NEW YORK STATE SENATOR

Thomas F. O'Mara

# Senator O'Mara's weekly column 'From the Capitol' -- for the week of July 1, 2024 -- 'Four million dollars later and still no answers'

THOMAS F. O'MARA July 3, 2024

ISSUE: **COVID RESPONSE**

Senator O'Mara offers his weekly perspective on many of the key challenges and issues facing the Legislature.

Senate and Assembly Republican conferences have repeatedly called for an independent, transparent, no-holds-barred, top-to-bottom examination of all the decisions that were made and all the actions that were taken during the COVID-19 response and recovery.

Senator O'Mara offers his weekly perspective on many of the key challenges and issues facing the Legislature, as well as on legislative actions, local initiatives, state programs and

policies, and more. Stop back every Monday for Senator O'Mara's latest column...

This week, **"Four million dollars later and still no answers"**

**In case you missed it -- which would be no surprise since its release was largely kept quiet by Governor Hochul -- a long-awaited report on New York State's response to the COVID-19 pandemic has finally gone public.**

**It arrives two years and more than four million taxpayer dollars later after the governor first announced its undertaking.**

**Here's the verdict from the Empire Center for Public Policy: "Hochul had commissioned a $4.3 million after-action review of the crisis, saying she wanted it to cover 'the good, the bad and the ugly' and bolster the state's preparedness for future outbreaks. Yet the 262-page report from the Olson Group, a Virginia-based consulting firm, turns out to be thinly researched, poorly argued, ill-informed, sloppily presented and marred by obvious errors. Although many of its findings ring true, it glosses over or ignores some of the state's most questionable actions -- such as ordering thousands of Covid-positive patients into nursing homes."**

**You can find a copy of the Hochul-commissioned report and read the Empire Center's review of it, "Hochul's Pandemic Study Is A $4.3 Million Flop," HERE.**

**The report was recently delivered with very little fanfare -- in fact, virtually none at all as far as I can tell -- by the Hochul administration. No press conference. You won't find it on the state Department of Health website. No pronouncements from the governor herself that the report can point the way to more effective state responses in the future. Most importantly, no measure of accountability.**

**Perhaps the most telling aspects of the release are that it was slipped out on a Friday afternoon -- common timing for news you want buried -- and just three days AFTER former Governor Cuomo testified to Congress on the very subject matter of that report.**

**In fact, the report admits that "a number of key officials were unwilling to participate" because they were worried "about possible litigation and other legal actions." This, according to the report's authors, "has undoubtedly resulted in some gaps in the record."**

**That's quite an understatement. It leaves enormous gaps that, in the end, leaves the whole exercise just a colossal waste of taxpayer dollars. How can we take serious a so-called "after-action review" that failed to compel testimony from the key figures involved in the day-to-day decision making and implementation of the state's COVID-19 response beginning in 2020 under Cuomo and, after his resignation in disgrace, under Governor Hochul?**

**As I said, it shouldn't come as any surprise. It leaves New York where it started: in need of an independent commission to examine what went on, and why, at the highest levels of state government throughout the pandemic. It leaves taxpayers footing the bill for another wasted effort. It leaves every New Yorker who lost a family member or any loved one to COVID without accountability or justice. It leaves us still not as prepared as we should be and can be for any future crisis of this kind.**

**In the end, all this report accomplishes is to continue to make the larger point: Why?**

**Let's never forget that New York government, and all New Yorkers, remained under the iron fist of executive order for nearly three years beginning in March 2020. We know that these executive powers were abused. There were no legislative checks and balances in an all-Democrat-controlled, toe-the-line Legislature. Local decision-making was ignored. It was unilateral action after unilateral action by the governor, executive dictate after executive dictate, state mandate after state mandate. It was a disaster, and incredibly costly, as we keep finding out.**

**The trouble is that we're not finding out the way we should be. It just keeps raising red flags and suspicions. Senate and Assembly Republican conferences have repeatedly called for an independent, transparent, no-holds-barred, top-to-bottom examination of all the decisions that were made and all the actions that were taken during the COVID-19 response and recovery.**

**Instead, two years ago this month, Governor Hochul announced the hiring of the Olson Group, yet another consultant (overseen, by the way, by her own state director of homeland security and**

**emergency services) to conduct an "After Action Review" of the state's pandemic response.**

**Now we have it and, in the words of the Empire Center, the final product "falls far short of what Governor Hochul promised" and, further, the governor "should declare the Olson Group's work unacceptable, demand a refund and launch a real after-action review -- by joining with the Legislature to establish an independent pandemic response commission."**

**Having had a front row seat as the ranking member on the Senate Investigations Committee throughout the pandemic, for me this latest development unfortunately just keeps calling to mind the sordid and terrible chapter of the Cuomo administration's handling of the COVID-19 response in New York's nursing homes, which was replete with lies, misinformation, stonewalling, whitewashing, and bald-faced personal gain for the former governor with a $5.1 million book deal.**

**All that we continue to know for certain is that there remains a glaring lack of urgency within the Hochul administration to willingly reexamine the Covid-19 response, all of it, from the beginning until now -- its costs, its shortcomings, its outright failures, what worked and what did not, who was responsible and who wasn't, what actions should remain in place going forward and what needs to be scrapped immediately.**

**This was the most devastating public health crisis New York State ever faced. The longer the reassessment of the response is delayed, the more transparency gets clouded, the more credibility is eroded, and the more the effectiveness of New York's future responses is jeopardized and weakened.**

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