



NEW YORK STATE SENATOR

Thomas F. O'Mara

Senator O'Mara's weekly column 'From the Capitol' ~ for the week of May 11, 2020 ~ 'Keep response focused on greatest pain'

THOMAS F. O'MARA May 11, 2020

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Right now, just stay absolutely focused on what we know is broken and causing great pain, like unemployment insurance and nursing home care, and let's get it fixed.

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 "From the Capitol..."

This week, "Keep response focused on greatest pain"

May 10, 2020 -- By necessity, the COVID-19 emergency response has been rapidly evolving.

Moving into the third month of this shutdown, it's also important now to continually assess and react to the response -- above all, to ensure that it stays focused, reasonable, and transparent.

Take last week, for example. Governor Cuomo made two pronouncements that sparked strong reactions. Specifically the governor said the state would be joining forces with the Bill Gates Foundation to "reimagine" education in New York, and with Google to transform the health care system.

In return, I urged the governor to keep his administration laser-focused on the public health demands of getting through this crisis and the need to get upstate back to work. From what I hear every day from those I represent, we cannot draw attention and resources away from the immediate crisis by engaging in grand and radical ideas to remake education and health care.

These moves drew a sharp response from legislators, as well as from educators, health care leaders, and good governments groups. Number one, now is not the time. Additionally, far-reaching changes to education or health care can't be done without input from the Legislature, direct stakeholders, or the public at large.

Since the state shutdown began in mid-March, Governor Cuomo has issued hundreds of executive orders that effectively allow the governor to unilaterally make state law. A recent Buffalo Newsreport, for example, estimated that the governor has already authorized nearly \$3 billion in spending on the COVID-19 response and some question whether the spending is being done with the appropriate, independent oversight.

State government by executive order is troubling. While I agree that the immediate COVID-19 response has demanded an ability to respond swiftly, Governor Cuomo appears tempted now to go too far too fast unilaterally. It raises serious and significant legislative concerns.

The Cuomo administration needs to keep state resources and manpower laser-focused on the immediate COVID-19 response. We need to weather this storm with fiscal responsibility and strict priorities. We do need to look ahead, but we cannot divert state efforts to pursue grand ideas and radical reforms for education, health care, or any other cornerstone of New York State's long-term future.

More importantly, we need to devote an absolute commitment to the most critical priorities, including:

-- the tragedy within state-regulated nursing homes statewide, including hot spots right here in the Southern Tier and Finger Lakes regions. The death toll is approaching 5,000, according to the latest state reporting. I have been working closely with local officials on the front lines trying to address this crisis in Steuben County, and I can attest to the frustration that we've had in dealing with the state Department of Health. Last week I joined legislative colleagues calling for an independent investigation so that we can better understand what's occurred, why, and address it immediately to save lives going forward; and

-- the absolute disaster that has prevented the delivery of Unemployment Insurance benefits to thousands of area residents who have lost their jobs because of the shutdown. The failed state Department of Labor system has dragged on too long and until it's fixed, the Cuomo administration shouldn't waste any time and effort entertaining conceptual reforms in education and health care.

I have stressed throughout the ongoing COVID-19 response that we need to be ready, once we weather this storm, to start an open and full discussion on the best ways to move forward for this entire state, upstate and downstate. It will require, at the least, a restructuring of New York government, strengthening the state-local partnership, and getting back to work rebuilding New York with the right priorities, long-overdue commonsense reforms, and fiscal responsibility.

Right now, however, just stay absolutely focused on what we know is broken and causing great pain, like unemployment insurance and nursing home care, and let's get it fixed.