



**NEW YORK STATE SUPREME COURT OFFICERS ASSOCIATION, INC.
I.L.A. – A.F.L. – C.I.O.**

**TESTIMONY BEFORE THE JOINT LEGISLATIVE BUDGET COMMITTEE
NEW YORK STATE SUPREME COURT OFFICERS ASSOCIATION
PATRICK CULLEN, PRESIDENT**

Good morning, Chair Krueger and Chair Weinstein and esteemed members of the State Legislature. I am Patrick Cullen, President of the New York State Supreme Court Officers Association and its 2,500 active and retired members, it is once again my privilege to address you on the judiciary budget and the impact it has on our members and the daily functions of the Unified Court System.

Our Court system has been through many trials and tribulations throughout the last five years. From a historic staffing crisis through a pandemic and many critiques and opinions about its present and future. Yet today, it remains the busiest judicial system in the country, operating around the clock. I can report, from the front lines, to you, that many of these factors have taken their toll. The uniformed personnel of the Unified Court System are proud public employees; however, many external factors are wearing on them. This is the primary reason I urge you to pass the judiciary budget in full.

While we have just completed the latest round of collective bargaining through the year 2025, there are many fiscal concerns that we view as problematic for the well-being of the court system. Court Officers are the public face of the system, providing the highest levels of public

safety for the millions of users, jurors, attorneys and judges that enter our courthouses annually. Out staffing is currently threadbare. Where four or five Officers used to staff posts and courtrooms now only two or three do and, in some cases, only one. This brings the justice system to a grinding halt. Screening procedures can take three or four times as long each morning and afternoon because there are not enough Officers to conduct them. This causes long lines keeping all participants from reporting to their parts on time. Additionally, throughout the day, as cases are called and many ready to proceed to trial or another court part, they are once again delayed or adjourned to another date because the judge's part where they are to proceed has no staff. What I very cursorily illustrate here is that without more Officers far less work gets done. In some cases, the adjourn date is a month or more down the line. The participants awaiting adjudication are forced to hold on longer for what in most cases is a very serious decision that does not come timely, because the system is so shorthanded. Many people's freedom depends on those critical decisions which are so often delayed because we lack staff and the safety measures to properly function. As you analyze the judiciary budget and hear from the many stakeholders involved, please draw a direct line of correlation between the delay of justice in our extremely busy courts to the terribly deficient staffing levels.

In the judiciary budget for the current year, there was funding set aside for the hiring of 500 Court Officers. During that timeframe, less than 110 were actually hired. This has caused us to fall far behind the normal attrition rates. There are multiple academy classes planned for the upcoming fiscal year, but what happens to the 390 jobs that go unfilled from last year's budget? They certainly are desperately needed.

Understanding the separation of branches, there must be an accountability attached to the passage of this budget. If there is funding for a specific number of Officers to be hired, the Unified Court System

should be held accountable to achieve that number. Once again, we support the passage of this budget in full, but the lack of oversight surrounding staffing has a direct and negative effect on the State's ability to provide services to its citizens. This is now my tenth year providing testimony to this Committee and year after year the judiciary budget calls for line items for new Officers and year after the year the reality falls short of it. This creates a less safe work environment for us and raises the prospect of dangerous conditions for all New Yorkers using our courts.

As was mentioned, there are academy classes to be commenced in the coming months, but even those who complete training and join our ranks will not come close to filling the gaps left by the tremendous number of Officers who have retired or resigned over the last three years. It has taken an exceptionally long period of time to get these classes ready and a major reason for that is the very same as most agencies in the public sector these days, recruitment, and retention. It is no secret that Tier 6 is more harmful a creation to public employees than anything else. It has dramatically increased the contribution levels of public employees while diminishing retirement age and benefit amounts. For these reasons alone, public employment is less attractive to a new generation of workers. With specific relation to the Unified Court System, the current eligible list from a recently certified Court Officer exam has 28,000 names on it compared to previous lists that contained over 100,000 eligible applicants. That is an approximate 72% decrease in people who are interested in pursuing our profession. This is a direct result of the creation of the diminished pension benefits under Tier 6. There were some minor changes made during the budget process last year and along with all public employee representatives we are hopeful that is a sign of a willingness to continue to analyze the deep-rooted problems it has caused. As illustrated here today, our entire justice system in New York can begin to function at the rate that

it used to and that works for so many more people and that begins and ends with staffing.

We continue to focus on our personnel levels but are always fighting for more training, specifically active shooter training, the utilization of Narcan to battle the growing Fentanyl crisis, as well as new equipment such as radios and magnetometers to protect all court users. We continue to believe that piloting a K-9 program will help add another layer of security for the court community. Many of our facilities are in such disrepair that ceilings are missing, and floors taken up. On many of these matters we will directly make the Judiciary Committees in each House aware of such problems, but we hope that we have lent some further clarity to the direct impact that a fully funded court system will have on our communities by providing the timely services they expect in the safest possible manner. Thank you for your time and consideration.