



NEW YORK STATE SENATOR

Neil D. Breslin

## Senate Democratic Conference Continue Push on Women's Health and Pay Equity

NEIL D. BRESLIN June 5, 2012

Host Women's Health Forum and Push Hostile Amendments to Force Senate Republican Action

(Albany, NY) The Senate Democratic Conference today continued a sustained push on important women's issues including women's health and workplace equality. The Senate Democrats hosted a public forum on the issue of women's health organized to discuss legislation sponsored by members of the Democratic Conference which the Senate Republican Majority has refused to move out of committee and bring to the floor for a vote. Health professionals and advocates joined Democratic Senators to discuss the issue of women's health and the bills currently awaiting Senate action.

During the Senate Session in the afternoon the Democratic Conference will push a number of hostile amendments to highlight the Republicans' refusal to address important women's issues. These amendments included the Reproductive Health Act, sponsored by Senator Andrea Stewart Cousins. The act would simply take women's reproductive health care out of the State's criminal laws and instead place it under a more appropriate regulatory authority, State's Public Health Law. Despite the innocuous nature of this bill, there has been a misinformation campaign circulated by those who continue to stand opposed to the hard-

won laws governing women's reproductive health.

Senate Democrats will also push an amendment for the State Fair Pay Act. The legislation sponsored by Senator Liz Krueger simply provides that it shall be an unlawful employment practice for an employer to discriminate between employees on the basis of sex, race and/or national origin by paying different wages. Unfortunately the Republicans have failed to act on this crucial legislation.

"Throughout the country we are seeing the hard-won rights of women being infringed and outright stolen. Issues like women's health and workplace equality should not be controversial. These are simply matters of equal rights that we should all be proud to stand up for," Conference Leader Senator John Sampson said. "The idea that these issues are controversial by the Senate Republicans is not only astounding, it is also deeply concerning. Senate Republicans have allowed New York to become yet another battleground in the ongoing radical war against women."

Today's public forum was organized by the Democratic Conference, and hosted by Senator Andrea Stewart-Cousins, to discuss multiple pieces of legislation that will improve women's access to quality health care. The forum not only examined current attacks on women's health and reproductive rights, but also focused on bills which have a direct impact on all aspects of women's health but have not yet brought before the Senate for a vote.

"Women have unique health care needs and keeping women healthy is critically important to the health and well-being of all of us," said Senator Andrea Stewart-Cousins, sponsor of the Public Forum on Women's Health. "They are our mothers, sisters, daughters, aunts, and nieces. Today's forum discussed legislation specific to women's health such as the Reproductive Health Act, coverage for breast and cervical cancer screenings, issues surrounding sexual trauma, as well as, the Health Benefit Exchange and how it impacts

women.”

Included in the bills discussed at today’s forum was S.6342, which will help develop plans to better address military sexual trauma experienced by female veterans by distributing information about where veterans can receive treatment and counseling. Also discussed were bills to ensure women are given the opportunity to prevent unintended pregnancies and legislation that would prohibit pharmacists from refusing to dispense prescription or non-prescription drugs approved by the Food and Drug Administration solely based on the pharmacist’s philosophical, moral or religious beliefs.

Additionally, a focus of today’s forum was the importance of the Health Benefit Exchange in New York. The Health Benefit Exchange was established by an Executive Order, as the Senate Republican Conference refused to allow legislation on it to be brought to the floor for a vote. Bills to expand access and lower costs for cancer screenings, as well as reform the Medicaid system were also discussed at the forum.

“Accessible and affordable health care is a fundamental right everybody is entitled to,” said Senator Neil D. Breslin. “As the healthcare landscape changes and states and the federal government look to establish their health care exchanges, we must be particularly cognizant of how these changes affect woman and their ability to receive quality health care.”

“Whether the bill deals with a woman’s uterus or her paycheck, the Senate Republicans seem awfully queasy about doing the right thing for New York’s women,” said Senator Liz Krueger. “But New York’s women deserve action, and today we’re giving Senate Republicans the opportunity to stand up for women’s rights, both at the doctor’s office and on the job. They’re going to have a chance to vote for or against the New York State Fair Pay Act, and they know that women earn 25 percent less than men doing the same work. They’re also going to have a chance to vote for or against the Reproductive Health Act, and show where

they stand on a woman's right to make her own personal, private healthcare decisions.”

“There are some on the other side of aisle who say that Democrats have manufactured a phony ‘war on women.’ There’s nothing phony about state legislatures trying to criminalize a woman’s right to make her own healthcare decisions,” Senator Toby Ann Stavisky said. “This ‘war on women’ is real, it has real consequences, and we’re not going to stand idly by while a generation’s progress towards equality is threatened. Equality for one means equality for all – and that includes women. Nowhere is this need more clear than in issues of public and private healthcare.”

“The Senate Democratic Conference has taken the pivotal step to organize a Women’s Health Forum and highlight several key health initiatives and legislation that affect women all across New York State,” Senator Shirley L. Huntley said. “I have introduced a bill regarding Military Sexual Trauma (MST) and where female veterans can seek treatment for this sort of trauma. Additionally, a myriad of critical legislation important to Women’s Health such as the Reproductive Health Act and Breast Cancer Screenings should have the opportunity to be brought to the floor and voted upon. This will enable the citizens of New York to make informed decisions about which members of the New York State Senate really care about addressing and improving women’s healthcare.”

“Women’s health is a matter of equality and ensuring the well-being of all New Yorkers,” Senator Velmanette Montgomery said. “Today’s forum, and all of the events organized by the Senate Democratic Conference on the critical issue of women’s rights, highlights the issues important to women as well as the legislative and societal barriers to equality in every sense of the word.”

Today’s public forum and hostile amendment push was part of the Democratic Conference’s ongoing efforts to highlight issues facing New York’s women that demand legislative action

in Albany.

In the past few weeks the Conference has held a roundtable discussion on the struggles of women in the workplace and the need for pay equity on May 15. Additionally, the Conference held a forum on May 30 on legislation that would reform the criminal justice system and combat domestic violence.

“As the effort to roll back hard-earned victories on women’s issues continues to develop on a national level, it is important that New York send a strong message that women deserve the right to make their own health choices,” Senator Michael Gianaris said. “Measures like the Reproductive Health Act would ensure women would be able to make their own decisions about their well-being, and I will continue to support its passage so that women can know government is on their side.”

“New York State has a proud tradition of progressive leadership on issues concerning women’s health and equal rights,” Senator Tony Avella said. “Unfortunately, the Senate Republican Majority continues to threaten that tradition by pandering to the far right extreme of their party instead of listening to the will of the overwhelming majority of New Yorkers. I urge my colleagues in the Republican conference to join with us in advancing women’s rights.”

“I want to thank my Democratic colleagues for focusing attention on the critical health needs of New York women,” Senator Suzi Oppenheimer said. “Now more than ever, we must remain vigilant against the assaults on women’s reproductive rights and ensure that all women have access to breast and cervical cancer screenings, as well as other potentially life-saving health services.”

“We need to continue to vigorously protect a woman’s right to choose,” Senator Jose Peralta said. “And whether it is reproductive health, violence against women or breast cancer, we need to treat these issues with the urgency and bipartisanship warranted by matters of life and death and health and well being.”

“The New York State legislature needs to do better when it comes to a variety of issues of affecting women - from women in the workplace, to economic development, to domestic violence, to women’s health which today’s forum addresses,” Senator Gustavo Rivera said. “The simple fact is that New York State has fallen behind in women’s health by not passing the Reproductive Health Act or fighting for greater access to health screenings. That is why I believe it was important to work with my colleagues to form a bipartisan and bi-cameral pro-choice Caucus that has and will continue to serve as an important vehicle for advocating for women’s health issues.”

Lois Uttley, Director of Raising Women’s Voices-NY, said, “For women and our families across New York State, affordable health insurance is a pressing issue. We look forward to the opening of New York’s Health Benefits Exchange, which will offer affordable health insurance to more than 1 million New Yorkers, beginning in 2014. This will be good quality coverage that includes the health care services that women and our families need.”

Joanne Zannoni, Executive Director of NYSCASA, said, “In consideration of the many veterans living with military sexual trauma and the difference that appropriate services can make in the lives of sexual assault victims, ensuring that our veterans know about treatment options seems the very least we should do.”

Kelli Owens, Government Relations and Public Policy Director, YWCAs of the Northeast, said, “The YWCA has been fighting for access to safe and affordable health care for women for over a century. The fact that today’s discussion is still necessary in 2012 is troubling but is

extremely important to every woman in New York.”

##