

POINT OF VIEW

The Ready Access to Assistance Act Offering Help Where It Is Needed

Anyone who has stood in line to receive public benefits knows that the process can be confusing, time-consuming, and complicated. And in New York City – the largest municipal system in the United States – it can sometimes feel impossible. New Yorkers seeking public benefits such as food stamps, public housing, or Medicaid often run into unforeseen problems that prevent them from accessing needed public services.

Take Mrs. Sanchez, for example. Irania Sanchez and her two daughters, Gabriela and Aylin, live in Brooklyn. Irania arrived in New York City in 1991 in order to be near her grandmother and other family. When her daughters began to get sick, Irania turned to the city for support to help pay for healthcare, but she found several impediments in her way: Her English was not strong enough to convey what her daughters needed,

and even with the aid of letters from doctors, her caseworker denied her application for Emergency Medicaid. Luckily, Irania discovered a Brooklyn-based advocacy group that helped her understand her rights and resolve the communication problems at the benefits office. As a result, her daughters received the medical care they needed, and Ms. Sanchez became a leader with the advocacy group, Make the Road.

In the past, when benefit seekers needed extra help translating documents or understanding requirements, dedicated advocates staffed help desks, answered questions and provided assistance. Simple and cost-effective, these help desks improved the accuracy and efficiency of the city public benefit system – at no cost to tax payers.

But our former mayor, Rudolph Giuliani, put an end to this practice. Giuliani banned advocates from setting up help desks in benefit offices, claiming that this practice interfered with city employees' ability to do their jobs.

Similarly, our current administration does not allow help desks in public benefit offices and has expressed concern that help desks could infringe on the privacy of clients, or cause overcrowding in public spaces. But these concerns are easily addressed – and do not justify upholding a ban that prevents benefit seekers from getting needed assistance.

A bill introduced by Public Advocate Gotbaum in 2007 would overturn the ban on help desks and allow experienced advocate groups into public benefit offices. Under the Ready Access to Assistance Act (REAACT), benefit-seekers would be able to enlist an advocate to represent them in their meetings with agency caseworkers and access valuable information, as well as translation/interpretation assistance. The bill would allow New Yorkers, particularly those whose

primary language is not English, to navigate the difficult and complicated process of applying for public benefits and services.

The truth is, help desks benefit everyone involved. A report produced by the Brennan Center Strategic Fund, Inc. in February of 2008 describes how help desks would assist clients in obtaining required documents, reduce confusion about agency procedures, help to ensure accuracy of records, and lend support to non-English speakers.

Help desks are already working in cities around the United States like Los Angeles, Philadelphia and Ann Arbor. They're also here in New York: Project FAIR has been authorized by the State to run a help desk at the Brooklyn Office of Administrative Hearings since 2001. They work to ensure the accuracy and efficiency of the fair hearing process,



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lightening the workload of the agency staff and enabling clients to participate fully in the fair hearing process.

The Brennan Center report notes that in cities that currently use help desks, not only did agency personnel come to rely on advocates for information and support, but advocates also found ways to clear up confusion with clients while cutting down on agency bureaucracy. One advocate told the story:

"I had a woman who came in to an [advocacy] clinic in Queens a couple of weeks ago. She had applied on four separate occasions at the same center. She saw different workers each time and each of the four workers told her that she wasn't eligible and wouldn't even let her fill out an application, wouldn't even accept an application. Which, right there, is just dead wrong. But, moreover, they were incorrect in their assessment of her ineligibility."

The REAACT bill would provide a common sense solution to a citywide problem. The bill would cut through government red tape and bring help to many New Yorkers -- like victims of domestic violence, immigrants and non-English speakers, as well as elderly or blind individuals trying to apply for public benefits.

The REAACT bill, drafted by the Brennan Center for Justice at NYU School of Law, has already gained the support of advocate groups such as the Community Service Society, Community Voices Heard, Families United for Racial and Economic

Equality (FUREE), Federation of Protestant Welfare Agencies, Gay Men's Health Crisis, Legal Information for Families Today, Make the Road by Walking, New York City AIDS Housing Network, New York City Coalition Against Hunger, New York City Employment and Training Coalition, Partnership for the Homeless, Picture the Homeless, POTS & PANS, Project FAIR, Urban Justice Center, National Center for Law and Economic Justice, Welfare Reform Network, Welfare Rights Initiative, and Women's City Club of New York.

The bill also has the support of thirty-six Councilmembers and the Chair of the Committee on General Welfare, Bill de Blasio.

But we still have a way to go. We need the mayor to support this bill allowing advocates to do what they do best: provide help to those in need. Whether New Yorkers are applying for public assistance or food stamps, facing tenancy termination proceedings or trying to navigate family court, advocates should be allowed onsite to help navigate the public benefits process.

It is time for the city to remove its ban on help desks in public benefits offices. Please email issues@pubadvocate.nyc.gov if you would like to show your support for this important bill.

Betsy Gotbaum is New York City's Public Advocate.

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involved."*

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