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2020 State Budget: A Call for Leaders to Commit to Marginalized Communities Through Thick and Thin

“The enacted budget shows the Legislature and the Governor’s joint pledge in funding essential services for marginalized communities during an extraordinarily difficult year. It is clear that social and health services will be stretched to the breaking point in the months ahead as we deal with the fallout of the pandemic. That is why I am calling on New York state leaders to commit, through thick and thin, to support essential services that help people receive public benefits, cope with foreclosure, illness, and debts. It is imperative that New York not allow the cost of the pandemic to be borne on the shoulders of marginalized communities.” said Kristin Brown, President and CEO of Empire Justice Center.

Disability Advocacy

The Disability Advocacy Program (DAP) received level funding in the enacted budget. DAP provides representation for low-income New Yorkers who have been denied federal disability benefits, which is the sole source of income for many low-income families. This funding will allow continued representation for low-income people during and after the COVID-19 pandemic. We are grateful to Assemblymembers Gottfried, Hevesi, Gunther, and Steck, and Senators Persaud and Kruger, for championing the program.

Foreclosure Protection

The Homeowner Protection Program (HOPP) received level funding in the enacted budget. We commend the Governor and the legislature, especially Housing Chairs Cymbrowitz, Kavanagh, Judiciary Chairs Dinowitz and Hoylman, Finance and Ways and Means Chairs Krueger and Weinstein, Leaders Peoples-Stokes, Stewart-Cousins, Senator Myrie, and Speaker Heastie for championing the statewide program that serves as the first line of defense for homeowners facing foreclosures. HOPP has served over 100,000 people and achieve loan modifications for over 25 percent of homeowners in all 62 counties since 2012. This funding will allow continued services to homeowners, especially those experiencing financial distress due to COVID-19.
Health Care

New Yorkers need more clarity than ever when it comes to navigating the health care system. That’s why we are pleased that the Consumer Health Advocates (CHA) received level funding in the enacted budget, which is the same amount of funding appropriated in 2019. We thank Chairs Gottfried and Rivera for championing the program. CHA helps New Yorkers navigate health insurance programs, address denials and appeals for medical procedures, and cope with medical debts. This program will be especially critical for people who have or will fall ill during the COVID-19 pandemic. However, we are deeply troubled by the enacted Medicaid cuts that will harm low-income people and people with disabilities. These cuts will also disproportionally affect safety-net providers that serve vulnerable populations. Collectively, these changes unjustly affect marginalized communities.

Immigration Legal Services

Immigrant New Yorkers are among those who have been at the frontline of the COVID-19 pandemic, often risking exposure and deportation in order to take care of loved ones and work in essential jobs. Against the federal landscape, the need for legal representation for immigrants facing unlawful detention, removal, and who are victims of trafficking can often be, now more than ever, a matter a life and death. We are heartened that immigration legal services received level funding in the enacted budget, allowing advocates to continue representing clients who are often the backbone of their families and communities. We appreciate Leader Stewart-Cousins and the Governor’s efforts in leading the state and nation on immigration matters.

Civil Legal Services

In hard times, it is especially important that civil legal services remain in place to help low-income New Yorkers gain access to housing, public benefits, and fight against discrimination. We appreciate Chairs Hoylman, Dinowitz, Weinstein and the Governor for keeping the fund stable for low-income New Yorkers.

Preventing Unjust Outcome for People Who Receive Safety Net Assistance

Families who may receive a one-time federal stimulus check should not be be forced off of New York State Safety Net Assistance, unlike all other public assistance recipients who were protected under the federal CARES Act. Empire Justice Benefits Team appreciates the Legislature for proactively working with stakeholders in preventing the problem for very low-income New Yorkers.

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To find out more about Empire Justice Center, visit our website, www.empirejustice.org. To learn more about our policy and legislative advocacy, sign up for our monthly newsletter, Policy Matters.

Empire Justice Center is a statewide, multi-issue, multi-strategy, public interest law firm focused on changing the “systems” within which poor and low-income families live. Empire Justice protects and strengthens the legal rights of people in New York State who are poor, disabled or disenfranchised through: systems change advocacy, training and support to other advocates and organizations, and high quality direct civil legal representation. Empire Justice has offices in Albany, Rochester, Yonkers, White Plains and Central Islip on Long Island.