

**Testimony of Michael Volforte, Director
on behalf of the Governor's Office of Employee Relations**

February 4, 2019

Chairs Weinstein and Krueger and honorable members of the Assembly and Senate.

Good afternoon. My name is Michael Volforte and I serve as the Director of the Governor's Office of Employee Relations. Thank you for the opportunity to address you on Governor Cuomo's Executive Budget proposal for the upcoming fiscal year as it pertains to the State workforce and my office.

During the past year, the State reached collective bargaining agreements with several unions that represent Executive Branch employees. Agreements were reached with four unions that represent approximately 60,000 employees. All of the agreements continue to strike the balance championed by the Governor – fairly compensating our proud and valued public workforce with pay increases in each year of each agreement while maintaining fiscal discipline. These agreements include changes and enhancements to benefits like health insurance and ensure that State agencies are enabled to deliver the services that they need. As part of these negotiations, we also reached a number of agreements on implementing Paid Family Leave and have recently rolled out the Paid Family Leave program for approximately 35,000 employees represented by United University Professions.

We offer many other benefits to our workforce. These include pre-tax contribution programs for unreimbursed health care expenses, dependent care expenses, transportation expenses and a new program for adoption expenses. We work

closely with our partners in labor to provide these high-quality benefit programs and many others. For example, through our labor-management Work-Life Services program, we are able to serve employees through our Employee Assistance Program, pre-retirement planning seminars, wellness services, and state worksite day care programs.

We continue to build upon Governor Cuomo's commitment to the professional development of the workforce. We have statewide mandatory training programs for all staff designed to protect the workforce, advise them of their rights and responsibilities under law and polices, and ensure access to government services by the public, including a newly redesigned training on ethics. We have also continued to reinforce leadership skills, supervisory skills, interpersonal relations, and the core job skills needed by our workforce to assist the public.

Through these professional development and benefits programs, we are able to serve tens of thousands of State employees with workforce benefits or development opportunities so that they can move forward in their careers.

In December, pursuant to Executive Order No. 187, my Office assumed responsibility for independently investigating complaints of protected class employment discrimination and harassment in Executive Branch agencies. With a team of independent investigators and lawyers, we are actively investigating complaints of discrimination and harassment in order to ensure that all allegations are investigated, individuals are advised of the result of that investigation, and appropriate action is taken in a timely manner by anyone found to have violated policy.

Over the past year, the core of organized labor has been threatened by an anti-labor movement reflected in the Supreme Court's *Janus* decision. The State has stood up to this movement and passed protections for public sector unions in the Civil Service Law. The Governor also protected the personal information of State employees from anti-union forces through Executive Order No. 183. In this year's budget, the Governor plans to codify and expand that protection for all public employees in New York State to aid in the fight against these anti-union forces. The Governor's proposal protects this information by making it an improper practice charge under the Taylor Law to disclose personal contact information of any public employee except as required by law. The Governor's budget proposal also guarantees that unions have the right to receive basic information on the employees they represent so that they can effectively represent those in a bargaining unit. The law further requires public employers to provide this information, upon request, at least quarterly to unions who request it. We will continue to take common sense action to do all that is needed to ensure that our partners in labor are protected from attacks.

As we turn the page to the next fiscal year, the State's overall workforce remains stable as it has for a number of years. There are no layoffs proposed in the Governor's budget. My office will continue to focus on negotiating the outstanding collective bargaining agreements to bring them to a conclusion, implementing recently negotiated agreements and expanding the development and education of the State workforce in order to enhance their skills, and deliver the services needed to the public.

Over the next year, we will proudly continue our tradition of collaboration with the unions in areas like health benefit design and protecting the safety and security of the

workforce. We will continue to negotiate new agreements and I am confident that we will reach agreements that recognize the valuable contributions of those in organized labor but also ensure our ability to meet the needs of the public which we all serve.

Thank you.