

## News from STATE SENATOR

*Liz Krueger*

New York State Senate, 26<sup>th</sup> District

### COMMUNITY BULLETIN – March 2007

#### Message from Liz . . .

Things continue to move at a rapid pace in Albany. Just this first week of March, we passed an important Ethics Reform law, redesigned our failing Workers Compensation program, passed a negotiated Civil Confinement Law, and may have an agreement to move the Presidential Primary up by one month. Additionally, a key issue area that I am actively working with the Spitzer Administration on is housing policy. As the ranking Democratic member of the Senate Housing, Construction and Community Development Committee, I have already witnessed this administration's desire to fundamentally change our state housing policy in ways that would help address the serious housing crises we face throughout New York State.

New York State's housing crisis requires immediate legislative and administrative attention. Report after report has outlined the dire need for more affordable housing, with figures growing grimmer with each passing year. The 2006 'Out of Reach' report by the National Low Income Housing Coalition (NLIHC) ranks New York State as the fifth most expensive state in the nation. An estimated 56% of all renters in the state are unable to afford a two-bedroom home. While the NLIHC report focused on rental housing, more and more prospective homeowners are also finding their dreams to be out of reach. While the average price for a single-family home in the United States has risen 88% over the past 10 years, the average price in New York State rose by 131%. A recent study found that just 2% of homes on Long Island are affordable to 60% of Long Island households.

While the housing crisis manifests itself in varying ways in different regions in the state, there are problems everywhere. Downstate the problems center primarily on affordability, while many upstate communities face deteriorating housing stock, population losses and a severe lack of living-wage jobs. It is critical that the State find ways to preserve existing affordable housing throughout the state, to rehabilitate decaying stock, and to expand programs that will create more affordable housing.

In New York City, a critical part of preserving existing affordable housing involves protecting rent regulated units. In the last decade, New York City has lost more than 50,000 units of previously affordable rent regulated homes due to the implementation of vacancy and luxury decontrol, the weakening of tenant protections, and the failure of the state Division of Housing and Community Renewal to properly enforce tenant protections. I continue to believe that restoring local control over New York City housing policy is a critical step toward protecting rent regulated units, which remain the foundation of affordable housing in the city.

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However, beyond rent regulation, the preservation and expansion of affordable housing must involve additional investment by the state. Quality affordable housing should be viewed as a critical piece of our state's economic development policy, as a lack of affordable housing can undermine the ability of our state to attract and retain its workforce. New York State has a rich tradition of investments in affordable housing, including the Mitchell Lama Program, but unfortunately such investments were not a priority for the last Governor. However, based on conversations with housing officials in the Spitzer administration, I am optimistic that there will be major opportunities to pursue proven strategies of affordable housing preservation and development in the months and years ahead.

In an effort to ensure we make the most of these opportunities, this spring I will begin holding a series of hearings throughout the state to explore models for financing the preservation of affordable housing. These hearings will provide me and my Senate colleagues an opportunity to hear from experts from across the state and country. Among the programs and proposals I expect we will explore:

- Creation of a dedicated revenue stream to fund housing preservation and development efforts;
- Review of existing state programs to determine which are most effective;
- Expansion of special needs housing and other programs for vulnerable populations at risk for homelessness.
- Development of a comprehensive inventory of all state-owned property and public authority-owned property that can be used for affordable housing.
- Improving the ability of the state's Brownfields Program to serve as a catalyst for affordable housing and community development.
- Creation of different preservation strategies to stabilize and provide long term protection for Mitchell-Lama buildings and state-developed housing authority developments.
- Strengthening the neighborhood and rural preservation programs.
- Providing rehabilitation funds for the many upstate cities and towns facing abandonment.
- Improving local municipal code enforcement systems to preserve housing.

I am excited about the opportunities for collaboration with the Spitzer administration on housing policy. Perhaps the most important goal for all of us is to begin to develop a comprehensive housing plan for the state. We can increase the availability of affordable housing and improve existing housing stock if we recognize the fundamental importance of housing issues to the future of New York State.

**State Senator Liz Krueger's Senior Advisory Board  
Presents a  
RESOURCE FAIR FOR SENIORS AND CAREGIVERS**

**Date:** Thursday, April 26th

**Time:** 1:00pm –5:00pm

**Place:** Temple Emanu-El

One East 65<sup>th</sup> Street (at 5<sup>th</sup> Avenue)

**Call (212) 490-9535 for further information, or to sign up for an appointment to apply for reduced-fare Metrocard or non-driver's ID**

**Community Spotlight**

## **Volunteer Opportunity for Older Adults**

The Advocacy Counseling and Entitlement Services (ACES) Project is seeking older adults, age 55 and over, to serve as volunteer public benefit counselors. Volunteers will participate in a seven week training program, beginning April 17, 2007. The training covers eligibility requirements and application procedures for Medicaid, SSI, Food Stamps and other public benefit programs. Upon completion, volunteers are placed in agencies to provide information on government benefits to low-income families, older adults and individuals with disabilities. Volunteers assist clients with completing applications and help correct benefit related problems.

The program needs caring and patient volunteers who are dedicated to helping financially disadvantaged people. No prior benefit experience is necessary. A personal interview, successful completion of the training, and a commitment of six hours per week for six months of volunteer service is required. For more information, call Edwina Osborne at (212) 614-5412 or Dereck Pollard at (212) 614-5550. For Staten Island, call Shirley Henick at 718-494-3222.

ACES is a program of the Retired and Senior Volunteer Program (RSVP). Established more than 40 years ago, RSVP's 7,000 volunteers contribute more than one and a half million hours of service annually to 500 organizations in New York City. RSVP is part of the Community Service Society of New York, a nonprofit organization which advocates on behalf of the poor in the areas of education, affordable housing, health care and income maintenance.

## **Send A Student To A One-Week Environmental Camp For Free:**

The New York State Department of Environment Conservation (DEC) is letting me send one 12-17 year old from my district on a one-week environmental educational retreat this summer. The student chosen must be able to commit to the full one-week program. In return, the camper will attend **free** from the normal camp fee of \$250. The DEC will give priority to students who come from a disadvantaged situation and would not normally be able to attend these camps.

These camps are very exciting, and are some of the best environmental learning experiences in the country. There are 3 camps for 12-14 years olds: Camps Colby (Saranac Lake), DeBruce (Sullivan County) and Rushford (Western NY). The 4<sup>th</sup> camp, Pack Forest, is located north of Albany in the Adirondacks and is for 15-17 year olds. Attendees not only learn about the environment from professionals, but engage in field studies and outdoor activities like canoeing and hiking.

If you—or someone you know between the ages of 12 and 17—are interested in applying for the free opportunity, please contact Travis in my office before April 15<sup>th</sup>, at 212-490-9535. Our office will review applications and select one nominee and one alternate. If you would like more information go to <http://www.dec.state.ny.us/website/education/edcamps.html>.

Knowledge and experience are not the only benefits that come with this opportunity. Attendees will gain independence, meet new friends, and have a great addition for their college applications.

## **Section 8 Voucher List Reopens:**

For the first time in 12 years, New York City has reopened its Section 8 Voucher list. 22,000 Section 8 vouchers will be available to very low income families seeking affordable housing in the City. Families with a voucher pay 30% of their income toward their fair market rent as set by the federal government, and the New York City Housing Authority (NYCHA) pays the rest directly to the landlord. 12,000 of these vouchers will be available this year, and 10,000 in 2008. Section 8 applications must be postmarked no later than May 14, 2007. You can request an application at the Manhattan borough office at 55 W. 125th St., or online at <http://www.nyc.gov/html/nycha/html/section8/section8-applying.shtml>.

## **Heat Season Rules:**

The City Housing Maintenance Code and Multiple Dwelling Law requires building owners to provide heat and hot water to all tenants. Building owners are required to provide hot water 365 days per year at a constant minimum temperature of 120 degrees Fahrenheit. Between October 1st and May 31st, a period designated as "Heat Season," building owners are also required to provide tenants with heat under the following conditions:

- Between the hours of 6:00 AM and 10:00 PM, if the outside temperature falls below 55 degrees, the inside temperature is required to be at least 68 degrees Fahrenheit.
- Between the hours of 10:00 PM and 6:00 AM, if the temperature outside falls below 40 degrees, the inside temperature is required to be at least 55 degrees Fahrenheit.

Tenants who are cold in their apartments should first attempt to notify the building owner, managing agent or superintendent. If heat is not restored, the tenant should call the City's Citizen Service Center at 311 (311 can be accessed outside of New York City by dialing (212) NEW YORK). For the hearing impaired, the TTY number is (212) 504-4115. The Center is open 24-hours a day, seven-days a week.

## **Spotlight on Policy**

### **Workers' Compensation Reform**

Earlier this month, the legislature passed a comprehensive package of reforms to New York's workers compensation system that addresses the chronic problems with this system. For years, New York businesses faced some of the highest workers compensation premiums in the country, while at the same time benefits for workers were extremely low. Both labor and business have been calling for fixing this broken system for more than a decade, and I am extremely pleased that Governor Spitzer has been successful in bringing all parties to the table to develop a successful reform package. By rationalizing the workers compensation payment system and cracking down on companies that are evading their responsibilities, these reforms should save businesses 10-15% on their premiums, while at the same time allowing for significant increases in benefits to injured workers.

Among the key components of the legislation are:

- Increases the maximum weekly benefit for injured workers from \$400 to \$600 over three years, and thereafter indexes the maximum weekly benefit at two-thirds of the average weekly wage;
- Imposes term limits on payments for "permanent partial disabilities", which currently are unlimited, while continuing unlimited coverage of medical services;
- Creates tougher civil and criminal sanctions against employers who fail to secure or obtain workers compensation coverage for their employees, and carriers who violate the law while

obtaining additional savings in the Workers Compensation program, which are to be directed towards premium reductions;

- Phases out the Second Injury Fund for future cases, which is now funded by assessments passed through to employers. This fund was originally set up to help injured World War II veterans, but had become a loophole used by some insurance carriers to avoid paying claims;
- Substantially improves the workers compensation administrative process by 1) increasing the role of the Superintendent of Insurance to take a leadership role, collect relevant data and streamline the administrative process; 2) requiring initial determinations to be made within 90 days; 3) updating medical protocols for consistency and best practices and 4) improving access to claimants for appropriate imaging services.

I am particularly pleased that both the business and labor communities have come together to support this package. After more than a decade of fighting on how to address this broken system, passage of reforms that address the concerns of both employers and workers is a major accomplishment that should both improve the business climate and expand the safety net for injured workers.