

Commissioner Roberta Reardon
New York State Department of Labor

January 31, 2022

Joint Hearing of the Legislative Fiscal Committee

Chairs Krueger and Weinstein, distinguished members of the committee, thank you for this opportunity to talk about some of the progressive proposals that Governor Hochul included in her Executive Budget, as well as to provide you with an update on our efforts at the Department of Labor.

Introduction

My name is Roberta Reardon. I am the Commissioner of the New York State Department of Labor. Our mission is to protect workers, provide support to the unemployed, and help New Yorkers find a career they love. We also support businesses across the State, which is needed as we continue to navigate COVID-19.

The pandemic continues to present challenges, but as New Yorkers we continue to face and overcome them. Thanks to the leadership of Governor Hochul, and with the partnership of the Legislature, the Department of Labor continues to evolve to better suit the needs of New Yorkers. We are laser-focused on preparing New Yorkers to assume their rightful place in the economy of tomorrow.

Unemployment Insurance

The D-O-L continues to prioritize assisting unemployed New Yorkers. Since the start of the pandemic, we have delivered around \$104 billion in benefits to 4.8 million New Yorkers, to help them feed their families, pay rent, and give people support when they needed it most because they could not work. This, while also standing up 6 programs. We also launched a new unemployment application, expanded phone lines to handle unprecedented volume, and continue to fight fraud by international cyber criminals.

We remain focused on keeping our systems secure, even though Unemployment Insurance assistance numbers have improved. I applaud our Office of Special Investigations for their incredible work during this crisis. They have prevented over \$36 billion from falling into the hands of criminals, and that number continues to grow everyday thanks to their vigilance.

Worker Protection

At the same time, worker protection remains another one of our top priorities. Our Labor Standards and Worker Protection teams remain vigilant in ensuring the safety and health of all workers. We continue to safeguard workers from disease by mandating workplace health precautions. Since the beginning of the

pandemic, we have investigated over 53,000 complaints and work with local governments to ensure compliance, while also protecting workers from wage theft.

Excluded Workers & Tourism Funds

In 2021, we launched the Excluded Workers Fund, an innovative assistance program devoted to helping those outside traditional unemployment assistance programs. We helped get over \$2 billion into the hands of over 120,000 New Yorkers in just 3 months. The DOL is also currently wrapping up distributing support payments to thousands of workers in the hard-hit tourism industry.

Workforce Development

The pandemic provided many New Yorkers a unique opportunity: a moment to reevaluate their lives, and in many cases, pursue new careers that better suited the needs of their families. The DOL recognized this and continues to explore innovative ways to help these New Yorkers develop the skills they need to secure the jobs of the future.

We embraced virtual technology and now provide free tools online to job seekers. 63,000 New Yorkers have logged nearly 700,000 hours of online skill learning via Coursera. These courses

are geared toward high-demand skills based on what businesses tell us they need.

Partnerships continue to be an essential part of our approach for enhancing training opportunities for New Yorkers. Through New York State's Workforce Development Initiative, the DOL is working with Empire State Development Corporation, SUNY, and CUNY to support job training that will establish a pipeline of skilled workers. The DOL also stands ready to work with the new Office of Workforce and Economic Development, the Regional Economic Development Councils, and other partners to strategically connect skilled workers to jobs in every region of the state. Long-term solutions that benefit workers and businesses will be an important chapter in New York's economic comeback story.

A very successful initiative in our multi-pronged approach in terms of workforce development are Registered Apprenticeships. This long-term solution to get New Yorkers into high-paying, in-demand careers is proving to be a win for both job seekers and businesses. Registered Apprenticeships give New Yorkers the skills they need to thrive within an industry while also providing businesses with a skilled workforce catered to a company's needs. There are around 18,000 apprentices participating in nearly 1,000 registered apprenticeships in our state, and we continue to expand into additional professions.

The pandemic highlighted vulnerabilities in some sectors, and Governor Hochul is addressing them. In her budget, she outlined her historic \$10 billion plan to rapidly rebuild and grow our healthcare workforce by 20 percent. Healthcare workers are the heroes of the pandemic, and we must add more support to turn the corner on COVID-19.

The pandemic also highlighted the important role childcare has in the lives of our workforce. As Co-Chair of the Governor's Child Care Availability Task Force, I can tell you affordable childcare is essential. Governor Hochul's plan to expand childcare access will help strengthen this critical support for families.

While we continue to navigate COVID-19, we must not lose sight of what is on the horizon. The Governor's proposed investment in Offshore Wind will create thousands of new jobs, and as Co-chair of the Just Transition Working Group, it is my duty to ensure that every community has a seat at the table as we expand our clean-energy sector. Small businesses also remain a vital part of our economy and these community cornerstones must be protected through Governor Hochul's proposed tax credits and funding support. The Department of Labor also offers support services for businesses of all sizes.

Conclusion

2021 continued to test all New York State agencies, including the Department of Labor. But together, we rose above, persevered, and continue to pioneer forward. We are prepared for what comes after COVID-19 and want to ensure that all New Yorkers are ready to participate, succeed, and thrive in the economy of tomorrow.