



NEW YORK STATE SENATOR

Ruth Hassell-Thompson

Public Protection Budget Ensures Equal Justice For All New Yorkers

RUTH HASSELL-THOMPSON June 22, 2010

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Majority adopts Interest On Lawyer Account funding in legislation

(Albany, NY) Recognizing the need to give all New Yorkers equal access to our justice system, the Senate Democratic Majority passed budget legislation on June 21, 2010 that fully funds the \$15 million Judiciary appropriation for civil legal services for poor New Yorkers.

Senator Ruth Hassell-Thompson (D-Mt. Vernon), Chair of the Committee on Crime Victims, Crime and Correction and Conference Chairwoman said, "We needed to stabilize Civil Legal Services in New York State and we did. Now New Yorkers who need legal assistance to stop foreclosure actions, to fight for unemployment benefits, to fight against housing evictions, debt collection and scores of other actions will have access to competent counsel."

Senate Majority Conference Leader John L. Sampson, Chair of the Judiciary Committee said, "The Senate Majority has worked diligently to preserve the fundamental right to fair and affordable representation for all New Yorkers. Honoring our commitment to public protections, the Senate was able to secure sustainable funding for these vital services."

The Interest on Lawyer Account (IOLA) Fund, in existence since 1983, is used as a means to provide additional financial support to civil legal service organizations. The money is used to provide legal representation to people in dire circumstances who are facing foreclosure actions, unemployment hearings, landlord tenant eviction proceedings, domestic violence, Social Security Disability, fair hearings and many other legal actions.

In addition to providing crucial assistance to New Yorkers at a time of need, civil legal services also provide the state economic benefits: The civil legal services program saves local governments money by helping to keep families facing foreclosure in their homes and out of homeless shelters. It helps unemployed workers receive insurance benefits they're entitled to, shrinking welfare rolls. And it helps disabled New Yorkers receive federal Social Security Disability benefits, bringing more tax dollars back from Washington and relieving the burden on state programs.

Furthermore, civil legal services saves money by making the court system operate more efficiently. It reduces the number of cash strapped individuals choosing to represent themselves who, due to their inexperience with the complexities of the law place an additional burden on an already overburdened civil and family justice system.

At present, the State's civil legal services programs meet less than 14% of the legal needs of the poor- and that's before the current fiscal crisis facing Civil Legal Service providers. This financial crisis facing civil legal service providers is compounded by the recent economic downturn, because this downturn has dramatically increased the need for civil legal services.