

NEW YORK
STATE
SENATE

ALBANY, NEW YORK 12247



January 14, 2010

Mark G. Cunha
Chair of the Board of Directors
Legal Services for New York City
350 Broadway, 6th Floor
New York, NY 10013-9998

Dear Mr. Cunha:

We write in fervent opposition to the plan to consolidate the Bedford-Stuyvesant Community Legal Services Office ("Bed-Stuy Office") with other Brooklyn offices, and strongly urge that that Bed-Stuy Office remain a separate, decentralized component of Legal Services for New York City ("LS-NYC") as it has been for the past 42 years.

It has come to our attention that a consortium of LS-NYC staff and supervisors, together with various outside entities, are considering a plan for the imminent consolidation of the Bed-Stuy Office with the South Brooklyn Legal Services Office (together with like changes for other Brooklyn LS-NYC offices). This merging of offices (which is apparently being done in the name of potential economic savings and increased efficiency) would also involve the dismantling of the Bed-Stuy Board of Directors as separate and distinct board. In our view, the elimination of the Bed-Stuy Office as an independent organization with its own board of directors is a terrible idea, and one that does violence to the fundamental principle of community-based legal services which has served the community well for decades. Indeed, we regard as essential community input as expressed through the Bed-Stuy Board (and other local boards), and removing them from the advisory, management and operational process would leave a dangerous and unacceptable vacuum with respect to community involvement. As you know, many of the Bed-Stuy Board members reside in and near the Bedford-Stuyvesant Community, some for many years. Therefore, we place enormous trust in their judgment and see their board positions as the best means for ensuring that our Community's ideas, values and concerns are conveyed to the Bed-Stuy Office and to us.

Moreover, at the Town Hall meeting that the LS-NYC Board and the Brooklyn Planning Commission convened on January 5, 2010, a large majority, if not all, speakers strongly advocated for the continuance of community-based, controlled and managed legal services organizations that provide a full range of legal services needed and requested by the communities these organizations serve.

In addition, we are at a loss as to why this move is being considered at this time. We have worked closely with William Bowman and Victor Olds, Bed-Stuy Legal Services, Board Chair and Managing Director & General Counsel, respectively, and the reports we have received – generated, by the way, from your own central offices – indicate that they have been running an extraordinarily effective operation over the past 2 ½ years. Indeed, they have been able to recruit lawyers and law student interns from the very best law schools (*e.g.*, NYU Law School; Fordham Law School; Brooklyn Law School; Columbia Law School; Harvard Law School; and Yale Law School) to join the Bed-Stuy Legal Services staff, and have amassed an impressive record of legal victories in almost every one of their practice areas. Moreover, we understand that some of their victories have even been published in the New York Law Journal, along with legal articles authored by Victor and the staff and students there. We have also been apprised of reports reflecting the fact that in some of their government benefits practice areas, they lead all of your other constituent offices in terms of both performance goals and outcomes (such as in the area of disability benefits, where we understand that they presently boast a 100% success rate!).

Even more impressive is the fact that the Bed-Stuy Office has been able to accomplish these remarkable feats while struggling to receive adequate financial and personnel resources to address the Bed-Stuy Community's legal needs, and we urge you to increase their level of resource allocation in light of their commendable performance. We therefore ask that you provide them with adequate resources to be able to fulfill their legal services commitments to the Bed-Stuy Community. Beyond that, we are also aware that you have heard from many voices -- clients, people in public life, community-based organizations, *etc.* – who also firmly oppose your planned Brooklyn consolidation. In the strongest terms possible, we urge that you listen carefully to those voices and their concerns before proceeding with your plans. Indeed, it would be extremely difficult for us to continue to give our support to a centralized legal services model that removes the decision-making role from the directors like Victor who work in those offices on a daily basis. To the contrary, we encourage you to find ways to expand the decentralized model so that the legal services being provided to the residents of the Bed-Stuy Community continue to emanate from that community, with the leadership for those offices being provided by the individuals who physically work there.

We require that you take the following steps immediately to strengthen the community-based model of the Bed-Stuy Legal Office:

- Provide adequate funding for a legal services organization that provides a full range of legal services.
- Approve hiring of qualified staff selected by Victor and approved by the Board, provided such hires are consistent with the Bed-Stuy Office's budget.
- Change the structure of the Bed-Stuy Office's catchment area so that local residents have the option of selecting the Bed-Stuy Office if it is more convenient for them than the legal office determined under the current allocation system, determined by LS-NYC.

- Allow the Bed-Stuy Board to amend its By-Laws so that the Board has independence and autonomy consistent with a community-based model. Among other changes, the Board should make its own hiring decisions, manage its own budget, and be responsible for selecting new Board members. The Board should decide whether to merge, consolidate or dissolve. No central body that does not have a nexus to the community should make these key decisions.

Accountable to our constituents, we demand that you be accountable to us, local and State Elected Officials. We will be reviewing your responses to our demands when making funding decisions. We look forward to ongoing reports on your progress in responding to our demands.

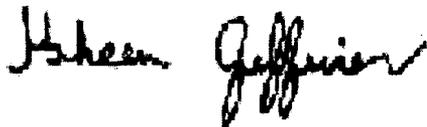
Very truly yours,



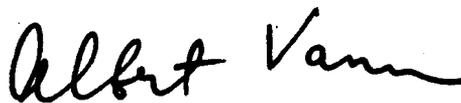
Senator Velmanette Montgomery



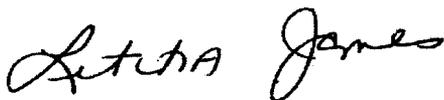
Assemblywoman Annette Robinson



Assemblyman Hakeem Jeffries



Councilman Albert Vann



Councilwoman Letitia James

cc: Congressman Edolphus Towns
Congresswoman Yvette Clarke
Senator John Sampson, Conference Leader
Senator Malcolm Smith, President Pro Tempore
Senator Ruth Hassell-Thompson
New York State Senate Brooklyn Delegation
Assembly Speaker Sheldon Silver
Assemblywoman Helene Weinstein
New York State Assembly Brooklyn Delegation
Members of Legal Services of New York City