



NEW YORK STATE SENATOR

Antoine M. Thompson

Public Protection Budget Ensures Equal Justice For All New Yorkers. "Majority adopts Interest On Lawyer Account Funding in Legislation."

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(Albany, NY) Recognizing the need to give all New Yorkers equal access to our justice system, the Senate Democratic Majority passed budget legislation today that fully funds the \$15 million Judiciary appropriation for civil legal service for poor New Yorkers.

Senator Ruth Hassell-Thompson (D-Mt. Vernon), Chair of the Committee on Crime Victims, Crime and Correction and Conference Chairwoman said, "We needed to stabilize Civil Legal Services in New York State and we did. Now New Yorkers who need legal assistance to stop foreclosure actions, to fight for unemployment benefits, to fight against housing evictions, debt collection and scores of other actions will have access to competent counsel.

Senate Majority Conference Leader John L. Sampson, Chair of the Judiciary Committee said, "The Senate Majority has worked diligently to preserve the fundamental right to fair and affordable representation for all New Yorkers. Honoring our commitment to public protections, the Senate was able to secure sustainable funding for these vital services."

The Interest on Lawyer Account (IOLA) Fund, in existence since 1983, is used as a means to provide additional financial support to civil legal service organizations. The money is used to provide legal representation to people in dire circumstances who are facing foreclosure actions, unemployment hearings, landlord tenant eviction proceedings, domestic violence, Social Security Disability, fair hearings and many other legal actions.

In addition to providing crucial assistance to New Yorkers at a time of need, civil legal services also provide the state economic benefits: The civil legal services program saves local governments money by helping to keep families facing foreclosure in their homes, and out of homeless shelters. It helps unemployed workers receive insurance benefits they're entitled to, shrinking welfare rolls. And it helps disabled New Yorkers receive federal Social Security Disability benefits, bringing more tax dollars back from Washington and relieving the burden on state programs.

Furthermore, civil legal services saves money by making the court system operate more efficiently. It reduces the number of cash strapped individuals choosing to represent themselves who, due to their inexperience with the complexities of the law place an additional burden on an already overburdened civil and family justice system.

At present, the State's civil legal services programs meet less than 14% of the legal needs of the poor- and that's before the current fiscal crisis facing Civil Legal Service providers. This financial crisis facing civil legal service providers is compounded by the recent economic downturn, because this downturn has dramatically increased the need for civil legal services

Senator Liz Krueger (D-Manhattan) said, "This is a great victory for equal access to justice. Civil Legal Services needs to have a reliable and guaranteed funding stream so that poor New Yorkers can get the vital legal services they need. The current system for funding through IOLA has resulted in a decrease of their budget of 75%. This is simply unacceptable during the current recession when people are relying on civil legal services more than ever."

Senator William T. Stachowski (D-Lake View) said, "Despite the serious fiscal issues facing the state, we must do all we can to preserve the IOLA Fund at sufficient levels. Whether it helps women seeking protection from abuse, mothers trying to obtain child support, families facing unlawful evictions or foreclosures that could leave them homeless, or senior citizens, veterans and others trying to obtain federal benefits for which they qualify, the fund provides quality legal assistance to those who otherwise would not be able to attain it."

Senator Eric Adams (D-Brooklyn) said, "The New York State Interest on Lawyer Account Fund ('IOLA') provides financial support to not-for-profit civil legal service organizations. It promotes equal access to justice for underserved populations, including low-income, elderly, and disabled New Yorkers. The Senate Majority Conference has successfully championed the cause of legal assistance for the most vulnerable New Yorkers."

Senator Neil D. Breslin (D-Albany) said, "Without access to legal assistance, the people who are suffering most in the current economic crisis, the unemployed, the elderly, children, people who face losing their homes through foreclosure and eviction, cannot protect their legal rights and interests. I am pleased we were able to restore funding for legal help for New York's most vulnerable."

Senator Velmanette Montgomery, (D-Brooklyn) said, “We must protect our most vulnerable citizens who, especially in times of economic hardship, rely on the vital services provided by civil legal service organizations. In addition to protecting families facing foreclosure and helping victims of domestic violence, the retention of these critical services will save New York taxpayers millions of dollars.”

Senator Antoine M. Thompson (D-Parts of Erie and Niagara counties) said, “Passage of the IOLA funding was critical for my district, because of the number of low income families. These families deserve equal representation, and hopefully this fund will keep them from falling further behind.”

Senator Eric Schneiderman (D-Manhattan/Bronx) said: “We have restored funding to improve our civil legal system - the last line of defense for low-income New Yorkers facing eviction, foreclosure, domestic violence and unemployment. By stabilizing the IOLA program, we are providing access to justice in the most efficient way possible.”

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