr. John McGowan after 32 years of service as a Psychologist and PEF member. Trustee and Council Leader Muriel Hardy Lee presented Dr. McGowan with a plaque and wished him a happy, healthy and relaxing retirement!



**February 10, 2025**

PEF leaders joined their union siblings from CSEA and NYSCOPBA for a joint Health and Safety meeting at Creedmoor Psychiatric Center in Queens.





### February 7, 2025

PEF VP Darlene Williams, Region 9 Coordinator Gabriela Franklyn and Region 12 Coordinator Corinne Testa joined PEF staff for a visit to Pilgrim Psychiatric Center, where they shared the latest union information and educated members on workplace violence procedures, who to notify when it happens, and various benefits available to them.

### February 5, 2025

Department of Labor members met with PEF leaders and staff at the 199 Church Street location — getting all the latest PEF news and benefits. Four new State employees joined the union as well! WELCOME!



**February 5, 2025**

Vice President Darlene Williams, Region 12 Coordinator Corinne Testa, Statewide Health & Safety (Article 18) Co-Chair Gabriela Franklyn, and PEF staff were up early at Stony Brook Medical Hospital to meet with members. Special thanks to Council Leader Amy Pacholk for finding a great space to table. We didn't need to find the members, the members found us!



**February 4, 2025**

PEF leadership including President Spence and Secretary-Treasurer Donahue attended a breakfast meeting at the Public Employee Conference. Also in attendance were former PEF member, and newly appointed Assemblyman Patrick J. Carroll as well as Assemblymember Billy Jones.



