



NEW YORK STATE SUPREME COURT OFFICERS ASSOCIATION, INC.
I.L.A. – A.F.L. – C.I.O.

TESTIMONY BEFORE THE JOINT LEGISLATIVE BUDGET COMMITTEE

NEW YORK STATE SUPREME COURT OFFICERS ASSOCIATION

PATRICK CULLEN, PRESIDENT

Good afternoon, Chairpersons and distinguished members of the Committee. It is a distinct honor to appear before you once again to deliver remarks on behalf of 2,500 active and retired law enforcement professionals I have the privilege of representing. This occasion marks my twelfth address to this body- an opportunity to convey our members' concerns at the State Capitol. My objective today is to underscore the essential role which our profession plays within the Judicial branch and to highlight the profound influence this budgetary process exerts upon our operational efficacy. The fiscal and legislative determinations reached by this Committee have far reaching and enduring consequences, not only for the professional lives and families of our Officers but for all New Yorkers who depend upon the integrity of our justice system.

While the Unified Court System continues to grow at every conceivable level, our security services have not been able to keep up with this progress and expansion. Our ranks have shrunk to a degree that is nearing unsustainability. The continuation of our leadership's narrative that safety and security are of the highest priority within the court system begins to ring hollow when the mandate to expand duties and responsibilities is not met with the commensurate level of addressing our hiring. Last year, the judiciary budget aimed to provide for the hiring of two classes which would have seen over 500 new Officers hired. Instead, we had only one class graduate late in the year with less than 175 Officers who had to be shared amongst twelve counties. In the same period those twelve counties saw four times as many separate from uniformed service. While we believe court leaders have failed to do enough to address these issues, the most flagrant cause is the continued mistake of not fixing the problems wrought by tier inequity. The longer that retirement tier disparities exist, the worse these hiring shortcomings will become. No more than three and

four hiring cycles ago, there were 110,000 eligible individuals on our open competitive hiring list. This number decreased to 28,000 after the next test, an over 70% decrease. We hoped that severe decrease was an anomaly, but alas, the current list saw a further 50% decrease having only 14,000 names on the eligible list. The simple fact is that this line of work is no longer attractive. For decades, New Yorkers sought public employment in the law enforcement space in massive numbers because it offered a reliable career with outstanding benefits and of course a membership in a defined benefit retirement plan which provided the ability to retire at a younger age. Tier 6 has eliminated that as an option, making our work a far less attractive option. Last year, S8207 was passed unanimously by both the Senate and the Assembly. This bill was submitted by UCS and intended to fix this exact problem by returning all peace officers in the court system to retirement eligibility of 30 years and 55 years of age creating an even playing field for all. UCS would have absorbed the negligible 27-million-dollar cost, yet the Governor vetoed this bill with the message that it was fiscally inviable. That could not be further from the truth, UCS leaders stated in this proposed legislation that they could and would shoulder the cost. While other groups may take issue with other aspects of Tier 6, over 65% of our members simply are seeking to be equalized with their coworkers in other retirement tiers and be given the same opportunities in their service to the State. Until that is done, there are two systems of treatment of employees in a system that seeks justice for all equally.

We cannot focus nor rely strictly on legislation to fix these bleak hiring practices. New York is at the top of most expensive places to live. The compensation for Court Officers has not kept up. While wage increases and other compensation are to be addressed in the scope of pending collective bargaining, grade increases for Court Officers must be prioritized by UCS leadership. It is essential that these non-contractual adjustments be made to the grade levels for all ranks in the salary schedule. Many other titles within the employment of the court system have received grade increases. Without similar treatment, our members see that as another double standard that exists and one that once again disadvantages those who wear a uniform and provide public safety. We appeal to the court leadership team to use this budget to provide increases for every Court Officer in New York. This will assist in attracting interested candidates for employment, keep many employed instead of seeing them leave for other public employers and boost morale among current Officers that they are valued and that the security they provide to court employers and court users is the priority it is claimed to be.

There are many upgrades that can be made to our daily operations throughout the State that can have an impact on providing better services to the public. For example, new technology, a K-9 program, and enhanced law enforcement training are all issues that our organization has advocated for in the past. During previous hearings, I have described with

specificity the need for and the benefit of some of these improvements. This year my intent is to seek partners in the Senate and Assembly who will assist on working on legislative proposals that, if enacted, may directly authorize the implementation of the many developments and augmentations that our employer has fallen grievously behind on. We screen hundreds of thousands of individuals per week and adjudicate millions of cases per year in run down facilities that in many cases physically prevent upgrades in the security apparatus. We will be seeking your intervention as elected officials, those we have put our faith in to enrich the ability of citizens to participate in civic activities and give us the tools, confidence and support to keep them safe while doing so.

Thank you all for the critical work being done on this budget. Please keep in mind the many State employees who keep the State functioning every day and how deeply your decisions impact their families.