



NEWSDAY FILE / CRAIG RUTTLE

# Bellone's ex-aide gets a 25% raise



**POLITICS  
& POWER**

Rick Brand

rick.brand@newsday.com

**J**ustin Meyers, once County Executive Steve Bellone's chief spokesman, now makes more than his old boss in his new job as a top aide to Suffolk District attorney Tim Sini.

Meyers, 32, earns \$189,929 a year, while Bellone makes \$187,000. It's a 25 percent pay hike for Meyers, who last served as a \$151,353-a-year assistant police commissioner for strategic communications.

News releases list Meyers, who is not an attorney, as Sini's chief of staff, although his formal Civil Service title is assistant to the district attorney.

Robert Clifford, who was spokesman for former District Attorney Thomas Spota, had the same job title for 16 years. Clifford made \$144,620 a year because the post was a grade 36.

Days before taking office, Sini asked Bellone and legislative presiding officer DuWayne Gregory (D-Copiague) to raise Meyers to a grade 45.

Gregory said Sini, in a phone call, said while Meyers "would still do communications, he will be doing more administrative stuff, too."

Gregory said he was unaware of Meyers' exact salary, but understood it would be "significant."

He said Sini wanted "a person he felt comfortable working with to accomplish the things he wants to do. I think he has to have flexibility and that's why I supported the change . . . I think the DA will make him earn every bit of it."

Sini said through a spokesman that Meyers' role is to make the office more efficient, and adopt best practices of prosecutors across the state and nation.

Meyers declined to comment.

Republicans assailed the pay hike as a reward for a political operative with no legal or sworn law enforcement experience.

"It's absolute abuse of taxpay-



JAMES CARBONE

Justin Meyers

ers' dollars for someone who's nothing more than a political operative . . . [whose] only claim to fame is winning a DA's race," said Legis. Tom Cilmi (R-Bay Shore), minority leader. "We can't afford to hire 911 operators or people to fill potholes because we're in a fiscal emergency . . . He's probably a good PR guy, but taxpayers can't afford to pay a PR guy \$190,000."

But Jon Schneider, Meyers' one time boss in Bellone's office, called such criticism unjustified. "Justin's a first rate professional with tremendous creativity, a real passion for public policy and a proven track record in communicating with Suffolk County residents," said Schneider.

Republicans tried to ax Meyers' police position from the budget last year, saying he had politicized the job by orchestrating a stream of news media events for Sini as police commissioner to boost his name recognition for his bid for DA.

They said Meyers had Sini out in snowstorms and holding news conferences on how to avoid having cars stolen — issues predecessors never dealt with.

On election night, Bellone touted Meyers' role in Sini's victory. "Some people have described Justin Meyers with terms like brash, arrogant," said Bellone. "I describe him as courageous, tough, smart, literally one of the most talented people I've ever encountered in my life."

Sini, who touts his own work ethic, also told the crowd that Meyers' "actually gives me a run for my money."

A county law bars elected officials and political appointees

from making more than budgeted for the county executive, but it doesn't apply to Meyers' salary. That's because Bellone could legally receive \$228,092 in salary, and aides say the 2018 budget includes the higher amount. Bellone has voluntarily taken less since he was first elected 2012, given Suffolk's \$150 million budget hole.

That law exempts the county health commissioner, the medical examiner and the office deputy, who are physicians, and the community college president. Sini, who will make \$203,245 this year, is exempt due to state law that ties district attorney salaries to those of state Supreme Court justices.

District attorney officials say Meyers is one of three top aides who report directly to Sini and who each make \$189,929, the same pay as former chief deputy to the district attorney Emily Constant.

William Ferris III, chief assistant district attorney, will handle all legal issues. John Barry, now acting police commissioner, will become the district attorney's chief investigator.

Officials say Meyers will oversee not only communications but all budget, training and information technology needs. He also will oversee lobbying and new initiatives such as opioid treatment efforts.

Bellone signed off on the upgrade, saying Meyers "will continue to be an invaluable asset" to Sini as district attorney.

With the new job in the district attorney's office, Meyers' pay has climbed by 51 percent since Bellone hired him in 2014 as a \$125,514 assistant deputy county executive.

Meyers later spent two years as Bellone's primary spokesman, and Sini in 2016 named Meyers as assistant deputy police commissioner for public affairs at a salary of \$140,391.

Meyers subsequently was promoted to assistant police commissioner after receiving a master's degree in strategic communications and executive management from Columbia University. He started his career as an aide in North Hempstead Town.

federal law that calls chiefly for civil penalties.

It called for a review to determine whether the agency "should continue to approach fisheries enforcement from a criminal-investigative standpoint."

In their filings, Kokell's lawyers argued that criminal prosecutions have been used "excessively to bludgeon fishermen."

They pointed to an article written by Christopher Hale, trial attorney for the Justice Department who is prosecuting the cases, in which he "advises his colleagues to consider criminal charging alternatives to Magnuson-Stevens."

Hale didn't return a call seeking comment. Department spokesman Wyn Horn-

**Feds allege that commercial fisherman Thomas Kokell illegally harvested more than \$400,000 worth of fluke.**

buckle said the government's filing speaks for itself.

The Justice Department in 2012 began criminal investigations of fishermen and dealers, six from New York and one from New Jersey.

The probe focused on a program known as research set-aside, which allows fishermen to bid at auction on the right to catch certain species of fish beyond a state's allotted quota. In court papers, prosecutors have alleged a trail of abuses involving the program, calling it "a license to steal."