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Testimony for the Joint Legislative Hearing on the Fiscal Year 2027 Executive Budget Proposal: Higher Education

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My name is Molly Senack, and I am testifying today on behalf of the Center for Independence of the Disabled, New York (CIDNY) as their Education and Employment Community Organizer. This testimony is supported by Sharon McLennon Wier, Ph.D., MEd., CRC, LMHC, Executive Director of CIDNY. Thank you for the opportunity to submit testimony about the Fiscal Year 2027 Executive Budget: Higher Education.

As an Independent Living Center, CIDNY has provided critical services to people with disabilities in NYC since its founding in 1978. By providing services that address the social determinants of physical health, mental health, education, employment, housing, and transportation, as well as providing support for the development of independent living skills, CIDNY helps people with disabilities navigate the ever-changing service system, and enables them to live independent, fully integrated lives in the community. Education is a critical component of this endeavor, and ensuring positive outcomes for students with disabilities in NYC schools is a cornerstone of CIDNY's mission.

Although there is no data specifically tracking the correlation between disability and post-secondary education dropout rates, in 2021 the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) found that students with disabilities were twice as likely to drop out of high school as their nondisabled peers (10.7% vs 4.7%). This is consistent with 2022 data from the American Community Survey (ACS), which shows that people without disabilities are almost twice as likely to have a bachelor's degree or higher than people with disabilities (38% vs 21%). Both statistics indicate there is a significant gap between meeting the needs of disabled students and meeting the needs of nondisabled students.

Under the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA), students with disabilities are entitled to an accessible college campus, and it is important to acknowledge how broad the definition of "accessible" is. Accessibility must exist in all forms (accommodations can be physical, technological, sensory, etc.), in all spaces, and at all stages of the college experience, from application through graduation.

However, many City University of New York (CUNY) and State University of New York (SUNY) campuses continue to fall short of what the ADA stipulates: classrooms, libraries, students housing, dining facilities, and offices are not always physically accessible. Elevators remain out of service for weeks at a time. Signs, including those in bathrooms and classrooms are not always available in large print or Braille. There are shortages in assistive technology (e.g. screen readers), as well as lags in updating it that can render certain software-based technologies obsolete and unusable. Students with learning, mental, or developmental disabilities who are entitled to accommodations within the classroom must often depend on professors who do not know how to offer aid. This issue

is not limited to NYS; it reflects a national problem: a 2022 NCES report found that of the 37% of students with disabilities who reported their disability to their school, almost 40% did not receive accommodations when they asked for them.

This lack of accessibility promotes an unfortunate cycle, where the majority of students with disabilities on college campuses choose not to report. According to the 2022 ACS, 21% of undergraduate students and 11% of graduate students reported having a disability during the 2019-2020 school year. Yet only 8% of students, or about a quarter of students who privately reported having a disability, registered as having a disability with their institutions. This discrepancy is consistent with the same NCES 2022 report mentioned above, which found that only 37% of students who acknowledged having a disability registered as such with their institution.

If students are discouraged from seeking accommodations, and are not guaranteed those accommodations if they do seek them, then those students are not receiving the supports and resources that they need to graduate.

While we are pleased to see that Governor Hochul included several key investments to the CUNY and SUNY systems in the FY 2027 Executive Budget, **CIDNY calls on Governor Hochul and the NYS Legislature to include the following recommendations in the final budget.** These recommendations will not only expand initial access to higher education for students with disabilities, but will help ensure those students graduate:

- **Allocate funding for in-depth training on disability and accommodations for campus staff and faculty** that uses more comprehensive definitions of both “accessibility” and “disability” with a focus on mental health and chronic medical disabilities.
- **Make similar investments to the \$1 million to improve access for students at CUNY Medgar Evers College** across other CUNY and SUNY campuses.
- **Allocate funding for capital projects to improve physical accessibility**, including repairs and maintenance, across CUNY and SUNY facilities.
- **Provide funding to ensure campuses’ assistive technology is up to date**, especially when it comes to software compatibility.
- **Allocate sufficient funding specifically for staffing and operations**, since accessibility on college campuses will only improve if there is funding to ensure the offices responsible for administering support and services are sufficiently staffed.

Thank you for your time.

Sincerely,

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