

231 ways toward tax relief

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County leaders delivered 231 ideas to Gov. [Andrew Cuomo](#)'s "mandate relief team" Friday in an urgent plea to help keep property taxes at a level that might be considered affordable. According to the report from the [New York State Association of Counties](#), nine state mandates represent 90 percent of the \$4.4 billion raised in property taxes levied outside New York City. NYSAC says something must be done about some of them -- such as making public employee pensions closer to private sector retirement plans, and shifting Medicaid costs off the backs of property owners.

"The enormity of the state-imposed fiscal burden on counties is so severe we remain concerned that even if a large share of the mandate reform and cost reduction proposals in this document are implemented, we may still fall short of our mutual goal of reducing property taxes," the authors warn. The biggest idea -- and the most fiscally difficult for New York -- is for the state to freeze at 2010 levels the Medicaid bill sent to the counties. Over ensuing years, the steady lowering of the county share would lead to a complete state takeover of Medicaid, similar to how the program is funded in the other 49 states.

"We believe that removing counties from the financing of Medicaid will reduce the overall size, scope and expense of New York's Medicaid program to the net benefit of the state's taxpayers," according to NYSAC, which handed over its mandate relief report to a commission Cuomo empaneled specifically to figure out ways to get the state off local taxpayers' backs.

As an alternative, Erie County Executive Chris Collins -- whose county decided it could no longer afford to be a member of NYSAC-- is considering allowing counties to choose which Medicaid services above the federally required minimum to offer to its residents. New York, under Gov. [George Pataki](#), set out to maximize the matching federal dollars and added a slew of optional services to its Medicaid menu.

County leaders say it's too much and are at least trying to get nonemergency visits to the emergency room disqualified under Medicaid coverage. Their ideas were compiled last week at the annual meeting of NYSAC because "the smell of a property tax cap is in the air," said [Mark LaVigne](#), the group's deputy executive director. The relief ideas would help the counties deal with a cap similar to what Cuomo seeks that assures increases in tax levies of no more than 2 percent a year.

County leaders statewide offered ways to ease the costs of the state-required health and human services programs they must finance and implement. Many noted a need to make it clear that public assistance programs should be temporary. Others suggested that counties be allowed to charge for probation services such as attaching a monitoring bracelet -- perhaps a \$25 fee, similar to what happens in other states. Counties pay

86 percent of the cost of probation; the Cuomo budget plan calls for that to rise to 90 percent.

The counties suggest retooling the average pension package "so it more closely mirrors what is available in the private sector." The idea suggests developing a less costly retirement benefit or a Tier 6 for new employees, and the opportunity to require most employees to contribute more to the pension fund.