



NEW YORK STATE SENATOR

Joseph A. Griffo

Weekly Column #5: Reducing public assistance abuse with more accountability

JOSEPH A. GRIFFO February 29, 2016

| ISSUE: **PUBLIC ASSISTANCE, UNEMPLOYMENT, JOBS & EMPLOYMENT**

Public assistance plays a very important role in supporting individuals and families in times of need and hardship, and I have always been an advocate for providing these benefits to the poorest of our communities.

There truly are people, children and families that need help. But as compassionate as we are, it is also true that taxpayers have become frustrated by frequent news headlines highlighting people who abuse and defraud the public assistance system. Yes, most individuals who receive benefits are honest and use the funds appropriately, but there clearly are others who exploit the state's generosity.

Taxpayers are right to demand that this abuse stops, so that these benefits can go to those most in need.

Public assistance benefits aren't supposed to be used to buy cigarettes and alcohol, or to be spent on gambling and strippers. Yet, news reports show that this abuse still occurs in New York State.

That's why I have proposed a more strict set of statewide rules that would now hold recipients accountable for spending cash from their Electronic Benefits Transfer (EBT) card on prohibited items. Benefits like the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program, or SNAP, are supposed to be spent to help support families, so taxpayers should not be expected to tolerate these funds being wasted away.

Currently, only retailers are penalized if these benefits are wrongly spent at their establishments. Under my proposed bill, however, recipients who misuse their benefits would now also have to bear responsibility: Repeat violations would bring mounting levels of penalties for individuals and their families, including the temporary termination of benefits.

Let me be very clear: It is wrong to suggest this legislation is targeting the poor to take away their benefits. In fact, it is just the opposite. I believe the prospect of severe penalties should serve to discourage the misuse of these funds, while ensuring they are appropriately and wisely spent to support those in need.

The public assistance system should never lose sight of the goal to help capable individuals return to the workforce, if possible. That's why my proposed legislation would also create a uniform statewide set of work requirements that I believe would offer the best opportunity for recipients to find a job and lift themselves, and their families, out of hard times.

Under my bill, all capable applicants for public assistance would have to apply in writing for three separate advertised jobs and provide the Department of Social Services with verifiable documentation of the applications. Documentation can be submitted either within one week before the application of benefits, or up to two weeks after.

Nobody wants to see families and children struggle in times of need. I believe my proposed legislation is a good step toward reducing public assistance waste and abuse, so that the most taxpayer dollars are available to be spent in the best interest of the poor.

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RELATED LEGISLATION

2015-S6071

- Introduced

- - In Committee Assembly
 - In Committee Senate

- - On Floor Calendar Assembly
 - On Floor Calendar Senate

- - Passed Assembly
 - Passed Senate

- Delivered to Governor

- Signed By Governor

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Relates to eligibility for SNAP benefits and specifies additional products eligible for WIC benefits

October 19, 2015

In Senate Committee [Social Services](#)

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Do you support this bill?