



## **UNITED UNIVERSITY PROFESSIONS**

### Testimony on Healthcare Workforce in New York State

December 19, 2023

*Presented To:*

Assemblymember Amy Paulin, Chair  
Assembly Standing Committee on Health

Assemblymember Aileen M. Gunther, Chair  
Assembly Standing Committee on Mental Health

Assemblymember Rebecca A. Seawright, Chair  
Assembly Standing Committee on People with Disabilities

Assemblymember Patricia Fahy, Chair  
Assembly Standing Committee on Higher Education

Assemblymember Latoya Joyner, Chair  
Assembly Standing Committee on Labor

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# UNITED UNIVERSITY PROFESSIONS

I'd like to thank all the esteemed committee chairs and members of the Assembly for inviting United University Professions (UUP) to participate in this important hearing on healthcare workers and the employee shortage here in New York.

My name is Dr. Frederick E. Kowal, and I am the president of UUP. UUP is the largest higher education union in the country with over 38,000 members and 6,000 retirees across 29 state operated campuses, SUNY's three teaching hospitals and System Administration. UUP has a unique perspective on the current worker shortage as our union represents academic faculty and health care workers at SUNY hospitals.

The need for health care workers has been widely talked about since the onset of the coronavirus pandemic in 2020. The ongoing shortage of doctors and nurses has been well publicized, but our health care facilities are also dealing with acute shortages of specialists such as respiratory therapists, speech pathologists, laboratory technicians, pharmacists and many other professionals who keep our health care system running. Unfortunately, these shortages are often overlooked.

SUNY has an important role to play in addressing New York's health care workforce shortage. With numerous nursing and medical professional programs offered at our state-operated campuses, three public teaching hospitals, and four medical schools, SUNY can—and should—be a major part of the solution to this challenge.

## **Teaching the Next Generation**

There are many well-known and respected health, nursing, and medical programs at dozens of our campuses. These programs graduate more than 11,000 health professionals annually; however, this rate is not sustainable; it is unable to replace the number of professionals retiring or leaving the field each year.

Massive state aid cuts and more than a decade of austerity budgets to SUNY have made it extremely difficult for campuses to invest in these needed programs. With 18 campuses facing multimillion-dollar deficits, these much-needed programs are expensive to run and don't get the attention they deserve and are often put on the backburner as they are expensive to facilitate. Several of our financially distressed campuses offer these

programs, but they may be in jeopardy as these colleges are forced to make cuts to programs and faculty.

Historically, the role of SUNY was to support the state's workforce needs—and with that responsibility came state aid to offset the higher costs of facilitating those programs. However, much has changed. Since SFY 2008-09, the state has reduced funding to SUNY by \$7.8 billion, or 39%, when adjusted for inflation. Previous administrations are to blame for this troubling downward trend of state support—and we are now seeing the consequences of their actions. SUNY is not equipped to keep up with the state's workforce demands.

UUP commends SUNY for requesting state support to bolster these programs, but that request is ignoring a major part of the issue: a lack of educators. One of the biggest problems with building out these programs is that SUNY isn't offering enough compensation to get these medical professionals out of clinical work and into classrooms. There needs to be a focus on incentivizing medical professionals to become educators. Only then can SUNY move to expand these programs and get more young people into the health care workforce.

### **SUNY's Teaching Hospitals**

The three state teaching hospitals, SUNY Downstate Health Sciences Center in Brooklyn, Upstate Medical University in Syracuse, and Stony Brook University Hospital in Suffolk County are not only helping to educate the next generation of medical professionals, but they are also providing life-saving services to the greater community. These state hospitals treat patients who are uninsured or underinsured, or who have been referred by other facilities unwilling to take their cases. Each year, our hospitals provide more than 1.3 million New Yorkers with high-quality health care, regardless of their ability to pay.

Under the previous administration, critical mission funding for the SUNY hospitals was cut year after year and then fully eliminated in 2018. When adjusted for inflation, this has resulted in a net loss of \$2 billion, or 66% to these crucial institutions since SFY 2008-09. Additionally, SUNY hospitals are required to cover their own debt service and fringe benefit costs; they are the only state agency required to do so. This additional financial burden on the hospitals has prevented them from reinvesting in patient services and has made it very difficult to modernize and upgrade facilities.

The pandemic also created financial troubles for these hospitals. SUNY Downstate was the only New York City-based provider designated as a COVID-only hospital, a decision that resulted in major financial losses as the hospital was blocked from doing other treatments and procedures for months. To keep hospital beds open, Stony Brook and Upstate were forced to stop elective surgeries, a major source of revenue for the hospitals. Our hospitals were forced to take on federal loans to get by. Those repayments have come due, and the state still has not provided reliable state support to these hospitals.

### **Support SUNY Health Care Workers**

Like many other hospitals, the pandemic and a worsening health care worker shortage has created an untenable situation for many of our workers at the teaching hospitals. Employees are being asked to do more, and more with less. The bonus pay for our frontline workers in the 2021-2022 state budget was appreciated, but it wasn't enough for these heroes. Funding for SUNY hospitals has been woefully lacking and it's hurt our health care workers and our patients the most.

The health care worker shortage is also having a major impact on morale. The SUNY hospitals have had to resort to using travel nurses to deal with the nursing shortage. Travel nurses are often paid significantly more than our members, and they often have less experience than our staff nurses. The state must do more to protect and support our workers, who put their lives on the line to save lives during the pandemic.

Our members have told us many applicants seek employment opportunities at SUNY hospitals because the training they receive is high quality. However, too many employees leave and take this knowledge to the private sector where they can make more money. For younger people just joining the workforce, the promise of a state pension is not as much of an incentive as it used to be. The state needs to make additional reforms to Tier 5 and 6 to be competitive with recruiting new workers to our state hospitals.

Our members are dedicated public servants who care very deeply about their patients. The pandemic has taken a toll on their morale, their mental health, and their personal lives. Many have missed family events and vacations because they feel like they can't leave their co-workers even more short-staffed. Our overworked members are doing their best, but it is important to note that patient outcomes and services are suffering. As we head into the next legislative session, UUP will continue to advocate for desperately needed state aid to support our members.

## **Support SUNY Downstate**

UUP has long advocated for direct support for SUNY Downstate. We support the SUNY administration's request for bridge funding (\$75-\$125 million) for this important institution. This hospital and its medical school are an important part of the state's health care system.

SUNY Downstate graduates a diverse cohort of students; 75% of Downstate graduates remain in New York state. It cannot be understated; the success of Downstate's medical school is incredibly dependent on the continued operation of the hospital. Downsizing the hospital would have serious and severe impacts on the longevity and success of the medical school. The medical school is not equipped to compete for residency slots with many of the larger private medical schools in the city. The partnership between the hospital and medical school is crucial for both entities.

The condition of the facilities at SUNY Downstate is a public shame. This state-operated hospital has been neglected for far too long. The hospital's disrepair affects patient care as well as the education and training of medical students. The hospital's infrastructure is decades old, and equipment is often kept past its end of life because there isn't enough money to replace it. Our patients and our students deserve better, and the state needs to do better.

SUNY Downstate needs a new hospital, which would require a major investment from the state. This capital investment would pay dividends as SUNY Downstate continues to educate the next generation of medical professionals and provides desperately needed services to the Brooklyn community.

UUP also supports legislation that would require the state to create a financial sustainability plan for the hospital to ensure that this crucial institution can continue to operate and service the Brooklyn community.

## **Conclusion**

The challenges the state is facing are immense and require a true investment from the state to overcome them. Investing in SUNY is investing in the next generation of health care workers. We are immensely proud of the work that our health care educators and providers are doing. UUP will continue to advocate for the needs of our workers, for our students, and for our patients.