

## ***NYSCOPBA President Tests Positive for COVID-19; Union Pleads for State to Keep Members Safe***

***Union calls for the use of Personal Protection Equipment for all members of NYSCOPBA***

***For Immediate Release***

***March 30, 2020***

**Albany, NY** – The New York State Correctional Officers & Police Benevolent Association (NYSCOPBA) today announced that Union President Michael B. Powers tested positive for COVID-19. Powers, who is regularly in contact with correction officers from every corner of the state, has been self-quarantining at his home for the last several days. The news reaffirms the Union's position that the State, including the New York State Department of Corrections and Community Supervision (DOCCS) and the New York State Office of Mental Health (OMH), must take immediate action to further prevent the spread of the COVID-19 virus in our state correctional and mental health facilities.

NYSCOPBA is imploring the State to allow all employees working in correctional facilities, mental health facilities, parole offices and other agencies deemed essential, the latitude to use the necessary personal protective equipment (PPEs) to assist in preventing the spread; specifically N95 masks, gloves and disposable smocks. Currently in DOCCS, only those employees who work in isolated or quarantined units are provided PPEs. Continuing to prevent the staff from protecting themselves will not only jeopardize the staff, inmates and inmate-patients, but also raises the likelihood of the virus being spread outside of the work sites.

NYSCOPBA is committed to working with the State to promote safe and healthy working conditions. If financial constraints are preventing the State from providing the life-saving equipment needed to protect its workforce, then NYSCOPBA is prepared to meet the needs of our members and provide the essential equipment.

NYSCOPBA has already made repeated requests to limit exposures. In letters dated March 9th and March 14<sup>th</sup> and sent to multiple state agencies, NYSCOPBA outlined their demands calling for several preventative measures to quell the spread of the virus. Initially, those demands were not met with the urgency that this situation requires. More recently though, the DOCCS has been providing direction and addressing several of the issues raised by the Union; but there is certainly more that needs to be done. Conversely, OMH has not consistently communicated with the Union or taken the necessary precautions to protect the staff and patients in the mental health facilities. This is unacceptable and must be addressed.

**NYSCOPBA President Michael B. Powers** stated that, "The dedicated members of NYSCOPBA are mandated to work on the front lines during the COVID-19 crisis. I am calling on the Governor to make employee safety a priority and direct his state agencies to allow ALL staff members the ability to use basic personal protection equipment. If the State cannot pay for it, then allow NYSCOPBA to help. Each day that our members are prohibited from wearing protective equipment, they are exposed to being infected and spreading the virus inside and outside of the facilities. We recognize and appreciate that some of our concerns have been addressed. However, further delays to our reasonable requests to protect staff must not continue. The members of NYSCOPBA must be afforded the ability to protect themselves. The use of PPEs to limit our members from exposure and infection makes sense. Too much time has already passed. Every day we are discovering more

positive tests for COVID-19. The State must act now before it is too late, and we're faced with a bigger crisis inside the state's prison and mental health systems."

Last week the New York City Department of Corrections, working with the NYC COBA, announced that staff would have permission to use their own N95 respirator or surgical masks and promised to distribute more masks to staff as the virus spreads. In an unprecedented move, the city corrections department also announced that the Eric. M. Taylor Center at Rikers Island, which was closed earlier this year, would reopen to help increase social distancing. The State has failed to enact these reasonable measures for the protection of the members of NYSCOPBA.

**Powers continued,** "To date, there are approximately 56 state correction officers and sergeants that have tested positive for COVID-19, including me. One of the officers is hospitalized and requires the use of a ventilator. Additionally, hundreds of DOCCS employees are under self-quarantine or directed by their personal physicians to remain under quarantine. In OMH/OPWDD, approximately 35 employees are under orders to quarantine. Six OMH/OPWDD employees have tested positive for the virus. Of those six positive tests, two are hospitalized with one remaining in critical condition. We can be assured that the total of positive cases will increase. The numbers underscore the fact that our state facilities are on the cusp of a wide outbreak. This concern must be taken seriously, and certain measures must be put in place immediately to protect staff."

In addition to the requests for PPEs, NYSCOPBA is also seeking immediate action to provide protections for members considered vulnerable or high-risk; accommodations for members who work in isolation units; increased testing for staff, inmates and patients; strict adherence to DOH and CDC guidelines; and more stringent transportation and movement policies. NYSCOPBA is extremely concerned by OMH's failure to discontinue patient admissions and patient movement from high-risk/high-infection areas to upstate OMH Facilities. Continuing with these ill-advised practices will undoubtedly increase exposures in those communities.

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