



NEW YORK STATE SENATOR

Tony Avella

CUNY Law Students Advocate in Albany for Important Social Policy Reform

TONY AVELLA March 25, 2014

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On March 12, 2014, students from CUNY Law's Economic Justice Project (EJP) joined forces with Hunter College's Welfare Rights Initiative (WRI) and the Empire State Economic Security Campaign (ES2), a statewide coalition of more than 200 social service providers, faith-based groups, and concerned citizens, to educate New York State legislators on several important social initiatives including access to quality education, affordable healthcare and housing, a healthy environment, living wage, and stronger safety net programs.

Joseph Schofield ('15); Roxanna Henry, WRI Legal Advocacy Organizer; Senator Tony Avella; John Guyette ('15); Sharon Miodovsky ('15); and Claudia Vargas, Hunter College student.

As part of their activities, coalition members met with New York State Senator Tony Avella, chair of the Senate Standing Committee on Social Services, to advocate for a bill (S1419/A3473) that would allow CUNY and SUNY students in four-year, baccalaureate programs who are on public assistance to count their in-class hours toward their workfare requirements.

One of the biggest obstacles undergraduate students on public assistance face is fulfilling their workfare requirements. Currently, New York allows students in two-year programs to count their in-class hours towards their workfare hours. However, the state does not provide the same support for students in four-year programs. The most effective way to get people out of poverty and off of public assistance is through higher education, yet currently New York neglects public assistance recipients trying to earn their baccalaureate degree.

While the bill has already passed in the New York State Assembly, it has been stalled in the New York State Senate. However, this year advocates have renewed hope for the bill's successful passage. Senator Avella, a co-sponsor on the bill, was supportive and agreed to do what he could to promote S1419 within the Social Services Committee with the hopes of getting the bill to the Senate floor for a vote.

CUNY School of Law launched the Economic Justice Project (EJP) in 1997 in response to the social justice crisis triggered by regressive welfare reform legislation. One of the consequences of welfare reform in New York City is that thousands of individuals who had been pursuing CUNY degrees were forced to quit school in order to fulfill workfare requirements. Most of these individuals were single mothers struggling to obtain the skills and credentials needed for the types of job that could lift their families out of poverty. EJP has responded to this challenge on several fronts by providing direct representation to hundreds of CUNY undergraduates, collaborating closely with and supporting the organizing and political efforts of the Welfare Rights Initiative (WRI) and other grassroots organizations, and working with others engaged in legislative and other systemic advocacy. In recognition of these efforts, the New York State Bar Association selected the project for the President's Pro Bono Service Law Student Group Award, and the Clinical Legal Education Association gave the project its Award for Excellence.

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