



NEW YORK STATE SUPREME COURT OFFICERS ASSOCIATION

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**TESTIMONY BEFORE THE NEW YORK STATE
JOINT LEGISLATIVE BUDGET COMMITTEE
PATRICK CULLEN, PRESIDENT
NEW YORK STATE SUPREME COURT OFFICERS ASSOCIATION
FEBRUARY 5, 2014**

Good afternoon, Chairman DeFrancisco, Chairman Farrell and members of the legislature.

Thank you very much for granting me time before you today so that I may share some information with you regarding the Supreme Court Officers of New York State.

My name is Patrick Cullen and I have the privilege of representing 2,400 active and retired Court Officers in Supreme Courts in New York City and the 9th Judicial District as President of the New York State Supreme Court Officers Association.

In this position, I am charged with the responsibility of being the voice of my members who give their professional lives to the service of their fellow New Yorkers.

I want to use this opportunity to bring to light some of the difficulties our membership has encountered in the past number of years. For the past several years the Office of Court Administration has submitted reduced or zero growth budgets in order to do its part in helping New York State through the financial woes we have all endured.

Regarding our members, the Office of Court Administration initiated title rollbacks, layoffs and promotional and hiring freezes in order to reduce costs and maintain an austerity not seen in decades.

Of course, the importance of these measures is understood on many levels, however, it has taken its toll on the state's judicial system. The Courts have been gutted of many key personnel level at all levels. As per OCA's own 2014-2015 proposed budget, current staffing is the lowest it has been in more than a decade, despite a significant increase in workload during that time.

What this means to the men and women of our organization is multifaceted. Though, the main result has been the reduction of safety throughout the Supreme Courts statewide.

Because our public workforce has been drained of resources:

* Public areas are no longer patrolled



*Entry searches are performed by far fewer officers, delaying entry to facilities

* Trials are being conducted with one, two and sometimes three officers fewer than acceptable staffing standards.

Additionally, the lack of manpower causes a constant redeployment of officers, delaying in some form every daily calendar in the Courts we represent.

All of these factors are complications in and of themselves, yet occur as the Office of Court Administration has, in the same time frame, placed its focus on efficiency initiatives geared toward speeding up the process of adjudicating a tremendous backlog of felony cases.

OCA readily admits these problems in its proposed budget and I quote;

" ... Employees who, in the face of overwhelming workload and reductions in personnel and resources, have redoubled their efforts and are working harder than ever."

We are glad to hear of this recognition, however, what is not included is the real impact it has had upon the safety of those citizens that the courts serve. An increase of violent activities in both criminal and civil terms, a substantial uptick in gang presence and the inability to assign Officers to the protection of jurors, litigants and judges who require it, but suffer because of our massive understaffing.

It is my belief we are already past a breaking point and it is just a matter of time before we see a devastating toll on the safety of New Yorkers inside our Courts. The public has a reasonable expectation to be protected while in our courts, and at our current staffing levels this just is not possible. Our individual court officers have been doing jobs traditionally done by two or three court officers under similar circumstances in the past.

Additionally, the ramifications of these occurrences have a tremendously detrimental result for the men and women who courageously don the uniform every day. We have seen a marked increase in injurious events to our uniformed forces. These officers have been hurt and some disabled responding to violent incidents. You may be aware of our intent to introduce legislation during this session which would serve to equalize our officers to the levels of other state law enforcement agencies with regard to workers compensation and disability retirement. The necessity for this bill exists due to the upsurge of injuries to our members augmented by the mandate of doing more with less.

My report to this committee of the alarming status of the safety of the public, as well as my members, as the result of OCA's previous draconian austerity program. I wish to point out, OCA's pointed commentary as to the current status of my members, from their own budget documents:

"...these challenges are exacerbated by the frequent need to deny annual leave requests to ensure coverage, affecting staff morale and wellbeing."

It is widely known that it is vital for law enforcement officers to maintain a high morale and mental acuity to ensure that complacency remains at bay for if it does, safety disintegrates from within.

I am sincerely grateful for the opportunity to offer some facts about the consequences these recent budgets have had on our professional lives and, of course, the trickle-down effect it has at home and in the communities we serve and live in. I am heartened by the ability to report directly from the front lines on behalf of the people I represent, the people that you also represent. Ultimately, the reason all of us are in this room is to represent our fellow New Yorkers, to help make their lives a bit better, to make New York a safer place to live.

Thank you again for your time and consideration.