

Governor Gets High Marks on First State of the State, But More Needs to be Done for Communities of Color

By Senator Ruth Hassell-Thompson

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Low-income and middle-income New Yorkers are hurting from the combined effects of high property taxes, unemployment and underemployment, health care premium increases, and cuts to public services. While it is within the responsibilities of the New York State Black, Puerto Rican, Hispanic and Asian Legislative Caucus ("the Caucus") to protect services and resources for the most vulnerable New Yorkers, we understand full well the immediacy of the fiscal challenges facing our state. We are committed to partnering with Governor Andrew Cuomo to balance a budget that is fair going forward.

There are significant challenges facing our state, chief among them a \$10 billion budget deficit. Like virtually all other states in the nation, New York continues to face its greatest revenue shortfall since the Great Depression of the 1930's. In the weeks to come, we hope for fruitful dialogue with the Governor to ensure that the burden of closing the budget gap is not falling saliently on the shoulders of indigent communities and communities of color.

We must also be mindful of the commitment to our children pledged under the Campaign for Fiscal Equity (CFE). Severe state cuts to education funding would leave localities in the unenviable position of submitting double-digit property tax increases. Additionally, further cuts to education could widen the achievement gap between high-needs school districts and more affluent school districts. We were elated to hear Governor Cuomo suggest he is supportive of a complete transformation of our education system. In an age of the iPad, YouTube and Facebook, a chalkboard and textbook may no longer be adequate. We must prepare our children to meet the challenges of an increasingly competitive and technologically sophisticated global market.

There is uncertainty on the implementation process of the Governor's proposed incentive-based approach, and we look forward to hearing more, but for now, we agree with the Governor, carrots and sticks may both be necessary. Reform will not be easy, and it is our hope that the Governor brings all interested parties together to bring forth the reforms our public schools so desperately need. We have to take special care of our high-needs school districts to ensure that the proposed property-tax relief plan in culmination with a new incentive-based approach is not adversely affecting our young people in high-needs school districts.

The 49 members of the Caucus, the most in its history, are prepared to partner with the Governor to ameliorate the myriad of challenges facing our state and to restore full confidence in state government. Though often obscured by distraction, we have made significant strides in the past two years with Caucus members prime-sponsoring progressive legislation, such as the M/WBE 2010 Business Diversification Act, the Domestic Workers Bill of Rights, Race to the Top education reform, the repeal of Rockefeller Drug Laws, matrimonial law reform and restoration of the Interest on Lawyer Account (IOLA) fund. Through the IOLA fund, we recognize the need

to give all New Yorkers equal access to our justice system. Imagine how many people in this troubled economy cannot afford adequate defense to stop foreclosure actions, fight for unemployment benefits, fight against housing evictions, debt collections, etc. This Legislature partnering with the Executive must continue to include the IOLA fund and other key initiatives affecting communities of color in the next budget.

But there is more to be done. Communities of color throughout the state have been ravaged by this economic recession, with unemployment numbers in some areas of the state approaching 35 percent. We have to begin to tackle underemployment in communities from the West Bronx, where residents work odd jobs to pay pills, to the Eastside of Buffalo where residents can only find work in low paying jobs at debt collection agencies.

We were delighted to hear the Governor, in his first State of the State address, propose a 14 percent increase in distribution of state procurement contracts for MWBE's, up from a paltry six percent. It served as a sign that this Governor is serious about diversity and understands the needs of an increasingly diverse state. MWBE's will serve as an engine towards economic recovery for communities of color where many of the firms are based.

We also applaud the Governor's efforts to right-size our juvenile detention facilities. These facilities have largely proven to be ineffective in treating the underlying causes of the offense such as chemical dependency and mental illness and many are underutilized. As such, troubled kids in detention learn to become troubled adults. A fiscal crisis requires strict cost-cutting and creative ideas, and to that extent, we agree with the Governor that community-based treatment has always been a cheaper and more effective option. Caucus members have long argued against the practice of warehousing mostly Black and Latino youth in upstate detention facilities as a way to salvage jobs. A horrible reminder of Tryon Residential Center former occupant Darryl Thompson resonates as a clear example of why detention is not always the best option for troubled youth. 15-year-old Darryl lost his life at the hands of youth aides who used force against him in 2006. Youth offenders like Darryl may be able to get the rehabilitation they need from alternative environments that don't resemble Rikers Island – but Darryl will never get that opportunity.

Questions remain on many parts of the Governor's agenda, such as, where the cuts in health care will come from and what do we do about the millions of New Yorkers at risk of losing their homes because of vacancy decontrol? But we look forward in the weeks to come to meeting with the Governor to have those questions answered, discuss our legislative priorities and synergize our progressive efforts with his.