

Remarks for Speaker Carl Heastie

New York State Compensation Committee

November 30, 2018
Manhattan

Good afternoon Chairman McCall, Chairman Thompson, Comptroller DiNapoli and Comptroller Stringer.

Thank you for affording me the opportunity to speak at this meeting of the New York State Compensation Committee. Please note that I have submitted to you my 2016 letter in support of a salary adjustment as well as a new updated letter. My testimony today summarizes these letters.

First, I would like to express my gratitude to each of you for taking the time to participate in this process. We know that your commitments to serving the city and state of New York are extensive. In particular, you each possess a wealth of financial expertise as well as government experience which will be valuable in this process.

I am here today on behalf of the members of the New York State Assembly.

This year marks the 20th year since an increase in compensation was authorized for members of the New York State Legislature. Under any objective measure, our static compensation has failed to keep pace with economic realities.

Over the last 20 years:

- The consumer price index (CPI) in New York State has risen well over 50 percent, while our salaries have remained the same;
- The medical CPI has expanded by well over 80 percent, making it nearly impossible for some members to provide necessary care for dependent children and aging family members;
- Childcare costs have doubled;
- The CPI for housing has increased by more than 65 percent and interest rates are on the rise; and
- The base salary for legislators has remained at \$79,500, and its purchasing power has diminished to \$51,401. During this same period, the state median household income has risen by 67 percent.

Legislators are not insulated from the financial pressures that are experienced by their constituents. They too must finance college loans, meet the cost of childcare and provide for the well-being of elderly parents and loved ones at home.

Nearly two-thirds of the Assembly represent New York City, Long Island, and suburban Westchester, Rockland and Putnam Counties. These are areas with a high total cost of living, some comprising the highest cost of living in the nation, making the impact of a frozen compensation structure even more acute.

Let us not forget the increasing complexity and demands of the position of a New York State Assemblymember which includes the drafting and adoption of an annual state budget of more than \$170 billion – an amount that has grown by 160 percent since our last salary adjustment. The budget approval process is intense, involving prolonged periods of public hearings, internal discussion, negotiation with our partners in government, and drafting bills to address both fiscal and policy considerations. It should be noted, that as complex as this process is, the budget has been passed in a timely manner for the last eight years.

And the budget is only one aspect of the work a legislator undertakes. With a population of 19.8 million people, New York State is one of the most diverse states in the nation in terms of geography, economics, ethnicity, race, religion and political opinion. Legislators must consider and address a range of issues that are considered by 37 standing committees and 13 joint legislative commissions. Members research, draft and introduce bills. They review hundreds of bills introduced by their colleagues. They meet with and hear the opinions of members of the public and advocates. They attend committee meetings, public hearings, roundtables and conferences year round.

When in their districts, members spend significant time and effort meeting with constituents, responding to local concerns, attending community events and addressing community needs – activities that take place seven days a week throughout the year.

The contention that New York State Legislators are part-time employees is a technical legal conclusion and is not representative of our responsibilities.

It is critical that an increase in compensation or a cost of living adjustment for members of the Legislature be received this year. A long overdue salary adjustment would encourage individuals of diverse backgrounds to enter public service, participate in the political process, and promote democracy by a true citizen legislature.

Any increase in compensation must be adjusted and indexed to meet the annual rate of inflation, at a minimum.

My colleagues and I are ever mindful that there is a hard-working constituent behind every state tax dollar, as well as an expectation that these funds be spent wisely.

It is essential that New Yorkers understand that support for an increase in compensation or cost of living adjustment for members of the Legislature would not compromise critical investments in the health, safety and prosperity of our state. Funding to increase the salary of Legislators based on the CPI would amount to an increase in state funding by one ten thousandth of one percent of State Operating Funds.

In conclusion, I impress upon you that the New York State Assembly has always put forth a Families First agenda. Our priority is to ensure that New Yorkers can afford to remain in their communities, taking care of their loved ones while contributing to our local economies. We are asking for the same opportunity for the members of the New York State Legislature.

The title of Assemblymember is distinguished, but not as distinguished as the titles bestowed upon us by our loved ones:

- Mother
- Father
- Son
- Daughter
- Grandparent
- Foster parent
- Caregiver.

The members of the Assembly come from all walks of life. They share the stories of the New Yorkers we represent.

- They are struggling to pay student loans.
- They are paying for childcare.
- They have children in college.
- They are single parents.
- They have children with disabilities.
- They are caring for aging family members.
- They are grandparents helping to raise grandchildren.

Legislators spend many days and weeks away from their families and loved ones, an important sacrifice by any measure in order to serve their communities. On behalf of my Assembly colleagues, I respectfully request your favorable consideration.

Allow me to again extend my heartfelt thanks for your participation in this process. Throughout your collective tenure, you have exemplified the best in public service. The residents of New York owe you each a debt of gratitude for your service.

I am happy to take any questions you may have.