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ERIE COUNTY COMPTROLLER

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COMPTROLLER'S REPORT: RATH BUILDING NOT READY FOR WORKFORCE TO RETURN

Office of Erie County Comptroller strongly recommends maintaining remote workforce in light of deadly disease still being spread in Erie County and across the country

(ERIE COUNTY, NY)- Erie County Comptroller Stefan I. Mychajliw Jr. issued a report to the Erie County Legislature today outlining numerous concerns with the Administration's return-to-work policy. The Poloncarz Administration sent an email to the Erie County workforce at approximately 1:41 PM on Sunday, June 28 its policy for some employees to return to work.

The memo was sent to returning employees less than 24-hours before many returned to the Rath Building and other county buildings on Monday, June 29th. The return to work memo does not include temperature taking by health professionals for returning employees or visitors. It also does not allow for proper six feet social distancing.

"The Rath building was not designed for proper social distancing. The county is needlessly putting the workforce at risk. God forbid if a visitor or employee contracts COVID-19. Because they were forced back into government buildings, the county runs the risk of those people spreading a dangerous and deadly disease to their children, spouses, parents, grandparents and the elderly. It is not worth the risk. Our employees are doing a phenomenal job working remotely. That should be the 'new normal,'" said Comptroller Mychajliw.

The points raised in the report by the Office of Erie County Comptroller show county buildings, specifically the Rath Building, are not prepared to properly check the health of incoming visitors nor is it ready for people to safely social distance. The Administration's current policy says elevator capacity should be limited to four riders at one time. However, with elevator measurements of six feet by seven feet, and 9.5-foot diagonally, corner to corner, it is physically impossible to maintain proper distancing with four people on an elevator. Comptroller Mychajliw recommends an elevator capacity of two, as is being done at State University of New York at Buffalo (UB).

“There are also no markings in the lobby elevator waiting area to indicate a safe, six-foot distance. This is standard for stores, businesses and other government buildings where people congregate.” said Comptroller Mychajliw. “Based on measurements done by my office, only eight people at any one time can safely social distance in front of the elevator banks. This is yet another reason to keep employees working remotely and away from the Rath Building.”

The long elevator wait time may prompt some employees to crowd in the lobby area and main floors or more challenging, use the stairs. However, because of lack of ventilation and space, stairwells may not be safe to use. The actual width of the stairs in the Rath Building stairwell is approximately 43-inches. This does not allow for safe social distancing if people are walking in opposite directions, up and down stairs at the same time.

Comptroller Mychajliw also expressed concerns with the lack of a plan for temperature taking, as many businesses are doing. The Poloncarz Administration’s policy does not account for any health screenings or steps to be taken for guests to the Rath building and other county facilities. In addition, many common areas inside the Rath building do not have Plexiglas partitions, where the county workforce engages with the public.

“The county is not doing enough to keep workers and visitors safe. Self-check? That’s a health disaster waiting to happen. Since the county can spend \$160 million on COVID related expenses, why not bring in nurses or health professionals to take temperatures? Airports regularly placed temperature taking health professionals at arriving gates to ensure travelers entering the United States were healthy. Did airports ask people to ‘self-check’ themselves upon arrival? Of course not. Makes zero sense. Trust, but verify.”

“The current policy does not go far enough to ensure the safety of workers and visitors once back in the building,” said Comptroller Mychajliw. “Erie County’s death rate from COVID is nearly twice the national average. We should be doing all we can to keep our employees safe. Many private sector businesses, as well as the City of Buffalo are extending work from home as an option. We should, too.”

Erie County’s death rate compared to confirmed cases is 8.9%. or 69 per 100,000 residents. Nationally that figure is 4.9% or 40 per 100,000 residents.

“The policy also doesn’t mention the fact productivity could actually go down with employees returning to work. There is a longer wait time to get on the elevator. Employees have to be extra careful in everything they do. I think the world of our union employees. They are being very productive working remotely. God forbid if one worker or visitor contracts COVID-19 in the Rath Building and spreads it to others. It makes about as much sense as sending seniors stricken with Coronavirus back into nursing homes,” concluded Comptroller Mychajliw.

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