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Suffolk County Court Employees Association

NYS Public Protection Hearings Jan. 29, 2019

My name is William Dobbins, President of the Suffolk County Court Employees Association. Thank you again for letting me speak at the NYS Public Protection hearings this year. I come to you, as I have done the last couple of years, searching for your help in getting enough funding so that our courts could once again operate at full staffing levels. We have not been at full staffing since the workforce reduction in 2010. We are literally holding on by the skin of our teeth.

As indicated in the name of our organization, the members of my association work in the Courts in Suffolk County. Over the last year, Suffolk County has become known nationwide as a result of the horrible MS13 activity we have all heard about. In fact, the lifeless bodies of the young people who were slaughtered by MS13 were found less than a mile from the courthouse in Central Islip. The MS13 problem in Suffolk County is so bad that it has gotten the full attention of County Executive Bellone, Governor Cuomo, and President Trump. To my amazement, the MS13 problem in Suffolk County has not gotten the attention of the people who hold the purse strings for the Office of Court Administration. The reality is that MS 13 is in our backyard. They are very active in the community surrounding the courthouse and they are, without a doubt, active within our court facilities. They are a force to be reckoned with. Their very presence in our court buildings is very intimidating to the people who use our courts, especially victims and potential witnesses. This past spring, four of our Court Officers were injured trying to break up a fight in the lobby of the courthouse between warring gang members. That being said, our Court Officer staffing levels are still below what they should be. We have approximately 22% fewer court officers than we had in 2010. In the environment that we work in, that very fact is disgraceful. With the MS13 activity in our courthouses, we should have 22% more staffing than we did in 2010. We need your help.

Our courts, as I have indicated in previous years, are a den for criminal activity. The best way to limit the criminal activity is through the presence of uniformed Court Officers. We don't have enough officers to patrol the hallways, bathrooms, or stairwells. We barely have enough officers to staff courtrooms. The Governor has been very vocal about his desire that Judges

remain on the bench in their courtrooms from 9 until 5 every day. With court officer staffing the way it is, it is virtually impossible for that to happen. The security supervisors are continually shuffling Court Officers from one post to another so that Judges can take the bench. Due to lack of security staffing, Judges are lucky if they can get on the bench by 10:00.

The shortage of court officers has led to another problem. Seventy-five percent of the prisoners that are produced from the Suffolk County Jail in Riverhead and Yaphank never see a judge because we don't have enough Court Officers to bring the prisoners from the holding pens to the courtrooms. Attorneys cannot wait all day to have their clients brought up to the courtrooms because the attorneys have other cases in other courts. The result is that the attorney waives their client's appearance, the case gets adjourned, and the defendant remains in custody without any resolution to their case. This happens every day in Suffolk County over and over again. It is a vicious cycle. Criminal Justice Reform has been a priority for the legislature for quite some time. This is one issue that can easily be resolved by putting more money into the court budget and hiring a lot more court officers.

Although the Office of Court Administration has finally begun hiring a large number of Court Officers, Judge Marks has indicated that the courts will have hired 360 Court Officers Statewide by the end of the 2018-2019 fiscal year, Suffolk County is still lagging behind. The hiring has not been sufficient to keep up with the rate of attrition. The Court System needs more money to bring the totals up to where they should be.

The abysmal Court Officer staffing problems are not the only staffing problems we have in Suffolk County. We need more Clerks, Court Reporters, Court Assistants, Senior Court Office Assistants, and many other staffing positions that were lost through the workforce reduction of 2010. Chief Judge Janet DiFiore boasts of her Excellence in the Courts Initiative. On the NYS Courts website, the Chief Judge says that she is "committed to achieve and maintain excellence throughout the court system giving the people of New York the level of justice services they have a right to expect". Without appropriate staffing levels, Judge DiFiore's Excellence in the Courts Initiative is just a fantasy. What is excellent about a Court System that can't hire enough Court Officers to make our courts more secure? What is excellent about opening courtrooms late, or not at

all, because there aren't enough personnel to staff the parts? What is excellent about long lines of people waiting to get into the court buildings? What is excellent about long lines at the information windows? What is excellent about using tape machines that produce a poor record of court proceedings because there aren't enough court reporters being hired? What is excellent about not having enough Senior Court Office Assistants to initiate cases into the computer system and prepare court folders for each case? What is excellent about backlogs of uncontested matrimonial cases, foreclosures, and no-fault insurance cases because there aren't enough Court Clerks and Court Assistants to review new filings, affidavits of service, notice of trials, judgments, etc...? What is excellent about not having enough Spanish Interpreters to serve a growing Spanish speaking population that use our courts? There is nothing excellent about any of this. The only way to achieve the excellence that Judge DiFiore desires is by hiring people that make the system work. The Court System needs sufficient resources to make it the "Gold Standard" that Judge DiFiore desires.

This is the fourth year that I have had the privilege to speak at these hearings. We laid the issue of backlogs and lack of funding at your feet 3 years ago. The backlogs cannot be solved without sufficient staffing and monetary resources. The Courts have been neglected far too long. The legacy that former Chief Judge Jonathan Lippman left behind when he retired is a court system plagued with short staffing and large backlogs. Chief Judge Janet DiFiore can fix this if she is provided with the resources. Please help us.