

# RETIREE



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THE UNITED FEDERATION OF TEACHERS RETIRED TEACHERS CHAPTER NEWSLETTER

## Congress watch

BY VINNY GAGLIONE



This column usually takes a look at the progress – or lack thereof – of legislation that affects retirees, along with issues of education, labor and civil rights among others. The pandemic of 2020, however, has overtaken all legislative issues we normally address including enhancing Social Security, Medicare and Medicaid; labor organizing legislation; civil rights; and many other topics. The House and the Senate have spent the greater parts of their days since February debating and passing legislation to deal with the health issues and economic impact of the Covid-19 virus on the nation.

The virus has deleterious and life-threatening effects, especially on those citizens suffering from compromised immune systems, and most especially we seniors. These are vital issues for us.

The first legislation passed on March 6 was the Coronavirus Preparedness and Response Supplemental Appropriations Act. It provided funding for a vigorous public health response to the virus. The money also was aimed at developing an effective vaccine, something which still appears to many months away.

A week later, the House passed the Families First Coronavirus Response Act which provided:

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## Message from Tom

BY TOM MURPHY, UFT/RTC CHAPTER LEADER

“Never waste a crisis” is something friends and enemies from the political left, the right and the center key into to push their own agendas. The Great Depression, Pearl Harbor, McCarthyism and red scares, civil rights and peace movements, the Stonewall Uprising and 9/11 are all examples of crises that initiated or motivated diverse kinds of social change.

As you can imagine, crises have been used and abused for good or for ill. Pick your favorite as to which is which.

We at the UFT and notably those of us in the Retired Teachers Chapter have had to navigate the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic both organizationally, for health and safety and in a political year, evolving into Campaign 2020. How do we stand with our members as we coordinate the vital interests of this political union? It may surprise you to hear me quote the late Paul Volcker who served as the chair of the Federal Reserve: “...in a crisis, the only asset you have is your credibility.”

The UFT has credibility with its members, especially with retirees, because it has come through for them over the decades during their in-service careers and in their retirement. Guaranteed pensions and good health coverage are the best examples of a secure retirement. It is why the RTC has been called the UFT day-time army by UFT President Michael Mulgrew. It is why AFT President Randi Weingarten looks to the retirees from her home, flagship local to be a model for retirees around the country.

When Michael took on the task of encouraging passage of the HEROES Act discussed in other articles in this newsletter, he enlisted the RTC to engage in lobbying the U.S. Senate. He knows retirees who reside in other states haven't forgotten the value of political action. And as Randi enhances the role of AFT retirees by elevating their status and importance in our nationwide affiliate, it is because she has witnessed firsthand the power and effectiveness of UFT retirees.

How about our credibility as an asset?

This newsletter highlights how the RTC dropped almost everything else during this pandemic just to reach out to as many retirees as we could. We did so with civic, non-political concerns just to see how our retirees were doing. We called, e-mailed and provided resources and direct assistance to those in need. For some, it was a referral for help; for others, it was just a friendly chat. The calls and contacts were a tonic for both the caller and those who received the calls. There was no ask or chore or request for organizational or political action. Just a friendly, “How are you?” It has been a wonderful time of member engagement.

Now we must move toward Campaign 2020. It is still not clear exactly what form this crucial presidential election campaign will take. But we must approach it with enthusiasm if we value the professionalism, economic security

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## RTC MEMBERS FIGHT FOR HEROES ACT

BY JOE LOVERDE

Retired Teachers Chapter members have been instrumental in the campaign to convince the U.S. Senate to pass the federal Health and Economic Recovery Omnibus Emergency Solutions (HEROES) Act. The relief bill, passed by the House of Representatives in May, would provide nearly \$1 trillion to fund public employees in all states who are on the front lines of the coronavirus battle and make sacrifices daily to treat patients, educate children and keep public services running.

The Senate had not voted on the bill at press time for this issue of the Retiree.

“As usual, our retirees have answered the call of their union,” Retired Teachers Chapter Leader Tom Murphy said. “We know we can always count on them to step up when a need arises, and this is as great a cause as any we’ve had in recent years. It is vital to the well-being of our communities, our students and our seniors.”

Pandemic-related decreases in tax revenues and increases in costs have caused unprecedented budget shortfalls in all 50 states, which are now struggling to fund public education as well as the public services older Americans count on.

If states do not get a federal lifeline, public schools, hospitals and other essential services could face devastating budget cuts.

As part of the UFT’s Our Schools Need a Lifeline campaign, the UFT emailed retirees in targeted states asking them to contact their senators and admonish them to vote yes on the HEROES Act to protect the nation’s seniors and children.

Murphy and UFT Treasurer Debra Penny, a teacher member of the Teachers’ Retirement System Board of Trustees, also signed a letter from American Federation of Teachers retirees and trustees to Sen. Mitch McConnell of Kentucky, the Senate majority leader. The letter urged McConnell to support and protect America’s senior citizens in a number of ways, including by supporting states through the HEROES Act.

A petition was pushed out on social media, including on several Facebook pages specifically for UFT retirees across the country, asking senators to support the HEROES Act. The two New York State senators support the bill, but more U.S. senators need to be on board.

To join the campaign, members can text **LIFELINE** to **30644**. Additional information is available on the UFT website at [www.uft.org/heroes](http://www.uft.org/heroes).

The page suggests ways to contact



*Photo was from our second Zoom RTC General Meeting (also viewed on Facebook Live) on Tuesday, June 23, 2020 during the Covid-19 pandemic. There were 2,100 members who participated in the meeting.*

friends and relatives who live in other states so they can reach out to their own senators to encourage them to support the bill.

It includes details about the bill and how much funding would go to each state, as well as a link where you can thank New York’s senators, Chuck Schumer and Kirsten Gillibrand, for their support.

Schumer joined UFT President Michael Mulgrew for a recent “On the Record” podcast to discuss the HEROES Act.

During the podcast, Schumer said: “We can’t get the schools back open as soon as we can, and as safely as we can, without real dollars. We do not want a compromise. If we stay strong and we get the rallies across the country that we need, we will win this fight.” ■

## PHONE OUTREACH MAKES SURE MEMBERS ARE SAFE

BY DOROTHY CALLACI

“I have never been prouder to be a UFT member than right now,” a surprised Arizona retiree said when she answered her phone recently. “I can’t believe someone took the time to check on me.”

Joan Monroe was one of the 38,042 retirees to receive a phone call in the RTC’s phenomenally successful outreach campaign to offer retired members support in the face of the ravages of the coronavirus.

Like the others, she was grateful.

“I am fine,” she told Jerry Weissman, Arizona RTC section coordinator, “and this is the best phone call I have ever received.”

As soon as the seriousness of the pandemic, and its risk to the elderly, became evident, the RTC set an outreach campaign in motion across the country. In March, beginning in Florida with its population of 7,800 UFT retirees, volunteers started calling the oldest and most vulnerable



*RTC phone bank*



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cohort, those retirees who are 85 and older, and then moved down age-wise from there. They were off to a busy start because, as reported by Patti Vitucci, the assistant director of activities at Boca Raton retiree headquarters, there are 1,000 retirees over the age of 85 on Florida's East Coast alone.

The purpose of the calls is to ensure each retiree is safe, is being taken care of and is coping with the anxiety of the isolation imposed by the pandemic.

Early in the outreach campaign, RTC Chapter Leader Tom Murphy said, "In times of crisis such as we are currently facing, member engagement is more important than organizational survival."

Christine Rowland, a West Coast Florida coordinator, said volunteers in her state made 10,962 calls, with 1,106 retirees requesting callback check-ins and 136 retirees so impressed with the outreach that they volunteered to make calls themselves.

Callers code the situation of each retiree they reach as green for safe, amber for facing some anxiety and red for in crisis. The names of retirees experiencing problems are forwarded to Christopher Chin, director of RTC Social Services, who reports that his staff has followed up on 300 retirees coded red or amber. Most of the problems, he said, involved fears of going out to shop for food. "We connected them with food delivery programs and volunteer shopping programs or with home care services in their areas," he said.

Social Services staff recommended counseling services to retirees who were experiencing anxiety and fear over COVID-19 or had concerns as they recovered from the virus themselves, especially if they lived alone. These retirees were offered weekly supportive check-in calls, which many accepted and are still receiving.

For those retirees who experienced a death in their families, mainly spouses, staff provided bereavement support and, when needed, guided them or their family members through the death notification process.

Florida volunteer Lorraine Mulrane

described being able to really help an "overwhelmed" retiree who had lost her spouse and best friend to COVID-19. "People don't realize how much the union is there for them, especially in this time when people are isolated," Mulrane said. "We can't have physical contact but we can connect with our voices."

Murphy categorizes the phone calls as "calls of camaraderie."

The RTC continues to meet the health, economic and emotional needs of its 78,000 retirees in many ways. Frequent emails keep all retirees updated and encourage them to visit the UFT website's coronavirus self-care section created by the Member Assistance Program at [www.uft.org/your-rights/safety-health/coronavirus/self-care-during-coronavirus-crisis](http://www.uft.org/your-rights/safety-health/coronavirus/self-care-during-coronavirus-crisis) to help manage stress and anxiety. The emails also remind retirees that social workers are available from 10 a.m. to 6 p.m. Monday through Friday at 212-598-6880.

But it is the thousands of personal phone calls that have been most helpful and have touched the hearts of so many grateful retirees. As Mulrane said, "I feel this is one of the best things the union has done." ■

*A thank you note to the UFT Retired Teachers Chapter from one of the front-line workers during the Covid-19 pandemic:*

Dear Tom, Analia, the retirees and the Staten Island borough office,

*Thank you so very much for your generous and thoughtful delivery of over 200 of the best cupcakes I've ever tasted!*

*As the eye of the storm passed and our registered nurses got back to a somewhat normalized hospital life, all the fanfare disappeared as the virus left. Many bad memories linger as we attempted to move into our routine. The delivery of the cupcakes was a beautiful gesture, letting the nurses know that the union is still there; they have not disappeared, like many others. You brought a smile to many faces, and more so the acknowledgment of all the work we do for the community, our community! The support of the retiree community as well as the Staten Island borough office will always stay with us as we continue on this journey.*

*Lastly, I've had so many ask where the cupcakes came from, they were that good!*

*In Solidarity,*

*Nancy Barth-Miller RN*

*Chapter Chair Federation of Nurses/UFT Staten Island University Hospital South*

*[Editor's Note: The letter was addressed to Chapter Leader Tom Murphy and UFT Staten Island Borough Director Analia Gerard. The cupcakes were delivered on June 9 to the UFT's member nurses who work at the Staten Island University Hospital.]*



*(From right center,) Nancy Barth-Miller, chapter chair, Federation of Nurses/UFT S.I. University Hospital South; Joyce Magnus, who organized the event; UFT Borough Representative Analia Gerard and UFT Vice President Anne Goldman along with retirees.*

PHOTO BY: JERRY GOLDMAN

- Free coronavirus testing for everyone who needs a test, including the uninsured.
- Paid emergency leave including up to 10 days of paid sick leave and up to three months of paid family and medical leave.
- Enhanced unemployment insurance extending protections for workers who were furloughed due to the coronavirus.

House Speaker Nancy Pelosi made it clear that the bill's intent was to provide "testing, testing, testing" as an important initial device by which to control the virus. It took the Senate three months to pass the bill and finally tests for the virus became more widely available. Great debate has followed focusing on whether the current administration adequately responded to the crisis.

The budgets of school systems, cities and states have been decimated by the shutdowns to prevent the spread of the virus because tax revenues have fallen

precipitously. And, unlike the federal government which can spend into deficit, local governments cannot. An estimated 885,000 jobs have vanished in NYC, and the city now faces a \$9 billion shortfall over the next year. Strong gains are not expected until 2022.

Which is the impetus now, at this writing, for a third federal bill – already passed in the House – the HEROES Act. This bill would provide assistance to local governments to cover deficits. (See accompanying article about the HEROES Act). The alternative to such a federal bill, to be blunt, could very well affect those of us who are retired. Our pensions and benefits often become the first target of the local budget cutters. In April, Senate Majority Leader Mitch McConnell said he favors allowing states struggling with high public employee pension costs to declare bankruptcy rather than giving them a federal bailout.

And besides all that, given the extent of the current federal deficit, don't be surprised if you start hearing more

insistent cries to cut Social Security, Medicare and Medicaid, which even prior to the coronavirus had been items planted in the budget proposals by the president. No similar calls have been heard to amend tax cuts that the president signed into law that gave huge tax breaks to corporations and the wealthy.

Let us be blunt. When this union calls on you to support legislation and candidates during these crisis days, apathy is not an option. The budget cutters who get elected will not be apathetic about dealing with your pensions and benefits. If you can't take action to help yourself, nobody else will because there are lots of other self-interested people and groups in this nation! ■

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and our essential benefits which are under attack. We retirees know how far we've come to build and achieve the dignity of our work. We remember what it was like before a union, whether it was as mundane as lunchroom duty or as serious as health coverage, a living wage or a secure retirement.

So, it is fearlessly and with confidence that we ask you to be involved in the great campaign to end our current national nightmare and get back on to the path of achievement of social and economic justice for ourselves and for the next generation.

As for our credibility, that is one of our union's biggest assets. ■

## New EmblemHealth Benefits Program Cards

During June, members enrolled in **EmblemHealth/NYC Health Benefits Program** received two mailings.

One mailing included the new EmblemHealth card with a new member ID number for use with doctor or medical services not performed in a hospital. Though the card says **SeniorCare**, the benefits remain the same as before. This is EmblemHealth's Medicare-eligible card. Pre-Medicare retirees won't receive a card that says SeniorCare. The mailing also included the **Empire Blue Cross Blue Shield** card with a 9-digit member ID number for hospital services.

A second mailing contained the new ID card for the **EmblemHealth Medi-**

**care prescription drug plan** for those members who are enrolled in it. The number is the same as your SeniorCare card. A separate ID card with an 11-digit number was sent to a spouse or dependent. All cards are effective July 1, 2020. Please read the accompanying letters with the cards!

If you did not receive the cards, please contact:

- for all GHI plans 212-501-4444
- for HIP HMO 833-269-4653
- for HIP HMO (Medicare eligible) 877-344-7364



### UFT RETIREE

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