



NEW YORK STATE JOINT LEGISLATIVE HUMAN SERVICES BUDGET HEARING

Testimony of Cynthia Dames

February 9, 2021

Good morning, Senator Liz Krueger and Assembly Member Helene Weinstein and members of the joint legislative budget committee. I want to thank you for the opportunity to testify today at this budget hearing.

I am Cynthia Dames, one of the founders of the NEW Pride Agenda (NPA), an organization launched in July of 2019 to advance the needs and rights of those in our community who experience discrimination not only because they are (LGBT), but also because they are people of color, Trans/Gender-Non-Conforming/Non-Binary (TGNCNB), immigrants, elderly, young, low-income or living at the intersections of these identities.

It is critical that New York State both respects and upholds the civil rights of our communities and restores and protects the social safety net. Many of the most vulnerable members of our community – transgender, the elderly, youth and people of color – have seen the frayed safety net up close long before COVID-19 became a pandemic. Joblessness, loss of housing, lack of food, WE TOO in the LGBTQ community, represent many of the most poor and marginalized.

As Assembly Member Linda Rosenthal commented in her newsletter last April: “the virus has already exposed the many holes in the social safety net that is supposed to keep the most vulnerable from falling through the cracks”. Protecting the most vulnerable New Yorkers demands that government at all levels continue funding critical social services that support the elderly, the young, people with disabilities, the unstably housed or homeless, the undocumented as well as those suffering from domestic violence, substance use disorder and the incarcerated.

The NPA strongly aligns itself with this urgent demand along with efforts to reform the criminal justice system by finding alternative approaches to poverty, drug abuse, mental illness, trauma, and violence.

And, while we hope that the federal government provides New York State with sufficient funding to protect the most vulnerable, the NPA also support the efforts to raise taxes on the wealthy to help close the budget gap exacerbated by the coronavirus pandemic which has triggered widespread

economic devastation. This is critical to avoid deep cuts to essential services and to maintain the jobs of those individuals who provide those services.

The New Pride Agenda was enormously grateful for funding that the legislature included in the final FY 20 budget that allowed us to receive a \$50,000 grant from the State Office of Children and Family Services (OCFS) to begin to build out our Civic Engagement and Public Education Project (CEPEP). This allowed us to support the hiring of Ahmed Mohamed, NPA's only full-time employee; all other support offered by voluntary commitments, pro bono consultants, and the good will of LGBT friends and allies.

So, what has NPA accomplished in its first year of existence?

- Led Albany GENDA implementation advocacy that resulted in NYS Executive 2020 Budget mandating GENDA training 340,000 state employees—first in nation.
- Successfully advocated for Walking While Trans inclusion in Governor Cuomo's 2021 Executive Budget. Supported the Trans led community in advocating for passage of Walking While Trans (WWT). Thank you, NYS legislature—what an amazing week!
- Pivoted in late March to the development of 20 bi-monthly virtual town halls focused on Covid-19, YES BUT ALSO HUMAN SERVICE NEEDS in the LGBTQ community, immigration, housing, income inequality, BLM, Criminal Justice reform-- And reduction and closure of LGBT services upstate!
- In Collaboration with Columbia University created a LGBTQ civic engagement survey, sent to a NPA data base of 62,000 LGBT New York voters—and the result: Top End LGBT priorities were affordable housing, homelessness, hate crimes, economic inequity—your human service priorities are ours as well.

This year we request your consideration of funding to support our efforts to fully build out a statewide LGBTQ Civic Engagement and Public Education Project (CEPEP) and support the needs of local, urban and rural communities working on behalf of its LGBTQ constituents.

Specifically, this funding request involves renewing the \$50,000 in funding for the NPA's downstate organizer and providing \$50,000 in new funding for an upstate/western New York Community Organizer that can help identify and amplify LGBT human service needs Upstate. NPA asked this \$100,000 request be funded through the \$9.5 million lump sum appropriated to OCFS in the FY 2020-21 Aid to Localities budget bill that was also included in two separate reappropriations in the FY 22 Executive Budget.

Having created a wonderful partnership between New Pride Agenda and our friends and colleagues in NY State government--imagine what NPA can do with not ONE but TWO full time employees!

We commend your leadership in respecting and upholding the civil rights of our communities and your commitment to protecting the most vulnerable New Yorkers. We are grateful for your service, Thank You.

