



STEFAN I. MYCHAJLIW
ERIE COUNTY COMPTROLLER

December 8, 2020

Mr. Timothy Hogues
Erie County Department of Personnel
95 Franklin Street, 6th Floor
Buffalo, NY 14202

Dear Commissioner Hogues,

Our office has received messages from employees who were transferred from the Department of Social Services' Special Investigations Division (SID) to the Department of Health to work as contact tracers. Many of these workers had been permitted to work remotely while with SID, however they have now been called back to a county building and placed in working conditions that they reported puts them at risk. As you know, numerous buildings that house Erie County employees have had COVID-19 outbreaks. In fact, you personally instructed offices to send more employees home when we reached the Yellow/Orange Zones. More should be done about this highly questionable move.

The employees who contacted my office said their concerns about accommodations, social distancing, air quality and lack of safety measures are being ignored. At a time when Erie County has a hotline to report "COVID violations" in the community, how is it possible departments aren't listening to their own employees' concerns? Today, as we are utilizing technology more than ever, is it not possible to train the newly designated contact tracers virtually? Furthermore, employees were told they would be allowed to work remotely after training is complete. Is that accurate? It was also reported that contact tracers in other NYS counties, who are also using the CommCare system, are able to work remotely. Is that also accurate?

Erie County employees are growing increasingly frustrated by hearing County Executive Poloncarz and Health Commissioner Dr. Gale Burstein say one thing to the media, and then use a different set of rules and procedures when addressing their health and concerns. In addition to the health and safety of employees, which is a top priority, this strategic move raises additional questions that will need to be explored, including: Is DSS able to perform the duties provided by SID and ensure that welfare fraud is thoroughly examined?

While working to protect the public during this pandemic, we must not put county employees at risk and should always lead by example. Too often we are seeing situations where government forces rules on private citizens while not following them. As always, if I can provide any additional assistance, please don't hesitate to ask.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in blue ink, appearing to read "Stefan", with a long, sweeping flourish extending to the right.

Stefan I. Mychajliw, Jr.
Erie County Comptroller

CC: Dr. Gale Burstein, Commissioner for the Department of Health
Commissioner Marie Cannon, Department of Social Services