

READY ACCESS TO ASSISTANCE ACT (REAACT) THE HISTORY OF JOB CENTER ACCESS IN NEW YORK CITY

1974: FAMILIES CAN MEET WITH ADVOCATES IN WELFARE CENTERS

- From at least 1974 to 1991, New York City's Human Resources Administration (HRA) allowed families to do exactly what the **Ready Access to Assistance Act** would allow them to do now: meet advocates in public areas of Job Centers and seek advice, information, and representation from them there. HRA permitted advocates to staff help desks and to walk around public areas of what were then known as Welfare Centers.
- This policy worked. Barry Ensminger, HRA's General Counsel during the last few years in which HRA allowed people seeking benefits to meet advocates in Welfare Centers, explains that the policy caused no disruption of any kind for HRA offices.

Mid-1990s: GIULIANI ADMINISTRATION EXCLUDES ADVOCATES

- In the early years of the Giuliani Administration, HRA changed the policy and barred advocates from Job Centers (then called Welfare Centers) except when accompanied by an applicant. People seeking benefits could no longer obtain information, advice or representation from advocates in public areas of HRA offices unless those advocates accompanied them into the offices. This policy remains in effect today.

2000: A CONSTITUTIONAL CHALLENGE

- The community-based organization Make the Road by Walking (represented by the Brennan Center for Justice) sued the City, alleging that welfare applicants have a First Amendment right to meet advocates in welfare offices. The courts said the HRA Commissioner could not have total discretion to decide who could enter the offices, but could limit access to persons present on "official business."

2006: NO CHANCE TO MEET WITH ADVOCATES IN JOB CENTERS

- Today, HRA continues to bar advocates from New York's Job Centers. Only advocates accompanied by an individual claimant may enter Job Centers.
- Advocates who seek to enter Job Centers unaccompanied are promptly asked to leave by security. Furthermore, even though advocates have the constitutional right to distribute information outside Job Centers, the City has stopped some advocates from doing so.
- *The result? For more than a decade, low-income New York families have struggled alone to solve the problems that commonly arise in any bureaucracy.*

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