



NEW YORK STATE SENATOR

Thomas F. O'Mara

Senator O'Mara's weekly column 'From the Capitol' ~ for the week of September 20, 2021 ~ 'A recipe for crisis that New York can't afford'

THOMAS F. O'MARA September 20, 2021

| ISSUE: **COVID-19 VACCINES**



Here's a perfect – and critical – opportunity for Governor Hochul to listen to the front lines and to finally recognize that they offer a better way.

Senator O'Mara offers his weekly perspective on many of the key challenges and issues facing the Legislature, as well as on legislative actions, local initiatives, state programs and policies, and more. Stop back every Monday for Senator O'Mara's latest column...

This week, "A recipe for crisis that New York can't afford"

In a recent letter to New York's new Governor, Kathy Hochul, I joined a number of my legislative colleagues in the Senate Republican Conference to weigh in on one of New York government's most divisive issues at the moment: the state mandate that all health care workers be vaccinated by September 27, or risk losing their jobs.

On September 10th we wrote to the governor, "The impact this mandate will have on the healthcare workforce will be felt across the entire State. Importantly, rural communities are already experiencing significant healthcare workforce staffing shortages and the effect of this mandate will only hasten the situation. To prevent a healthcare workforce exodus, public health officials have asked that you consider modifying the vaccine requirement, perhaps by allowing for a weekly, or more frequent, testing alternative. We strongly urge you to do so as it is essential that we preserve our existing healthcare workforce."

The vaccine mandate is currently embroiled in lawsuits and protests. Last week, a federal judge in Utica issued a temporary restraining order blocking the mandate from going into effect for some workers seeking a religious exemption (the mandate itself provided a medical exemption).

It's a mandate, however, that Governor Hochul and her inner circle could and should revisit and address with greater caution and a stronger dose of common sense.

If she doesn't care about our state-level concerns, Governor Hochul should heed the legitimate and reasonable calls from many local leaders. Local public health departments on the front lines of the COVID-19 response and health care overall share our alarm.

For example, 10 local health departments throughout the region, including those in Schuyler, Steuben, and Yates counties, recently urged the governor to rethink the mandate, writing, "While we fully support COVID-19 vaccines and urge every eligible New Yorker to get vaccinated, the ten counties represented in this letter share grave concerns about the practical implications of your proposed mandate on the stability of our healthcare system. Local nursing homes and hospitals have already begun receiving mass resignations of staff...The potential mass exodus of healthcare staff in late September, coming several weeks after children return to school, coupled with the continued increase in COVID-19 cases across the state caused by the proliferation of the Delta variant is a recipe for crisis throughout the entire healthcare system."

These dedicated health care professionals, men and women who have worked around the clock since March 2020 to combat COVID-19 with the health and well-being of their communities as the only

priority, propose, as a compromise, “allowing for a weekly, or more frequent, testing alternative to vaccination” as a “reasonable option that would respect the personal health decisions of healthcare workers while protecting, to the greatest extent practicable, the safety of patients and their families.”

Chemung County Executive Chris Moss wrote to Governor Hochul in a similar vein on September 15th, “In Chemung County alone, this mandate could have a devastating effect on several facets of our health care system, to include nursing facilities, hospitals, and our County Health Department...This mandate is only going to exacerbate the problem. Over the past 18 months these same health care workers were instrumental in guiding municipalities and assisting the state through the pandemic. In return, the state is now implementing a vaccine mandate that will adversely affect the same health care workers who have led the fight against the virus...As opposed to having counties throughout the state review emergency plans for the lack of health care workers, we should be collaboratively working with your office on a resolution to adequately address the situation to the satisfaction of all parties, which in my opinion should include some type of testing regiment as opposed to a mandated vaccine.”

These local leaders and health professionals at the grassroots level are not crying wolf. This vaccine mandate has delivered a crisis in the making, and it can be avoided.

Under former Governor Andrew Cuomo, it was always a “my way or the highway” approach to governing, and we are still trying to remedy the damage that was done. So far, on this issue, Governor Hochul is showing no signs of being interested in a different approach.

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