



NEW YORK STATE SENATOR

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## Senate Passes Renee's Law

JAMES S. ALESI June 16, 2011

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The New York State Senate yesterday passed “Renee’s Law,” which would help protect staff of the state’s youth residential programs and ensure appropriate placement of youth based on their criminal history. The bill (S.5565), co-sponsored by Senator Catharine Young (R,I,C – Olean) and Senator George Maziarz (R,C – Newfane), was prompted by the brutal 2009 murder of Renee Greco committed by youth in her care. Renee Greco was only 24-years-old when she was bludgeoned to death while supervising troubled teenagers at a group home in Lockport, Niagara County.

“Renee still would be alive today if Renee’s Law had been in place prior to her murder,” Senator Catharine Young said. “There was absolutely no reason why she was left alone in a dangerous setting with six male residents who had histories of violence. Renee was failed by the system that increasingly places violent offenders in less secure, community-based settings where staff are not prepared or trained. Renee’s Law will require better staff training, and appropriately place juveniles in environments where they will no longer be a threat to society.”

“Renee Greco lived, worked, and was murdered in my Senate district,” Senator Maziarz said. “She was trying to make a difference in the lives of young people, but the system failed her. We adopt this law in Renee’s memory to reform the operations of the state Office of Children and Family Services and protect innocent workers and communities from violent young criminals.”

“Renee’s tragic murder was one in a series of incidents that are occurring with dangerous frequency in youth residential facilities and communities across the state,” Senate Majority Leader Dean G. Skelos said. “Renee’s Law would address the serious safety concerns of the dedicated people who have chosen to work with troubled youth so that both the staff and youth can be protected from violence.”

On June 8, 2009, Renee was the sole supervisor of six males at the Avenue House for troubled youths. Two of the

juveniles, 18-year-old Allen and 17-year-old Thousand, placed a blanket over Renee's head and beat her to death with a wooden table leg while she sat at a table playing cards with other residents.

Senators Young and Maziarz said that while both Thousand and Allen were arrested and later convicted for their roles in Renee's death, the state's current juvenile justice system still failed Renee and others who have been victims of violence. Lax policies put in place by the state Office of Children and Family Services (OCFS), including one which allows violent youths to be released prematurely from heavily supervised facilities into less secure residential homes, have contributed to other vicious assaults on community members and youth workers.

Among the key provisions in Renee's Law is the establishment of a multi-tiered risk assessment system that requires OCFS to take into account the severity of the youth's original crime, their behavior while in an OCFS facility, and other mitigating factors prior to the youth being placed into less secure OCFS-run facilities or privately operated residential homes.

The bill requires that a youth's criminal record be shared with all staff responsible for the care of youth in their custody and with any foster parents of youths placed in their care after released from OCFS custody. Staff would also be mandated to report a youth's criminal activity while in their care to local law enforcement and would be protected under the state's whistleblower law to come forward.

Renee's Law requires that staff receive expanded training such as classes in staff abuse prevention and identification, child abuse and maltreatment prevention, gang awareness, and conflict resolution. It would hold the Commissioner of OCFS personally responsible for ensuring training mandates are met.

Local law enforcement also would have access to a youth's records and a provision in the bill would require OCFS to notify local police departments no less than ten days before a youth is placed within their jurisdiction. Additionally, Renee's Law would require a police officer to accompany an employee of a program, upon request, to an AWOL youth's home and assist in retrieving such youth.

The bill has been sent to the Assembly