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Farm workers OT legislation will hurt those it's trying to help

BY LEGISLATOR IRENE MYERS

When it comes to making decisions and/or setting policy, leaders are often told to be careful of the "law of unintended consequences." What this means is that, while you think you may be adopting legislation to address some particular issue, you may actually be creating negative outcomes that you did not expect. I am reminded of this when it comes to New York inching close to implementing a 40-hour overtime threshold for farm laborers.

In 2019, legislation was passed that required time-and-a-half to be paid to farmworkers after they worked 60 hours of straight time in a week. In addition, a Farm Labor Wage Board was created to further review reducing the overtime threshold to 40 hours per week. Then just last month, this board voted 2-1 to adopt the 40-hour threshold over the next decade for New York farms. It will initially be lowered (from 60)

to 56 hours in 2024, and then decreased by four more hours every other year, reaching 40 hours in 2032.

The sole member to cast a no vote on the Farm Wage Board was the president of the New York State Farm Bureau. The two members who voted yes have no experience in the agriculture industry. The vast majority of comments on this proposed change were from farmers who pleaded with the board to understand the economics of farming, but these pleas were ignored.

Now, for those unfamiliar with the farm industry, you might be thinking to yourself that such a threshold seems reasonable. After all, other sectors of the economy, say manufacturing and retail, pay overtime after 40 hours. And as a union member myself, I certainly believe in worker rights and the need to treat people fairly. But agriculture is much different from other sectors of the economy, and

this law will undoubtedly hurt the farmworkers it seeks to help.

Farms do not have the luxury to simply raise their prices to cover increases in costs. With things like competition with farms in other states and contracts within the supply chain, there is very little room to increase prices. So, farmers need to control costs and look for efficiencies.

So, what did we see when the overtime threshold was lowered to 60 hours? Farmers capped their laborers at a 60-hour work week. Considering many workers travel from other countries to work on our farms, they want to be able to work as much as possible to earn as much as possible. Thus, when the hours are capped, they earn less. This makes it more likely these workers will look for work on farms outside of New York state, putting our farms at a further disadvantage. This will lead to less agricultural production, diversification, and

job availability, severely impacting counties like Niagara where agriculture and related businesses are a huge part of the local economy.

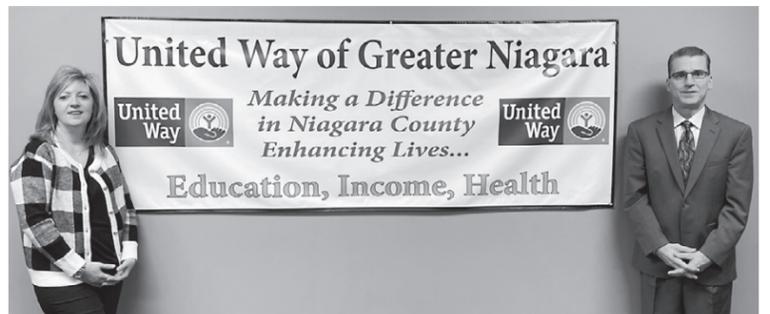
Thus, if the members of the Farm Wage Board had bothered to talk to any workers they were supposedly trying to help, they would have received a much-needed lesson in farm economics, and understood these overtime changes are not supported. Instead, they adopted a policy full of unintended consequences.

Thankfully, this wrong-headed action by the Farm Labor Wage Board is not the final word on the issue, but only a recommendation. The state labor commissioner still must submit a report for public comment, with the ultimate decision left to Gov. Hochul. I encourage all of you to contact the governor's office and tell her this bad policy must be stopped, and we must protect our family farms.

United Way thanks sponsors

The United Way of Greater Niagara, in a press release, thanked Denise Abbott, left, of DeGraff Memorial Medical Park CWA Local 1168, and Nicolas Maniccia of KeyBank for chairing 2021's campaign, "and for their commitment to the United Way.

"Your contributions to our community do not go unnoticed, and we appreciate everything you do to support the area where we all live and work. Thank you!" (Submitted photo)

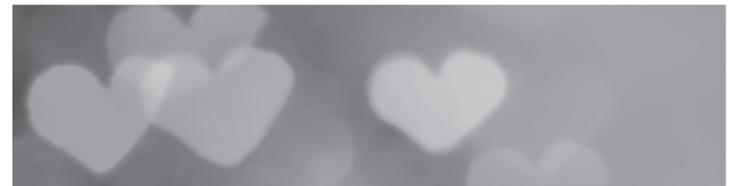


'Doctors with a Heart' collects items for NiaCAP

Dr. Glenda Rose and Dr. Thomas Barba of Rose Chiropractic P.C. in Lewiston sponsored the 32nd annual "Doctors with a Heart" Day for their patients. In exchange for chiropractic services, non-perishable food items were collected from the public to benefit Niagara Community Action Program's food pantries.

Pictured are doctors Rose and Barba.

Rose Chiropractic is located at 435 Ridge St., in Lewiston. For more information, or to make an appointment, call 716-754-9039.



Niagara County Tribune/Sentinel

Founded February 14, 1987

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The Tribune is published weekly.

Display Ads Deadline: MONDAY 5 PM

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NIAGARA FRONTIER PUBLICATIONS

