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Gotbaum to Introduce Bill to Help New Yorkers Seeking Public Benefits

Public Advocate Betsy Gotbaum announced she will introduce a bill tomorrow to provide New Yorkers seeking public benefits and services at city offices on-site access to advice and representation from knowledgeable advocates. The bill is being co-sponsored by Council Members Eric Gioia and Bill de Blasio.

Drafted by the Brennan Center for Justice and known as the Ready Access to Assistance Act (REAACT), the bill calls for allowing advocates to set up information tables in public benefits offices of city agencies, including the Human Resources Administration, Department of Housing Preservation and Development and Administration for Children's Services. In addition to access to advice and information, benefits seekers would be able to enlist an advocate to represent them in their meetings with agency caseworkers.

The purpose of the bill is to help New Yorkers, particularly those whose primary language is not English, to navigate the difficult and complicated process of applying or recertifying for public benefits and services.

"People seeking benefits often don't understand what information is required of them and don't know their rights when they are wrongly denied benefits or services," Gotbaum said. "Whether you're applying for public assistance or food stamps, facing tenancy termination proceedings or just trying to navigate the child welfare system, advocates should be there on the premises to help you. This bill is a first step in that direction."

Councilmember Gioia, chair of the City Council Oversight and Investigations Committee, said, "This bill helps New Yorkers help themselves. Far too often we've found that government bureaucracy and red tape is keeping New Yorkers from getting the much-needed aid they're qualified for and deserve. This must change, and this bill is a step in the right direction. I thank and commend the Public Advocate for her hard work and leadership on this issue. Working together, we're going to make sure that every New Yorker has the tools, information and access they need to improve their lives."

Councilmember de Blasio, chair of the City Council General Welfare Committee, said, "The question you have to ask is: why would these agencies want to keep advocates for low-income families out of their offices? Government works best when the doors are open. The presence of advocates helping New Yorkers claim benefits for which they are eligible can only improve the functioning of the bureaucracy. Our Public Advocate, Betsy Gotbaum, has got it absolutely right."

“This bill provides a no-cost, common sense way to help government function more efficiently and ensure that low-income New Yorkers can obtain the assistance they need,” said Laura Abel, deputy director of the Poverty Program at the Brennan Center for Justice at New York University School of Law.

“This bill will be incredibly helpful to low-income New Yorkers, who need all the help they can get as they navigate through the maze-like public assistance system,” said Andrew Friedman, co-director of Make the Road by Walking.

For many years, the city permitted advocates to staff help desks and circulate in the public areas of what are now known as Job Centers. In 1992, HRA began barring advocates from centers, except when accompanied by an applicant, a policy that remains in effect today. Advocates who seek to enter HRA Job Centers unaccompanied are turned away by security.

“Those of us who work against poverty recognize the value in being able to seek advice at a help table,” Gotbaum said. “We are hoping the mayor will join us in supporting this important effort to enable our government to better serve the people.”

Gotbaum noted there are current precedents for granting advocates access to public spaces in government benefits offices. Buffalo, Los Angeles, and San Diego all allow advocates access. New York State lets advocates staff a table inside the public assistance fair hearings office in Brooklyn and on the premises of family and housing courts in New York City.

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