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FINAL REPORT RELEASED ON CORONAVIRUS OVERTIME PAID TO ALL COUNTY EMPLOYEES

Report shows high paid, six-figure political appointees padded overtime and pension by working COVID hotlines, instead of Erie County utilizing lower level workers for tasks

(ERIE COUNTY, NY) – Erie County Comptroller Stefan I. Mychajliw Jr. issued a final report to the Erie County Legislature today on overtime pay charged to Coronavirus for union county employees. An initial report was released last week outlining \$825,039 paid to 54 Managerial Confidential, political appointees, for working COVID-19 related overtime.

Now a final report has been completed by the Office of Erie County Comptroller outlining overtime paid for all Erie County employees, including those represented by unions/bargaining units.

To date, \$3,174,477 of the \$160 million in federal CARES Act funds has been spent on overtime for all Erie County workers. Of that, \$2,349,438 has been paid to 719 employees represented by bargaining units. This includes overtime disbursed to high paid Administrators, also considered political appointees, which happen to be represented by unions.

The report shows that instead of utilizing lower paid county employees or even those workers sent home with full pay to work Coronavirus phone banks, the Poloncarz administration gave those jobs to some high paid Administrators, whose overtime costs were much higher.

For example, Mr. Michael Szukala, the politically appointed Medicaid Inspector General, is paid an annual salary of \$120,047. To date Mr. Szukala has also collected an additional \$4,032.29 in overtime pay for answering phones at the COVID operation center, with current hours of operation Monday through Saturday, 9:00 AM to 5:00 PM.

This political appointee also assisted at testing sites at various locations across Erie County, where hours of operation are certain weekdays, 10:00 AM to 6:00 PM. The county overtime earned is in addition to the \$35,000 annually he collects as an Amherst Town Councilman.

In addition to previously serving as the Deputy Comptroller for Audit under Mark Poloncarz when he was County Comptroller, Mr. Szukala is listed as “Treasurer” of the WNY Democrats for Progress political club. Mr. Poloncarz is listed as the club’s “President.”

“If you’re a political appointee of the County Executive, you’ll get rewarded with a lot of overtime during the Coronavirus response. So many blue collar folks are out of work. Businesses are forced to close. Families can’t pay their bills. Yet the Poloncarz Administration took advantage of a crisis by allowing political appointees to pad their paychecks and their pensions,” said Comptroller Mychajliw.

This overtime pay to salaried, appointed Administration hires comes as Erie County instituted a hiring freeze and laid off approximately 65 employees. Some of the tasks being performed are not directly related to the positions for which employees are earning overtime.

“Adding insult to injury, the Administration asked the Legislature to eliminate union positions to reduce the deficit. I’m sure union employees or those that just lost their jobs would have appreciated working phone banks or as contact tracers. Instead, six-figure political appointees worked phones to pad overtime and pension payments. For the record, I personally offered to the County Executive to have some of my office staff perform those duties, at no additional costs to taxpayers and no overtime. My request was denied. Now I know why. Overtime was given to select, six-figure political appointees,” added Comptroller Mychajliw.

In fact, AFSCME employees earned a total of \$56,463 in overtime for 54 employees working a total of 2,100 overtime hours. This means Health Commissioner Gale Burstein has earned more overtime (\$83,996 and counting) than all AFSCME employees combined.

In addition, 124 CSEA Correctional employees earned \$86,462 for 1,864 overtime hours worked. When factoring in holiday pay for the Administration’s appointees, the Health Commissioner earned more (\$88,206) than the total for all the CSEA Correctional employees.

CSEA represented workers earned a total of \$754,130 in overtime for 305 employees, working a total of 17,636 overtime hours. Employees represented by NYSNA earned \$91,075 for 26 employees working 1,633 overtime hours. PBA represented employees earned \$1,251,114 in overtime which equaled 137 employees working 23,155 overtime hours. There are 72 Teamster employees who have earned a total of \$110,194 working 2,651 overtime hours. In addition, a total of \$87,043 in holiday pay was earned by 198 employees represented by various bargaining units.

Bargaining unit employees represent 93.5% of the county workforce. Managerial Confidential employees constitute the remaining 6.5%. Approximately 26% of overtime costs have been paid to political employees, with the remaining amount paid to workers represented by unions.

“The Erie County Legislature will make a determination whether they believe this is an appropriate use of COVID funds. It would be a disservice to taxpayers for the Legislature to ‘cherry-pick’ holding one office or department accountable. That is not fair. If the Legislature so chooses, they can demand an hour-by-hour accounting of overtime paid to all employees, not just a select few. There’s justifiable outrage in the community about this issue. Taxpayers paid the bill in the first place. They are not happy some political appointees made more for 18-weeks of overtime than what they make in one entire year,” concluded Comptroller Mychajliw.

The \$160 million in federal COVID funds given to Erie County is to be used on COVID related expenses only, and cannot be used on any previously budgeted expense.

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