



NEW YORK STATE SENATOR

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SEN. GRIFFO'S WEEKLY COLUMN: Before budget deadline, it's a busy time in Albany

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To say it has been a busy couple of weeks in Albany would be an understatement.

There have been numerous meetings with constituents and groups and debates in Session over proposed bills and legislation. We are working hard to pass bills that aim to accomplish much, including making our schools safer and better protecting students and staff, ensuring that the state's hardworking taxpayers receive timely payment of state income tax refunds and helping to fight the high cost of prescriptions by preventing consumers from overpaying for medications.

Since there has been so much going on, I wanted to take a moment to update you on several items.

School Safety

I joined with my colleagues in the state Senate to pass a package of critical school safety measures that would strengthen security and help keep students safe. The bills, which will be sent to the state Assembly, increase the ability of schools to hire qualified security personnel; create new state funding mechanisms for infrastructure investments that improve school safety; increase access to school-based mental health services; expand state actions and intelligence coordination to protect schools against attack; and strengthen penalties for crimes on school grounds.

In the last year alone, the Senate successfully extended a 10 percent increase in building aid for schools to fund additional security measures like door hardening, metal detectors, and other related infrastructure. The Senate also secured \$25 million in new funding for non-public schools, day cares, and community centers at risk for hate crimes and \$15 million for non-public schools to increase their security. Initiatives like these will continue to be a part of this coming year's budget negotiations.

Fighting Addiction

Our plan to combat heroin and opioid abuse, which has been advanced as part of the Senate Majority's new state budget proposal, would provide a record level of state funding to combat this problem. It also includes far-reaching health and safety initiatives to reduce the harmful effects of drug abuse on everyone from infants to adults.

Our proposal would increase the state's support for opioid use disorder-related services to a new record of \$265 million - going beyond the 2018-19 Executive Budget proposal of \$228 million.

Prescription prices

The Senate recently approved a new measure that helps consumers become better informed about the price of drugs and prohibits two costly practices - gag clauses and clawbacks - used by pharmacy benefit managers (PBMs). Each have come into question recently as prescription drug prices continue to rise.

Pharmacy clawbacks occurs when a patient pays the pharmacy a copayment that is more than the actual cost of the drug, the PBM then recoups or clawsback the excess cost collected by the pharmacy. Gag clauses, meanwhile, prohibit pharmacists from telling a consumer the price of the medication or the fact that if they simply pay out of pocket the drug would actually cost less. PBMs prohibit such disclosure as it would limit their ability to clawback. This legislation would prohibit such practices.

I supported the bill, which has been sent to the Governor, and have sponsored similar legislation.

Sexual Harassment

I cosponsored legislation that was recently passed by the Senate that provides the most comprehensive response yet to sexual harassment in workplaces throughout the state.

The major reforms in the legislation, which has been sent to the Assembly, include: establishing a statutory definition of sexual harassment; prohibiting the anonymity of the accused in court-approved settlements and banning mandatory sexual harassment arbitration clauses; prohibiting confidentiality agreements unless the victim requests confidentiality; expanding protections to independent contractors; creating uniform policies for all branches of state and local government; and protecting hardworking taxpayers from paying for public sector harassment settlements.

Tax Refunds

I joined with my colleagues in the Senate to pass legislation that would ensure hardworking taxpayers receive timely payment of state income tax refunds. Under the bill, if the state is unable to pay a tax refund due to a discrepancy in the return, then the department would have to provide written notice to the taxpayer and a date when the discrepancy will be resolved. If the state fails in this obligation, it would also be liable to pay interest on the refund owed to the taxpayer. The bill has been sent to the Assembly.

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