

Commissioner Reardon Budget Testimony

Joint Legislative Public Hearing on 2024 Executive Budget Proposal: Workforce Development

Chairs Krueger and Weinstein, distinguished members of the committees, thank you for giving me the opportunity to provide an update on our efforts at the Department of Labor. I am Roberta Reardon, New York State Labor Commissioner.

Over the last year, I've been able to dedicate more time to meeting one-on-one with many of my partners in government. It's been incredibly rewarding and I'm really looking forward to continuing these conversations in the future.

Those one-on-one discussions include meetings with our esteemed labor chairs, Senator Ramos and Assemblymember Bronson. It's clear you both have such a genuine passion for labor and a tireless pursuit for justice and fairness in New York's workforce. We share that mission. And congratulations to Harry on your recent appointment. I'm very happy to have my friend and colleague serving in that role.

As I testify before you today, I am reminded of the profound transformations that have unfolded during my time as Commissioner. The world around us has undergone significant changes, and so too has the DOL, constantly adapting to meet these evolving challenges.

With that in mind, I'd like to take the opportunity to reintroduce who we are and what we do for the people of New York State.

The DOL is an agency operating with greater efficiency and unity than ever before. We're not just a collection of divisions with varied responsibilities: we are a unified entity, driven by a singular mission to serve. We're interconnected and collaboratively focused on supporting workers, helping young people safely enter the workforce, assisting businesses, and empowering New Yorkers in their pursuit of employment.

Whether our customers are looking to receive unemployment assistance, pivot to a new career, enhance their skills, or need help recovering stolen wages, we are here to help.

Everyone at the DOL has a role in our success. And by ensuring that our fellow New Yorkers thrive, we are helping to fuel our state's economic might.

This is a moment of opportunity, and we continue to explore new, innovative ways to improve the delivery of our wide spectrum of services.

For instance, we now have virtual agents helping Unemployment Insurance customers get quick answers. Our phone virtual agent was launched last July, and, in that time, it has handled 5.5 million questions and resolved more than 53,000 cases.

That's nearly a million questions a month, which is huge, because it allows our call center staff to handle more complex questions. Meanwhile, after authenticating, our customers can resolve a lot of account-specific issues through the virtual agent. It's truly a game-changer and we continue to refine the tool's capabilities.

As you know, we are also in the process of overhauling our antiquated 1970s UI mainframe with a new, state-of-the-art system that will improve communications, resolve claims faster, and improve fraud detection, because we must continue to protect this valuable social support system.

We're making sure that businesses are paying their fair share. Last year, we reached an unprecedented settlement with ride share giant, Uber. The company agreed to make quarterly and retroactive payments into the State's Unemployment Insurance Trust Fund. New York is the first state in the nation to secure an agreement of this caliber with Uber.

In Worker Protection, we continue to develop our multi-faceted case management system that will ultimately allow New Yorkers to report labor violations, including wage theft, unemployment fraud, and more online.

We've also ramped up our efforts to combat child labor violations. According to our data, from 2021 to 2023, there was a 290 percent increase in reported child labor violations statewide. Many of you have likely seen articles about this issue across the country. Now more than ever, the increase in violations is due to public awareness and

subsequent reporting.

I thank Governor Hochul for helping us shine a light on this issue and lead an aggressive crackdown with the establishment of the state's Child Labor Task Force.

As part of these efforts, we've also visited hundreds of businesses to ensure compliance, launched a Child Labor Information Hub on our website, and established the Protect Youth Workers Pledge, which encourages employers to affirm they have educated their employees about labor rights and signs of labor trafficking. I thank the Legislature for advocating for additional resources for Worker Protection. This division is such an important arm of our agency, and they are safeguarding our precious workforce.

With an ever-present focus on workplace equity, we released two important reports: One, looking closely at the impact the pandemic had on the Gender Wage Gap, the other, a first-of-its-kind study examining employment disparities among transgender, gender non-conforming, and non-binary New Yorkers.

As Governor Hochul continues to spur economic growth in every part of our great state, we are doing our part to support businesses small and large.

We continue to gauge the needs and concerns of our business community through our annual surveys. We also spearheaded a small business tour, where we visited Utica, Troy, Buffalo, and Rochester to

highlight state resources that can help these community cornerstones thrive in today's economy.

This is in addition to the many services we offer to businesses, including workforce recruitment, consultations, hiring incentives and so much more.

With so much new economic activity happening right now, and more on the horizon, it is still very much a job seeker market, and with over 200,000 positions in our statewide job bank, now is the perfect time to take advantage of career opportunities.

Our career fairs, both in-person and virtual, continue to be popular among businesses and job seekers alike. These events showcase opportunities from across the economic spectrum, with positions in the communities where these job seekers live.

We also continue to hold virtual workshops to give New Yorkers every advantage possible in the job market. And we capitalized on cutting edge technology in the expansion of our Virtual Career Center, an online platform that helps New Yorkers accelerate their career search.

We're using many of these tools as part of our ongoing effort to help asylum seekers gain work authorization and find jobs. These individuals certainly face some unique challenges, but we're up to the task. After all, the Governor asked us to do what we do for all New Yorkers, and assisting asylum seekers affirms our mission to support a diverse and inclusive workforce statewide.

I'd like to extend my deepest gratitude to Governor Hochul for entrusting us with additional resources and tools as part of her proposed budget. Her faith in our department empowers us to maximize the impact of every dollar, ensuring that we continue to effectively serve the workers and businesses of New York.

For instance, the proposal to Expand Recovery Tools for Stolen Wages would be a big win for our Worker Protection Division. This is a very dedicated team of people who have seen their responsibilities expand significantly over the years.

Most recently, the expansion of the Workplace Violence Prevention Law to include elementary and secondary public education facilities added 4,400 more employers under the purview of this unit.

Tools are vital in equipping these dedicated individuals to meet the evolving challenges in worker protection.

I'd also like to thank the Governor for supporting several other initiatives that align with our core mission. In the coming months, we will be working to expand our Registered Apprenticeship program to incorporate younger students and our state agencies. We'll also be enhancing our Teacher Ambassador Program, establishing the Office of Workforce Data and Research, developing a Youth Worker Bill of Rights, and creating a Virtual Immigrant Entrepreneur Center. This administration made these proposals in response to concerns raised by you and we look forward to your continued partnership in our efforts.

This is a moment of transformation, where our commitment to adapt and lead change is paramount. Our focus is clear: to serve the people of New York with unwavering dedication and excellence. With the support of this budget, we are set to enhance our strategies and operations, ensuring that every decision and action aligns with our mission to support workers, businesses, and communities.

I see the Governor's budget proposal as more than a fiscal plan: it's an invitation to collaborate on a blueprint for a brighter, more equitable future for everyone statewide. We aim to transform these challenges into opportunities for growth and progress, while building a legacy of innovation, equity, and resilience...setting new benchmarks in public service for the betterment of all New Yorkers. Thank you.