

**Stay Union ★ Stay Strong**

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**Testimony**  
**on**  
**The Unified Court System and COVID-19**  
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**Senate Standing Committee on Judiciary**  
**Senate Standing Committee on Codes**  
**Senate Standing Committee on Housing, Construction, and Community Development**

Chairpersons Hoylman, Bailey, Kavanagh, and distinguished members of the New York State Senate, thank you for the opportunity to testify on the Unified Court System's response to COVID-19 and its impact on CSEA members.

The Civil Service Employees Association (CSEA) represents over 5,800 members across the Unified Court System (UCS) in almost every non-judicial title. The health and safety of these members is paramount to the union. Throughout the pandemic, the CSEA has engaged our counterparts at the UCS to address the growing danger of the Coronavirus and to attempt to contain its spread through court houses across the state.

Early in the pandemic, there were some issues with securing personal protective equipment (PPE) and proper safety measures for all court staff. This included difficulties in receiving and maintaining supplies of gloves, bleach wipes, and hand sanitizer, and issues with ensuring that courtrooms were being adequately cleaned. Additionally, there were health and safety concerns for staff working outside of court houses, such as Mental Health Legal Services attorneys that visit clients in hospitals and conduct hearings outside of courthouses. While these issues weren't all resolved at the time, Governor Cuomo's State of Emergency declaration and the corresponding cessation of in-person court proceedings put these issues on hold and undoubtedly saved lives among court personnel.

With the shift to virtual courts, CSEA members could safely telecommute. During this period, UCS was responsive to CSEA's questions and together we were able to resolve many issues. We are also happy that some functions continue to be handled remotely as that is safest for our members and keeps the density numbers down in the actual court houses.

While the courts were still exclusively virtual, CSEA proactively drafted health and safety precautions that courts could take upon re-opening and shared these recommendations with UCS.

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These recommendations focused on three main issue areas: 1) Engineering solutions like physical barriers, floor markings to ensure proper distancing, and ventilation systems; 2) Administrative solutions like checking temperatures, limiting capacity, and ensuring mask compliance; and 3) PPE solutions including masks for all staff and other protective equipment as necessary. Many, though not all, of these recommendations were adopted by the UCS. But there is more that needs to be done.

As courthouses reopened, CSEA and other unions representing court employees participated in joint examinations of health and safety measures. Unfortunately, what started out as a good process was sped up and became cursory at best as regional re-openings proceeded in fits and starts. In some cases, our local presidents were only given 24 hours' notice to review a dozen or more court houses. This left little time for any meaningful redress of health and safety issues. As a result, courts re-opened for in-person business without some safety precautions in place. Because of this, there remain several unresolved health and safety issues.

Chief among CSEA's outstanding concerns is the cleanliness of the court houses. To date, the number of court houses which receive cleaning services during the day between proceedings can be counted on one hand. Some courts still only receive a cursory evening cleaning. During a pandemic this is unacceptable. In part, CSEA believes this is due to cleaning services being locally controlled by the individual Judicial Districts, with seemingly no uniform mandate or standard across the state which would ensure uniform cleaning schedules while courts are in session AND at the end of the day.

Secondly, every court was supposed to have plexiglass installed in locations where staff interface all day long with the public; yet in courts from Upstate to Long Island and NYC, much of the plexiglass is still missing.

Lastly, the supply of N95 masks acquired by UCS based on health and safety recommendations of the unions has been depleted in courthouses across the State for weeks. UCS has now purchased face shields and surgical masks. However, the best science shows that for staff who are continually interacting with the public all through the workday inside buildings, surgical masks and face shields do not afford workers as much protection as face shields and N95 or Kn95 masks. Surgical masks may be sufficient for back office staff who are not in constant contact with the public but are not appropriate for all workers. Court Officers who deal with a constant stream of visitors, court room staff who will be sitting for hours with a changing group of visitors, and staff entering hospital and prison settings must have the additional health protection afforded by the N95 or KN95 masks and face shields.



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As New York begins to reopen and deal with the ongoing pandemic, CSEA will continue to work with the UCS to make sure that these safety and health concerns are addressed to ensure that workers and the public are safe in all our court houses.

Thank you for the opportunity to submit testimony on these important issues.