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MEA MEMBERSHIP MEETING

LOOKING BACK AT A YEAR OF GROWTH AFTER TRYING TIMES

By Vanessa DeSantis



MEA President Darrell Sims

Improved membership and a technological upgrade were some of the topics brought up at MEA's first membership meeting the year. The meeting took place on July 7th and was conducted via Zoom.

A takeaway from the MEA's tech upgrade is that case files will no longer be in paper form: the MEA now has a cloud-based system for member records as well as team and officer communication. Since many managers remain working remotely, having a system that allows the MEA to reach members out of office is especially useful.

In 2021 the MEA launched a social media initiative to improve its digital footprint and to upgrade its Search Engine Optimization. Traffic to the site grew substantially as a result and the MEA was able to add more members and even compensate for the percentage of membership lost to unions' accretion of managerial titles.

MEMBERSHIP

Using an easy-to-follow visual on the Zoom call, showing a list of agencies with membership increases in 2021, Executive Director Alice Wong elucidated the percentage increases of chapters, and the overall MEA

membership number which tallies to a little over 2800 members now.

Specifically, the Comptroller's Office membership grew by 19.23 percent; Design and Construction grew by 16.67 percent; Housing Authority by 26.19 percent; HPD by 20.60 percent; and DOITT (OTI) by 18 percent.

Ms. Wong added that back in 2020 a new chapter, the Mayoral Chapter, was formed with the help of the Municipal Chapter, which received a chapter award owing to this effort.

UPDATE ON MEDICARE ADVANTAGE PLUS PLAN

President Emeritus Stu Eber spoke at the meeting and brought members up to date on the status of the prospective privatized retirees Medicare plan the City intended to roll out early this year. A class action court case filed by a retiree group held up the rollout leaving many to wonder if the plan will eventually be scrapped.

This delay comes with down sides, according to Mr. Eber: the City will not negotiate union contracts until the lawsuit is settled and will likely not get around to determining employee pay raises until a better idea of health care costs for in service and retirees is determined. This effects MEA members benefits, too, as managers are enrolled in the City's Management Benefits Fund.

MEA President Darrell Sims agreed that the City would likely not be ready to negotiate. "They [the City] don't know the money situation because they don't know about the healthcare benefits."

Mr. Sims doesn't see anything happening in terms of pay raises until the court case is settled which likely

won't be until sometime in late October and could even extend beyond that. Nevertheless, the MEA scheduled to meet with the Office of Labor Relations (OLR) and discuss pay raises for managers.



MEA Executive Director Alice Wong

RAISES AND BENEFITS

President Sims believes managers deserve the salaries for the work that they do and shouldn't have the City tie the issue of subsidizing healthcare to their compensation.

He told meeting participants that his sympathies were with them during this trying time in New York -- where costs of living are sky high and global issues such as the war in Ukraine have increased gas prices and inflation.

"It's unfair to active workers that they don't have a pay raise in the near future," he said, adding, "We are on the front line keeping the services going."

Thanking them for their attendance, President Sims asked members to stay safe and keep a high morale for the sake of themselves, their families, and their work staff.

"I'm pulling for you," he said.

GRAY SKIES WITH BRIGHTER DAYS AHEAD

Happy Summer Everyone! Summer is the time of the year when the living is supposed to be easy. However, because of the pandemic, Ukrainian / Russian War, economic downturn capped with high inflation, mandated back to office requirements without provisions for teleworking and work from home exceptions, and without pay raises in sight the living is not easy. We have always been resilient and we will make it through these unprecedented difficult times. We are hoping and praying for better times and brighter days ahead.



By Darrell L. Sims

Dire economic conditions triggered by the pandemic have affected the lives of most New Yorkers. Salaries of City employees are frozen and significantly inadequate to address increases in the cost of living and the highest inflation rate in over forty years at 9.1%. Pay raises are desperately needed for all City employees.

During MEA's recent meeting with the Office of Labor Relations, it was explicitly stated that pay raises are tied to reductions in City healthcare benefit costs. With healthcare reserves depleted, the City and unions must resolve excessive health care benefit costs before pay raises can be considered. Contract negotiations with unions have not commenced. It was expressed that there is no timetable for when raises will be provided for Managers or unionized employees. Managerial raises are usually effectuated after union collective

bargaining raise patterns have been set.

Until recently, it was anticipated that negotiations for pay raises would be based on the outcome of the pending City appeal of the court decision regarding the Medicare Advantage Plus plan that is scheduled for Appellate Court hearings in September of this year. However, the situation has become more complicated. On July 15, 2022, the City was informed that Anthem / Empire Blue Cross Blue Shield, the selected Preferred Provider Organization (PPO), withdrew its commitment to participate in the Medicare Advantage Plus plan.

In addition, based on a Request For Information released by the City and the Municipal Labor Committee (MLC) on June 16, 2022, plans are in the works to reduce health care benefits for active employees and pre-Medicare eligible retirees by 10% with a new Health

Maintenance Organization (HMO).

Interested and qualified health maintenance organizations were required to submit their information for review by July 14, 2022. The City and MLC anticipates selecting an organization and implementing that new health care plan by January 1, 2024.

Also, on June 3, 2022 a Request for Proposals was released by the City seeking a Group Dental Administrative Services vendor to provide administrative dental services for management, supervisory, and administrative City government employees who are not covered under collective bargaining agreements. HealthPlex is our current provider.

The MEA Executive Board acknowledges and appreciates the hard work of our members and continues representing NYC managers to the best of our abilities. We wish everyone a Safe, Healthy, and Happy Summer that is full of achievable hopes and dreams.

INTRODUCING MEA'S NEW RECORDING SECRETARY... STEPHEN FISHER

By Vanessa DeSantis



Stephen Fisher

This year the MEA Executive Board selected Stephen Fisher to be its new Recording Secretary, replacing predecessor Lisa Yee.

Stephen was Assistant Deputy Commissioner of the Office of Procedures, Human Resources Administration, when he retired in August 2018 after working in that position for eight years. Stephen began working for the City in 1972 as a college intern. He held positions in corrections and juvenile justice before beginning work at HRA in 1986. In total, Stephen has 33 years of public service.

He was also instrumental in getting MEA retirees concerns represented last year when a new plan proposed by the City and the Municipal Labor Committee to privatize Medicare was scheduled to go into effect January of this year.

When Stu Eber, President Emeritus of the MEA and Chair of the Council of Municipal Retiree Organizations (COMRO), asked him to post updates on the status of the new plan, his 11 years in healthcare came in handy. Stephen had worked both in private and public sector healthcare after many years in City government before finally returning to it again in 2007, missing its unique world and pace.

He was well-steeped in how patient billing and healthcare's ancillary

services worked and that knowledge proved especially useful when the MEA was getting many questions from its retired members about what the proposed Medicare Advantage Plus plan would mean for them.

"Nobody really knew what was going on," he said. "They didn't understand what the plan was asking for."

Fisher, together with many retired MEA members, had reservations about the new plan and the legalities of its implementation.

SPREADING THE WORD

As word got out about how the plan would add costs, along with having an odious "gatekeeper" aspect where a provider authorizes certain services instead of leaving it to the doctor and patient – many retirees from all unions and agencies grew concerned that their right to quality healthcare had been quietly bargained away.

Groups formed in reaction to the plan, such as the grass roots Organization of Public Service Retirees, Inc, a coalition of retired City union workers, which ended up filing an Article 78 Petition in the State Supreme Court.

Stephen, for his part, met with MEA members and enumerated their concerns in letters to the City and the Municipal Labor Committee in April and June of 2021.

"It came down to the issue of freedom of choice," said Fisher.

CITY APPEALS RULING

The Courts seemed to agree, ruling in March that the City could not charge retirees the \$191 it planned to for choosing to keep their current healthcare coverage.

The decision to move forward with the prospective healthcare plan is still being battled out in the courts today. The City has appealed the ruling and

it remains to be seen what the higher courts will decide.

Most recently on this issue, in July in a reaction to all the delays, Anthem Blue Cross made a public statement that it would not be able to give its customers their answers in the appropriate timeframe. Anthem had decided to withdraw from the Alliance.

"It's unclear now what this means. Is it now moot because Anthem dropped out? It's hard to say," said Mr. Fisher. The Municipal Labor Committee and the City are actively negotiating with another health insurance plan.

In the meantime, Stephen has been the MEA's resident watchdog on this issue, posting updates regularly on the site.

JOINING THE MEA

Stephen first joined the MEA in 1997 after William Dworkin, President Emeritus of the MEA told him about it. The two met working at the same agency: HRA. Fisher was Assistant Deputy Commissioner for the Division of AID Services and Mr. Dworkin was on the income support side; both working during the height of the AIDS crisis in the early 1990s.

Having been actively involved in the MEA for many years, when asked this year if he'd like to become an officer on the Board, it seemed like a natural evolution of what he'd already been doing.

"I am now posting the same updates as I always was, only this time more formally under the title of MEA Secretary," he said.

Though Stephen sees the challenge of an Association advocating for City Managers when so many managers have left to join unions, he thinks there is still so much the MEA can offer and hopes to see it expand and improve its membership.

TECHNOLOGY INVESTMENTS GROW MEA

By Bendix Anderson



MEA Executive Director Alice Wong

NYC MEA has radically grown its capacity to help members with new technology. These tools are already helping MEA communicate and advocate for its members faster.

“Technology was our biggest investment this year,” says Alice Wong, Executive Director of NYC MEA.

Advocacy is one of the most important services MEA provides members. Individual managers can turn to MEA when they have a dispute on the job, questions about benefits or need legal advice. MEA is replacing our members’ data base designed 15 years ago with a new, advanced customer relationship management (CRM) system created by Salesforce, a local technology company. The migration of the data is now complete, reports Ms. Wong. Many private companies use similar systems to securely hold confidential information on customers and clients.

IMPROVED MEMBERS’ SERVICES

Now, when members call with questions, the MEA team can securely access the robust member profile system from anywhere.

The new, cloud-based system combines MEA’s old electronic database of basic member data and its files on individual member cases. All the information is now securely held in a single system. “Our office is now fully remote capable. We don’t have to get

the paper file out of a filing cabinet to remind ourselves of the details of the case,” says Ms. Wong.

The same cloud-based system now helps the MEA team receive emails and voicemails, wherever they are working. MEA also invested in three new software tools — FileZilla, Kleopatra and Jitterbit — to securely handle, encrypt, and decrypt files uploaded into MEA’s system or imported from other systems.

Member can also now apply for scholarships through the on-line portal from MEA’s Career Development Program (CDP). Members can also easily upload information and documents and new members can file their applications on-line.

MEA REACHES PEOPLE WITH WEBSITE AND SOCIAL MEDIA

The MEA website also had more visitors than ever before – that includes both members and potential future members. “We’re very proud that we were able to utilize platform and to get members and non-members to

come and learn about MEA,” says Alice.

Many turned to MEA to get information they couldn’t find anywhere else. “We were the only organization that actually provided information about the City’s proposed Medicare Advantage Plan,” says Ms. Wong. “The unions, we discovered, would direct their members to our website.”

The MEA website received 313,000 unique pageviews over the 12 months that ended in June 2022. That’s a 973 percent increase from the year before.

MEA also utilized social media including LinkedIn, Instagram, Twitter, and Facebook like never before. The number of referrals from social media to the MEA website from social media grew to 9,000 over the last year, up from almost zero the year before.

“We strongly encourage you to come visit our website, and social media platforms -- and get up to date information on what’s really happening,” says Ms. Wong.

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