



Commissioner Reardon Budget Testimony

Joint Legislative Public Hearing on 2026 Executive Budget Proposal: Workforce Development

Good morning. I am New York State Labor Commissioner Roberta Reardon. I'd like to begin by thanking Chairs Krueger and Pretlow and the distinguished members of these committees for the opportunity to discuss Governor Kathy Hochul's Fiscal Year 2027 Executive Budget and speak about the important work we are doing at the Department of Labor.

As Labor Commissioner and a member of Governor Hochul's cabinet, my focus is clear: ensuring that New York remains a safe, affordable place to live, work, and raise a family.

I know that every member of this body shares our commitment to supporting New York's workforce and business community. And I am so grateful for the respectful and collaborative partnership we have built together.

From Staten Island to Massena, from Granville to Buffalo, on the road and in the office, online and in-person, everything we do at the Department of Labor connects back to our core mission: protecting workers, supporting businesses, and helping New Yorkers find careers they love.

New York is a large state, home to residents as diverse as the communities in which they live. With Governor Hochul's leadership and the support of our legislative partners, including our esteemed labor

chairs, Senator Ramos and Assemblymember Bronson, our Department is working tirelessly to support the needs of the modern workforce and meet New Yorkers where they are.

I'm excited to say that this year, the Department will launch the next generation of our Unemployment Services system. This new system will make it much easier for individuals to access the support they need and will also significantly streamline the process for businesses.

The platform will be accessible by smartphone, reduce payment delays, and provide real-time claim status updates. It is built to address the challenges and needs of our current moment while remaining flexible enough to evolve alongside our changing world of work.

I thank our partners in the Legislature for working with us to make it happen. Our Department is committed to improving our customer service and this will represent a major milestone.

Another milestone? Paying off the federal Unemployment Insurance Trust Fund loan. This key decision last year allowed us to raise the maximum unemployment insurance benefit AND cut costs for businesses statewide. I want to thank our partners in organized labor, as well as the Legislature, including Speaker Heastie and Majority Leader Stewart-Cousins, for working with Governor Hochul to make this bold move possible.

The impact is real. More than half of New Yorkers receiving unemployment insurance have seen their weekly benefits go up. That is more money in their pockets when they need it the most.

And at the same time, businesses are saving an average of \$100 per employee this year and \$250 per employee next year! A true win-win.

Paychecks across the state are also growing once again. On January 1st, New Yorkers earning minimum wage received a bump in their pay of 50-cents per hour. That's the third-straight year of minimum wage increases. And starting next year, the minimum wage will be indexed to inflation. This is another example of successful partnership between Governor Hochul, the Legislature, and the labor community.

January also marked one year since New York became the first state in the nation to mandate Paid Prenatal Leave for pregnant workers. Just last year, the new law provided up to 2.7 million hours of leave for approximately 138,000 workers across our state.

As the first mom Governor of New York, Governor Hochul understands firsthand the difficulty of balancing family and work. Like so many parents, she struggled to find affordable child care when she was first starting her family.

Governor Hochul's proposed budget year includes unprecedented investments to make affordable, universal child care for children under five a reality for families across New York State.

As co-chair of the New York State Child Care Availability Task Force, I know that child care is a necessity, not a luxury. Parents cannot work if they cannot find child care. Period. We have a responsibility to ensure all parents can participate in the workforce to their fullest capacity and desire. Because when that happens, we all benefit.

The Governor also knows that truly supporting working families means ensuring safe and fair conditions on the job.

Protecting workers used to mean showing up on the job site in a hard hat. But the world of work has evolved. And so have our Department's efforts to keep workers safe. We now protect New Yorkers across the modern workforce, using the latest technology, tools, and regulations.

As part of this effort, Governor Hochul proclaimed June 2025 as Worker Safety Month. This helped spotlight three new laws: the Retail Worker Safety Act, the Warehouse Worker Injury Reduction Program, and the Fashion Workers Act. These laws address the real and evolving risks in each of these industries. To date, more than 11,000 New Yorkers have taken the Department's FREE Retail Workplace Violence Prevention Training program, available on our website at no cost to all retail employers.

This past year, we also celebrated the 50th anniversary of our On-Site Consultation program. Over the last 50 years, the On-Site Consultation program has saved New York businesses an estimated \$500 million and prevented an estimated 20,000 workplace incidents. That's 20,000 New Yorkers who made it home safely to their loved ones thanks to the dedicated efforts of our staff and our business partners.

Our Department is also committed to protecting New York workers financially.

New Yorkers work hard for their paychecks. And we want to make sure that money ends up where it belongs – in the pocket of the worker who earned it. Last year's budget expanded our ability to hold businesses engaging in wage theft accountable. What's the impact? In 2025, we recovered and returned more than \$35 million in lost wages and collected two point two million dollars in penalties. And with our Wage Theft Investigation Dashboard, all New Yorkers have the most transparent access ever into our fight to protect workers' paychecks.

In fact, our website serves as a comprehensive resource hub for all New Yorkers on a plethora of topics. Data portals, dashboards, training materials, FAQs, and so much more are all available 24/7.

I'm excited to share that this year, the Department will launch our own registered apprenticeship program in the Worker Protection Division. It's the perfect example of our multi-pronged mission in action – protecting workers AND connecting New Yorkers with career opportunities.

Registered apprenticeships are one of my favorite workforce development models. And together with our partners in the business and labor communities, we are expanding this effective form of higher education into high-demand sectors, making these “earn while you learn” pathways more accessible than ever.

And to connect young New Yorkers with career opportunities, our Department is hard at work implementing the legislation you passed last year to bring working papers into the digital age. We are creating a one-stop online portal to simplify the process for young workers, parents, guardians, schools, and businesses.

Looking ahead, I know that you and your constituents have high expectations for us. You have listened to us and filled our toolbox with smart regulations and strengthened our ability to fight on behalf of New Yorkers. Your support has truly made our work better and I thank you for it.

Under Governor Hochul's leadership, New York State continues to set a national standard – empowering and protecting workers, supporting businesses, and creating pathways to the careers of tomorrow. With your continued support and the critical resources outlined in the Governor's budget proposal, I'm confident the Department is strongly positioned to meet the challenges and seize the opportunities of our modern world of work.

I now welcome your questions.