



NEW YORK STATE SENATOR

Pete Harckham

Harckham, Levenberg, County and CSEA Officials Call for Safeguarding Child Protective Services Workers

PETE HARCKHAM May 16, 2025

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State Sen. Pete Harckham at the podium during today's press conference with (l-r) Asm. Dana Levenberg, Christine Leoce from Westchester County DSS and CSEA Westchester County Local 860 President Hattie Adams

Peekskill, NY – New York State Senator Pete Harckham and Assemblymember Dana Levenberg, along with officials from Westchester County, City of Peekskill and the Civil Service Employees Association, called today at a press conference here for support of legislation that will safeguard Child Protective Services (CPS) workers while on the job.

The press conference took place just a few blocks away where, a year ago this week on May 14, Maria Coto, a CPS worker with the Westchester County Department of Social Services (WCDSS), was attacked and brutally beaten by Haseem Jenkins while visiting a client. Coto died later from her injuries on June 19; her attacker is in jail pending trial on two counts of second-degree murder.

Over 20 of Maria Coto's WCDSS co-workers attended today's press conference, including Christine Leoce, her supervisor, who spoke with Coto on the phone just a few minutes before she was attacked. Coto's aunt and uncle, Eleanor and Gerardo Gutierrez, also were at the press conference.

To see two videos of today's press conference, click [here](#) and [here](#).

Harckham and Levenberg introduced legislation ([S.6986](#) / [A.7831](#)) earlier this year that establishes crimes of assault, aggravated assault and menacing specifically to CPS workers while in the line of duty, as well as legislation ([S.6987](#) / [A.7833](#)) requiring Department of Social Services (DSS) districts statewide to provide "panic buttons" to all employees who interact with clients in external settings.

"No one trying to serve and help the vulnerable residents of our state should ever worry about being attacked on the job and not returning home at the end of the workday," said **Sen. Harckham**. "But let's be clear: field visits by Child Protection Services workers and social workers in general can be potentially dangerous. That's why Assemblymember Levenberg and I have introduced these two bills to protect CPS workers. This horrific act of violence has left a hole in Maria's family and a hole in her work family at DSS. We have to do everything we can to make sure a tragic death on the job like Maria's never happens again in New York."

Harckham noted that the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics reports social service workers are five times more likely to suffer a workplace violence injury than other workers overall, making it one of the most dangerous jobs in the America.

“No one—least of all workers seeking to protect children—should feel alone and vulnerable to an attack like the one Maria Coto suffered,” said **Asm. Levenberg**. “In Maria’s honor, I am calling for swift passage of legislation to equip workers like her with panic buttons and the knowledge that the State of New York has their backs in the field.”

CSEA Westchester County Local 860 President Hattie Adams said, “Passing this legislation is integral to creating safer conditions for the caseworkers safeguarding our most vulnerable populations. We are grateful that Senator Harckham and Assemblymember Levenberg recognize the risks caseworkers face when working in the field and understand the urgency in getting these bills passed. We can’t honor Maria Coto’s memory without taking every step possible to ensure that what happened to her never happens again.”

Westchester County Executive Ken Jenkins said, “We all remember the deeply tragic death of Maria Coto, a dedicated Westchester County Social Services employee who was brutally attacked, though not by a client, while performing her duties last year. Westchester County’s Social Services employees, who are required to have direct interaction with clients in a variety of settings, often stand on the front lines to safeguard our most vulnerable children and families. The County is constantly striving to do all that we can to protect those who protect others.”

Jenkins added, “I stand with my colleagues New York State Senator Pete Harckham and Assemblymember Dana Levenberg in their fight to increase punishment and create stronger safety protocols for our County’s Social Services workers, like the addition of a mobile panic button. It is our civic and moral responsibility to ensure their well-being at all times.”

Westchester County Board of Legislators Chair Vedat Gashi said, “Westchester’s CPS workers put their lives on the line every day. The violence they face isn’t just outrageous—it’s preventable. Panic buttons and stronger penalties are common-sense, life-saving measures—measures that might have saved Maria Coto. We cannot allow another public servant to die for doing their job.”

Peekskill Mayor Vivian McKenzie said, “The heinous crime and tragic loss of a social services worker last year highlights the urgent need to ensure the safety of child protective services professionals. Their work is vital to the well-being of our communities, and they deserve to carry out their responsibilities without fear for their lives. Those who commit such violent acts must be held fully accountable, and we must prioritize strong protections for those dedicated to serving the public.”

RELATED LEGISLATION

2025-S6987

-
- 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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March 27, 2025

In Senate Committee [Social Services](#)

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Do you support this bill?