



The Public Advocate for the City of New York
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Public Advocate Gotbaum, Advocates, Councilmembers: New Yorkers Need Immediate On-Site Help at Public Benefit Offices

Public Advocate Gotbaum, Brennan Center Strategic Fund Release Report Supporting Bill to Help New Yorkers Access Public Benefits

MANHATTAN -- Public Advocate Betsy Gotbaum and the Brennan Center Strategic Fund released a report today supporting the bill to provide New Yorkers on-site assistance from knowledgeable advocates at public benefit offices. The report, entitled *Improving New York City's Public Benefit System*, was prepared by the Brennan Center Strategic Fund and outlines the clear need for permitting advocates to set up information tables in the public areas of benefits offices of city agencies.

Under the Ready Access to Assistance Act (REACT), introduced by Public Advocate Gotbaum and co-sponsored by Councilmembers Bill de Blasio and Eric Gioia, benefit-seekers would be able to enlist an advocate to represent them in their meetings with agency caseworkers, easily accessing valuable information as well as translation assistance.

The new Brennan Center Strategic Fund report supports Gotbaum's bill by arguing that NYC should remove its ban on non-profit advocates setting up help desks inside government public benefits offices and provide important information to benefits applicants and recipients. These help desks would reduce confusion about procedures and policies, ensure the accuracy of government agency records, support populations with special needs, and improve communication between clients and caseworkers – all at no cost to taxpayers.

Public Advocate Betsy Gotbaum said, "Our REACT bill is plain common sense. Advocates should be allowed into public areas of city agencies, where people are often waiting for hours, unable to navigate the process, so they can provide crucial information, help with application forms, translation services, and ensure access to benefits. The bill will also allow for easier access to federal benefits that are good for New York families and children, as well as the city's economy. It's a win-win."

QUOTE FROM ERIC GIOIA

Councilmember Bill de Blasio said, "For years, the General Welfare Committee has heard from applicants who don't receive benefits because they got wrong information from staff in benefits offices, they mistakenly brought the wrong documentation to apply, or they don't understand eligibility requirements. And when trips to benefits offices don't go right the first time, people have to go back again, which means missing work, missing school, or needing to make child care arrangements. It doesn't have to be this way - we can help get it right the first time around by allowing advocates to assist applicants in public areas of benefits offices."

David Pedulla, Research Associate at the Brennan Center, said, "By allowing non-profit organizations to run help desks in public benefits offices, REACT offers a cost-free way to strengthen the public benefits system in

NYC. People will be able to obtain assistance in ways that make our public benefits system more accurate and efficient. Building on this City's strong history of cooperation between non-profits and government, the bill is an important step to ensure that the basic needs of low-income New Yorkers are met."

Andrew Friedman, Co-Director of Make the Road by Walking, said, "It is critically important that New Yorkers have access to the information and support they need to access City services that enable them to feed their families and prevent homelessness. There is simply no good reason for the City to lock trained advocates out of public offices that provide desperately-needed services."

Diane Wenzler, Director of Publications and Research Services, CSS, said, "The placement of informed, competent advocates at help desks throughout public benefit offices in NYC will be a significant step toward helping our City's low-income families and individuals secure benefits and ease economic hardship. Such advocates will not only increase eligible families' and individuals' access to needed programs, but they will also coordinate efforts with city personnel easing their work load."

The Public Advocate was joined by Councilmember Eric Gioia, David Pedulla from the Brennan Center Strategic Fund, the New York City AIDS Network (NYCAN), Andrew Friedman, Co-Director of Make the Road by Walking, Diane Wenzler from CSS New York, the Co-Director from Project FAIR, and New Yorkers experiencing difficulty seeking public benefits.

Public Advocate Gotbaum introduced REAACT (Introduction 359) in 2006, and the first hearing was held before the General Welfare Committee at the end of that year. Drafted by the Brennan Center Strategic Fund, the bill, which currently has 33 New York City Council co-sponsors, would help New Yorkers access food stamps, cash assistance, Medicaid, child care benefits, and subsidized housing. The law would take effect 90 days after the bill is passed.