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Pataki, Lawmakers Look to Help Victims

Free tuition, tax breaks among proposals

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Albany — Gov. George Pataki and state lawmakers are devising a number of ways to assist those affected by the World Trade Center attack, including offering free college tuition to victims and their families, creating special medals for rescue workers and granting billions of dollars in tax breaks for businesses in lower Manhattan.

Picking up an idea that has been circulating among legislators, Pataki proposed yesterday that the spouses and children of those killed in the attack and its aftermath, as well as anyone seriously injured, receive free tuition at the state or city public universities.

Pataki's plan, which would include free room and board, books and all other costs, currently would add up to about $47,500 for four years of study at SUNY. Those who wanted to go to a private college would be given an equivalent amount.

Pataki said the scholarships would extend to relatives of anyone who died in the attack on the Pentagon or the crash of United Flight 93 in Pennsylvania, as well as fire, police and rescue workers who were seriously injured.

"The governor's support is welcome," said Assemb. Richard Brodsky (D-Westchester), who had begun drafting such legislation last week. "We need to be partners in all of what we do for these families. They are our first and primary responsibility."

The Legislature was supposed to be finished for the year, but Assembly Speaker Sheldon Silver (D-Manhattan) said Monday that lawmakers would return repeatedly to Albany to deal with everything from issuing death certificates for those bodies never found to ensuring that employers could not fire National Guard members called up for extended duty.

Silver also suggested designating lower Manhattan, which he represents, as an economic development zone, as the state has done with depressed regions elsewhere. Businesses that locate in such zones are entitled to huge breaks in sales and property taxes.

"We have to look to rebuild lower Manhattan stronger and better than it ever has been," Silver said.

Legislators are also talking about providing free tuition for all police officers and firefighters even if they are not hurt on the job. "This is a good time to consider everything," said Sen. James Alesi (R-East Rochester), who was pushing that before the attack.

Sen. Michael Balboni (R-East Williston) said he is also proposing waiving the fees for death certificates and speeding up the process of getting wills resolved. "We have to care about the people who have been left behind," Balboni said.

Balboni has also suggested that New York create a special medal to honor everyone involved in the attack and rescue and recovery operations.

In some ways New York is well positioned financially to underwrite many of these new programs. Congress has already committed billions to help rebuild the city. The state has $4.4 billion in surplus and special reserves, and the budget that lawmakers passed in August was $4 billion less than the governor had proposed in January.

But the state is also facing a sizable drop in revenues, not just because of this year's economic slowdown but also because of the damage and closures to one of its principal generator of taxes: Wall Street.

The securities industry provides $8 billion to $10 billion in taxes a year, according to the governor's office. Rudimentary math suggests the state has lost about $135 million from Wall Street's closure over four days last week. Tax breaks to keep businesses from moving out of the city would take away more.

Assemb. Robin Schimminger (D-Kenmore), a Buffalo area lawmaker who heads the Assembly's economic development committee, said, "The resources of the state of New York are sizeable enough that not a soul is going to be concerned about any undue diversion of resources."

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