

**Testimony of Michael Volforte, Director
Office of Employee Relations**

March 1, 2023

Chairs Weinstein and Krueger and honorable members of the Assembly and Senate. My name is Michael Volforte and I am the Director of the New York State Office of Employee Relations. Thank you for the opportunity to speak to you about Governor Hochul's Executive Budget proposal for Fiscal Year 2024 as it relates to our agency and the State workforce.

The proposed budget continues Governor Hochul's goal of increasing the State workforce by proposing growth in a number of agencies like the Division of State Police, Department of Environmental Conservation and the Office of Parks, Recreation and Historic Preservation. This year's budget also contains a number of proposals to jump start hiring for the future like Continuous Recruitment examinations, establishing Centers for Careers in Government in partnership with the Department of Labor and a campaign highlighting the importance of careers in public service.

Together with our employee unions, we shape the future of the workforce and efforts to retain and expand it. Over the past year, we successfully negotiated three collective bargaining agreements covering employees represented by the Police Benevolent Association of New York State, Council 82 and the Civil Service Employees Association (CSEA). All agreements contained compensation increases in each year of the agreement. The CSEA agreement not only provided increases but made changes to health insurance to encourage unit members to save money by using our broad participating provider network in the Empire Plan. Between ongoing and planned negotiations, we will negotiate with nine unions this year for new collective bargaining agreements. Our approach in negotiations will remain consistent with the Governor's message of being fair to employees and ensuring that agencies are positioned to continue to deliver outstanding service to New Yorkers.

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Last year, we continued to assist agencies and employees in emerging from the pandemic and we continue offering such services. For example, we agreed with all of the unions to extend the vacation accrual deadlines until the end of 2023 to permit employees to take more time off. We also assisted in the rollout of the \$3000 health care worker bonus included in last year's budget for eligible private sector and State employees. As of today, this benefit has been extended to more than 39,000 state employees serving in a variety of roles in the health care and direct care fields. These employees were critical in our efforts to manage and respond to COVID-19.

On a daily basis OER fields numerous inquiries from executive branch agencies. We routinely dispense advice on proper administration of our compensation and benefits packages as well as advice on maximizing employee performance and operational flexibility under the terms of our negotiated agreements. We also continue to work to ensure that all complaints of illegal discrimination and harassment are properly investigated and addressed.

As we indicated last, year, agencies have transitioned to their own telecommuting policies rather than the former emergency statewide program. Most allow telecommuting up to several days per pay period but require in office presence the remainder of the pay period. Our guidance to agencies has been consistent: telecommuting programs must strike a balance between providing a convenience to employees on one hand and maintaining accountability and robust services for New Yorkers on the other hand.

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As you all know, our office offers a number of pre-tax programs for State employees that saves employees by using pre-tax dollars for various eligible health care, dependent care and transportation expenses. Last year, there were over 26,000 enrollments in the various programs. We continue to make our pre-tax program even more attractive by allowing individuals to “roll-over” the maximum amount of 2022 funds into 2023 for the Health Care Spending Account and provided for a grace period for our Dependent Care Advantage Account and Adoption Expenses flexible spending accounts where employees can use their 2022 balance during the first two and half months of 2023 to incur new expenses and utilize previously deducted funds.

In collaboration with our union counterparts, we continued many other programs that provide important benefits to our workforce. In the last year, our Employee Assistance Program rendered valuable assistance to almost 20,000 employees working and coping with the pandemic. We also distributed over 4,500 job and career related tuition benefit reimbursements in the last year and offer a WellNYS Everyday program. Lastly, through our labor-management committees, we continue to foster and develop the State’s training and professional development programs and in 2022, we offered over 700 training and development programs serving over 26,000 employees.

As the Governor indicated in both the State of the State and in her budget address, the State is moving forward with paid parental leave for New York State executive branch employees. Recently, our office partnered with the Department of Civil Service and implemented paid parental leave for unrepresented State employees. This leave will provide 12 weeks of leave at full pay for bonding with a child after the birth, adoption or foster care placement. This benefit will provide much needed time for new parents to bond with new family members without having to make

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undue financial sacrifices. Our office will negotiate with each of the unions that represent employees to extend this benefit to them.

In sum, while the current job market poses challenges for the State, under Governor Hochul's leadership our office is well positioned to continue to deliver for State agencies and employees alike so that they can continue the essential services that New Yorkers rely upon.