

Testimony of Michael Volforte, Director Office of Employee Relations

January 30, 2024

Good afternoon, Chair Krueger, Chair Weinstein, other respected Chairs and honorable members of the Assembly and Senate. My name is Michael Volforte and I am the Director of the New York State Office of Employee Relations. Thank you for the opportunity to speak to you about Governor Hochul's Executive Budget proposal for Fiscal Year 2025 as it relates to our agency and the State workforce.

The proposed budget continues Governor Hochul's commitment to streamlining hiring of state employees to ensure critical positions are filled. Last year, Governor Hochul introduced the HELP program – Hiring for Emergency Limited Placement – to streamline hiring of employees into healthcare and public safety titles. This program has led to more than 6,000 new hires in the last year. This year the Governor is building on that success by expanding the HELP program to additional titles. As part of efforts to make working for the State more attractive, our office worked with the unions and the Department of Civil Service to reduce the health insurance waiting period for new insurance to kick in to 28 days.

This year's budget provides additional tools to ensure state government has the workforce it needs to deliver services to the public. The Governor has proposed that our Office negotiate the elimination of the longstanding lag payroll and salary deferral programs for new hires which have hindered New York's ability to compete in an ever-tightening job market. Additionally, as part of the coming year's Executive Budget, our Office will lead a public awareness campaign to educate future, and current, State employees about the federal government's Public Service Loan Forgiveness (PSLF) Program. Our effort will build on legislation, enacted by the Legislature and signed by the Governor in 2022, to make the program more accessible by setting a standard hourly threshold for full-time employment for PSLF purposes and clarifying key legal terms associated with the program. Our campaign will bolster the recruitment and retention of State employees by making sure they have knowledge of this valuable program and agencies do their part by advertising the program and assisting employees in getting these valuable benefits. The Governor has also directed the Department of Civil Service to identify and implement opportunities for experience-based hiring to supplement more traditional credential-based methods for identifying qualified candidates.

Consistent with the Governor's State of the State message and our requested budget, our Office will take the lead on providing additional diversity, equity and inclusion training for the State workforce to foster a work environment of inclusivity and continue to move New York forward as an employer of first choice.

Over the past year, we successfully negotiated three collective bargaining agreements covering employees represented by The Public Employees Federation, the United University Professions and District Council-37. All of these

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agreements contained compensation increases in each year of the agreement and introduced cost-saving measures that preserve health benefits while helping to control the growth of costs borne by both employees and the State. Negotiations continue with the other unions with expired agreements. Our approach in negotiations will remain consistent with the Governor's message of being fair to employees and ensuring that state agencies are positioned to deliver outstanding service to New Yorkers.

OER fields numerous inquiries from executive branch agencies. We routinely dispense advice on proper administration of our compensation and benefits packages as well as advice on maximizing employee performance and operational flexibility under the terms of our negotiated agreements. We also continue to work to ensure that all complaints of illegal discrimination and harassment are properly investigated and addressed.

Executive branch agencies continue to administer their own telecommuting programs. Most still allow telecommuting up to several days per pay period but require in office presence the remainder of the pay period. Our guidance to agencies has been consistent: telecommuting programs must strike a balance between providing a convenience to employees on one hand and maintaining accountability and robust services for New Yorkers on the other hand.

As you all know, our office offers a number of pre-tax programs for State employees that saves employees by using pre-tax dollars for various eligible health care, dependent care and transportation expenses. Last year, there were over 22,000 enrollments in the various programs. We continue to make our pre-tax program even more attractive by allowing individuals to "roll-over" the maximum amount of 2023 funds into 2024 for the Health Care Spending Account and provided for a grace period for our Dependent Care Advantage Account and Adoption Expenses flexible spending accounts where employees can use their 2023 balance during the first two and half months of 2024 to incur new expenses and utilize previously deducted funds. We've also been able to fund increased employer contributions for the Dependent Care Advantage Account for the second year in a row.

We also assist employees through our Labor-Management Committees. Those committees distributed over 10,000 job and career related tuition benefit reimbursements in the last year and offer a WellNYS Everyday program. Our Employee Assistance Program had well over 20,000 contacts last year from employees seeking help. Lastly, through our labor-management committees, we continue to foster and develop the State's training and professional development programs and in 2023, we offered training programs ranging from leadership skills to more technical topics such as writing skills, project management, investigative

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techniques, numerous information technology programs and several direct care topics such as gender-affirming mental health care and behavioral therapy.

With respect to training, in 2023 OER prepared and deployed a cadre of over 300 trainers to deliver on the Governor's commitment to in-person Sexual Harassment and Workplace Discrimination Prevention.

Consistent with the Governor's leadership on making New York a family-friendly employer, all the agreements we reached last year included Paid Parental Leave. This leave provides 12 weeks of leave at full pay for bonding with a child after the birth, adoption, or foster care placement. This benefit provides much needed time for new parents to bond with new family members without having to make undue financial sacrifices.

In sum, under Governor Hochul's leadership our office is actively engaged in support of programs that will ensure a robust, well-prepared executive branch workforce that all New Yorkers can rely on.