

Brennan Center Strategic Fund

READY ACCESS TO ASSISTANCE ACT (REAACT) LEGISLATIVE SUMMARY

WHAT WOULD THIS BILL DO?

The bill would enable a family seeking welfare benefits or other public benefits to obtain help with the application process by meeting and consulting with an advocate inside the government office.

WHY IS THIS BILL IMPORTANT?

This bill fixes a common problem. People seeking benefits often do not understand what information the government needs from them, and do not know what to do when officials wrongly deny them benefits. Currently, the City bars advocates from setting up help desks in many offices where benefits decisions are made. Help desks would reduce the frustrations of families and officials, and increase the accuracy of decision-making.

WHAT KIND OF ACTIVITIES WILL THIS BILL ALLOW?

The bill gives advocates the right to perform a number of activities in public areas of offices where the city administers public benefits, such as ***public assistance, Food Stamps, Medicaid, subsidized housing, housing subsidies and services, and child care benefits***. If the City were to authorize advocates to offer and provide help *inside* government offices, the advocates would help both the City and individuals by:

- Informing people of their rights and obligations, translating documents, providing interpretation, and generally easing communication with officials.
- Setting up help desks and guiding claimants through the complex application and recertification processes.
- Representing individuals in interactions with government officials.
- Helping the City administer public benefits programs more efficiently by pointing out inefficiencies in the system, and by monitoring the government's compliance with federal, state, and local laws.

ADVOCATES HAVE ACCESS IN OTHER PLACES – AND IT WORKS

This Act would bring New York City's policy in line with those of other cities, both in New York and in other parts of the country. Buffalo, Los Angeles and San Diego allow advocates to set up help tables and distribute information to people seeking benefits. In New York City, help tables are allowed at fair hearings offices in Brooklyn and at the Family Courts and Housing Courts. In all of these offices, advocates add a measure of ***fairness*** and ***accountability*** to the administration of public benefits programs without disrupting the operations of the offices.

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