



Suffolk County's Largest Independent Union

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January 24, 2012

Dear Assemblyman Herman D. Farrell, Jr., Chair, Assembly Ways & Means Committee:

Thank you for allowing the Suffolk County Association of Municipal Employees to address you today. I am Peter Meringolo, lobbyist for the Association, and am speaking on behalf of Cheryl Felice, President, who is unable to be here today due to a recent surgery.

Suffolk County AME is dismayed to learn of a bill to shift the Medicaid program from its current county localities to the state. Our union represents approximately 500 workers who will be impacted if this bill is successful.

It is AME's belief that the Medicaid program, while perhaps needing adjustments, is best administered and maintained by those who have been providing services on the local level. Back in 1996, when President Bill Clinton hailed the *end of welfare as we know it...* in signing the **Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Act**, the law effectively transformed the nation's welfare system (of which Medicaid is a vital part) from an *entitlement* to a *work-based* one, instituting new time limits and restrictions. And who implemented this new program with its extensive myriad of new rules and regulations, without so much as an interruption in payment responsibility to those who were receiving benefits and Medicaid from the Suffolk County Department of Social Services? These services were provided by AME members, Suffolk County workers, who open and monitor the public assistance and Medicaid cases which are active here in Suffolk.

The Suffolk County workers are genuinely concerned with the applicants that walk through their doors... because they are their own neighbors and local community residents, many of whom have fallen on hard times or who have sustained disabilities or illnesses... needing the assistance of these benefit programs. The Suffolk County workers also are familiar with the geographic

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localities as well as the demographics of the applicants and recipients... because they live right here alongside them. Suffolk County workers, for the most part, are born and raised right here in Suffolk County, making their understanding and familiarity of the Medicaid/benefits population unsurpassed. And such understanding and familiarity results in the swift and timely opening of cases, all of which represent an “emergency” to the applicant(s).

As many states have set out to redesign their welfare and Medicaid programs, they are also faced with the varying differences and uneven statistics subject to local demographic, political, and institutional factors. It is not as simple as tossing 62 counties into a “New York State Bowl”... when the average salary of families in Buffalo is less than half the average salary of families living on Long Island... and expecting one method of providing Medicaid services to cover every NYS applicant. But it’s not just about the clients.

In an age of economic confusion, low-worker morale is disrupting the lives of not only my members, but of their counterparts throughout the state. That cannot be disputed. Already our phones have started to ring with anxious workers asking if their job is secure; if they should leave service now – prior to any change actually occurring, in the hopes of protecting what they have already earned; how would their accruals be calculated; their seniority rights; civil service protections; salaries; vacation; sick time; representation. It is an atmosphere of fear, not camaraderie and certainly not collaboration. My members in Suffolk County’s Department of Social Services are on the front line, possessing all the history, knowledge, and extensive experience in this area. And, yet, no one has asked them for their input.

None of these questions have been answered; and until they can be answered, to our members’ satisfaction and understanding, we should not change what is *not broken*. Yes, improvements need to be made to the program; but that’s where it starts: at the program level and working with the workers

who have worked the programs and done the jobs -- not by removing the workers from their jobs.

At a time when more than 40 million Americans live in poverty, and as policymakers confront budget deficits and a new era of austerity has fallen upon us; we believe there is a need for a sobering assessment of our state's Medicaid program based on the services provided and the separate demographics of each of New York's 62 counties. AME will be lobbying against the Medicaid restructuring bill and will offer our services to meet and discuss potential resolutions/ideas with the governor's office.

Thank you for allowing us to speak on this important issue.