

Brennan Center Strategic Fund

READY ACCESS TO ASSISTANCE ACT (REAACT) QUESTIONS & ANSWERS

Q: Why do people seeking benefits need advocates in government offices?
A: People seeking benefits often don't understand what information the government needs; don't know what to do when errors prevent them from receiving benefits; and don't understand, in some instances, why they are ineligible for benefits.

Q: What does this bill allow advocates to do in Job Centers?
A: Advocates will be allowed to answer questions from people seeking benefits in public areas of Job Centers. They may set up a help desk, distribute information, walk around waiting rooms, and provide representation.

Q: Won't this bill create chaos in public benefits offices?
A: No. HRA's General Counsel during the last few years in which HRA admitted advocates unaccompanied by claimants (Barry Ensminger), said that advocates did not disrupt HRA offices during his tenure. Advocates at help desks at New York State's Welfare Fair Hearings office and in the NYC Family and Housing Courts, help the government do its work more smoothly. In other parts of the country, similar policies also work well. In Buffalo, Los Angeles, and San Diego, advocates provide valuable assistance to people seeking benefits without disrupting the offices.

Q: Won't offices be flooded with advocates?
A: The bill gives the government agency the explicit authority to regulate the presence of advocates in government offices. For example, if too many advocates wish to be present in one office, the agency may create a rotating schedule. This will ensure that people seeking benefits receive the information and advice they need without disrupting the function of the agency.

Q: How will we protect people seeking benefits from for-profit ventures?
A: The bill grants access only to "non-profit organizations with the mission of serving, providing information to, advocating on behalf of, or otherwise benefiting individuals served by public benefits offices." Individuals or organizations seeking a profit do not gain access under this bill. The bill expressly prohibits individuals or organizations admitted pursuant to the bill from soliciting any money in city offices.

Q: What will this cost?
A: This is a zero cost bill for the public and the City Council. The City may have to dedicate minimal staff time to administer the program – i.e., creating a schedule for participating advocates – but administrative costs would be low and we do not anticipate that any new staff would have to be hired.

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