



Bellone testimony

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Thank you for the opportunity to speak before this committee. I am joined today by Suffolk County's acting Civil Service Director Tom Melito. While I will speak more broadly about the Civil Service office's negative impacts on the operations of county government, the Acting Director will discuss specific recommendations designed to enhance the value the office brings to the organization.

The Suffolk County Department of Human Resources, Personnel and Civil Service is central to our efforts to achieve excellence in this government because of its role in recruitment and human resource management.

The Civil Service office controls hiring for County government and oversees hiring for local governments throughout Suffolk.

In Suffolk County, the Civil Service office is also charged with providing a centralized human resources management function.

In 2012, I came into a county government that was broken and dysfunctional. I initially assumed this was caused primarily by mismanagement. I was wrong. Over time, I came to understand that there was a corrupt operation in Suffolk County government whose primary purpose was self-preservation. This corruption, centered in the District Attorney's office under the former leadership, has had a crippling effect on the operations and effectiveness of this government by protecting a broken status quo.

Nearly 4 years ago, I stood on the steps of the former District Attorney's office and called on him to step down for running a criminal enterprise out of his office. It was 18 months later when the US Attorney's office for the eastern district indicted the former DA, who was found guilty of corruption and abuse of power this past December.

Just last year we fought another long battle to remove the entrenched head of the Suffolk County Civil Service office, who had held the post for 38 years. In seeking reappointment to another six year term, this individual argued that I had to reappoint him because he was the only person on Long Island who met the qualifications for the position, qualifications that he himself had drafted and implemented years earlier. He mused that there might be one individual from upstate New York who could qualify but then expressed doubt that this individual would have any interest in moving.

The notion that no one else could qualify for such a position in the largest county in the state is, of course, absurd on its face. It was important though, for him and others, that he continue to be in a position to wield the power of the civil service office to dole out favors that in turn helped him to retain power.

Despite some extreme efforts to keep this individual in power we were ultimately successful in making a change. Following his removal, I appointed an Acting Director who led a review of the state of the office in coordination with our Director of Performance Management and Deputy County Executive Melito. The report, which was produced at the end of this review and released last December, made two critical findings.

First, it highlighted an almost complete lack of diversity in the office, with just one person of color among 77 employees within the Department. Second, the report cited the complete absence of critical Human Resource functions in direct violation of the county charter. A department that literally has the term Human Resources in its title had no HR Director.

This report, laid out in stark detail what had been clear to me for some time, that the Department of Civil Service must be reformed to enable us to attract, retain and empower talent in the workforce to create a culture of innovation and diversity that will allow this government to reach its full potential.

As you are fully aware, this is not an academic exercise. Everything that we do in this government has a real impact on the lives of the 1.5 million residents in Suffolk County. To the extent then that this government or any government is not operating as effectively and efficiently as possible we are causing real harm and damage to the people and communities that we serve.

Because of the culture of corruption that we have confronted and the battles we have won, we now have the ability to accelerate reform in this government but the task ahead is enormous. We are just now in a position to implement basic pillars that are necessary for any large organization to operate effectively.

We have more than 500 data systems that do not communicate with each other.

We have no centralized human resources function to help identify and nurture talent within the organization and to create accountability structures to help enhance performance.

There is no centralized training unit or division that can work with departments and employees to advance their skills increasing the proficiency and versatility of the organization.

We lack basic systems in this government like a modern payroll system or procurement system.

All of these deficiencies directly relate to and have been impacted by the failures of the civil service office and its leadership.

Let me cite just one example. It took nearly two years - two years - for my administration to convince the civil service office that we needed new titles to bring in the specific talent necessary to transform our IT infrastructure to help create accountability and transparency within the government. After securing the titles the first person we hired to help lead this IT transformation was eventually forced out of the title because she wasn't "reachable" on the written exam that she was required to take. In other words, she didn't score in the top 3 on an exam that is not an effective measure of who has the right combination of skills and qualities to do the job. So we went back to Civil Service to push for this title to allow for a "time and experience" exam to provide slightly more flexibility in identifying the talent necessary to do this critical work. Since my re-election this last November, we have been recruiting talented individuals to fill these titles and do this essential work but we still face Civil Service challenges with respect to these titles. The result of all this has been more delays preventing this government from implementing critical reforms and improvements.

I cannot emphasize enough the import of the civil service office on the operations of government. Reform is essential and we are doing this on the local level but we cannot do this alone. We need our partners in the State Legislature to review civil-service laws and regulations to identify those that inhibit effective organization management and to work with us to create positive change.

I want to again thank this Committee for engaging with Suffolk County on how best to recruit talented individuals into our workforce and to support their healthy growth and development within the organization. I look forward to working with the Members on this Committee to achieve these goals.

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