

Sheila Birnbaum,
Chair NYS Commission on Legislative, Judicial and Executive Compensation
64 Beaver Street, Box 454
New York, NY 10004

Dear Chairwoman Birnbaum,

All those who have paid attention to politics in New York State know our legislature has participated in more than its full share of bad behavior and corruption. Members of government have repeatedly found themselves in situations that at least stretch, if not break, social and legal rules. Corruption is bad, and a culture that seemingly incentivizes it must be changed.

When thinking through legislature pay, the goal must be a pursuit of the most affordable, effective government. In so many districts around the state, housing prices are skyrocketing, while the pay for the legislature has not risen. This is unacceptable, and to remain in this role requires a certain degree of stability outside of salary that makes the position even more exclusive than it already is.

I recommend to this committee that the state raise the wages to reflect inflation, and in most years, attach the wages to COLA increases so that this is not a conversation we need to have nearly as often. My exception to this rule would be years where the economy and budget are in deficit, in which there should be no raises. In real numbers, with this inflation being calculated back to the last pay raise for legislature 17 years ago, members would be paid \$113,000.

Last year, the state attorney general submitted a report to curb corruption in Albany. In this report, he suggested a pay raise to at least \$112,500, to ensure people are paid sufficiently. This number very closely reflects a tie to inflation, and most importantly, creates a situation in which no person in the legislature has any necessity to go outside of their salary in order to make a living.

We must, however, do everything we can to couple this wage with a ban on all outside income, so that legislators' time and influence is not divided between their own self-interest and the people they represent. Look no further than the 65th assembly district, where I am running, to see what happens and who benefits when legislators can receive pay from the outside. I have pledged to not take in any outside income if I am elected, but we must create rules and regulations to ensure this is true for all members.

Additionally, we must eliminate bonuses received by members in leadership, or lulus. There is \$2.5 million currently allocated to lulus. By simply splitting this between the members, that would be \$12,000 for each member of legislature, making their overall pay increase less of a hit on the system. The lulus structure is not adopted at the federal level and it should not be utilized here. Adding money to

power does not make people more likely to look out for others, it has a history of doing quite the opposite.

The goal of scrutinizing legislature pay, particularly in this moment, should be to correct the entire system it is a part of. Though this committee is not directly responsible for bringing up ethics reform, having a sufficient and fair pay system can be an effective way to lead towards actually enforcing rules that need to be followed. With low pay, comes a culture of looking the other way, since everyone is doing something to bolster their pockets. This needs to change.

However, I do not believe your committee is responsible for changing this culture single-handedly. Ultimately, I think that if it is the job of the legislature to make these determinations on pay, the members of the legislature should make these determinations on pay. It should not be left to a simple silent tacit agreement, so along with this public commentary, I believe this committee should do all it can to ensure the representatives are participating in, and ultimately making, this decision.

Sincerely,
Yuh-Line Niou

Candidate for State Assembly