



# ASSEMBLYMEMBER LINDA B. ROSENTHAL



WINTER 2020

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Dear Friends,

*These continue to be trying times. When last I wrote, I had hoped that by now our lives would be returning to some semblance of normalcy. Despite the continued uncertainty, I remain awed by the remarkable resiliency of the human spirit.*

*Staying far away from family and friends, having regular routines disturbed for so long, the mask wearing and so much more, though simple measures to keep us and others safe, have been difficult to maintain for this unexpectedly long period of time. Students, in particular, and their parents by extension, have endured a tremendous amount of upheaval in their education, and I am concerned about the impact that so much instability and change will have on their development.*

*In spite of these challenges, most of us have met the moment and continue to make important sacrifices that help keep us all safe. When we talk about COVID-19, we often talk in terms of community spread. This underscores the fact that it will take the work of the community to help control it.*

*My staff and I have been and will continue to work around the clock to provide you with support, answer your questions and help resolve any issues you might have.*

*Please contact the office at 212.873.6368 or [rosenthal@nyassembly.gov](mailto:rosenthal@nyassembly.gov) for anything. We are always here to help!*

*I am looking forward to the future.*

Sincerely,

Linda B. Rosenthal



*As a result of COVID-19, sanitation services were cut citywide. Since the cuts, many West Siders have complained about overflowing trash cans and an increase in trash on the sidewalks and streets. As a result, some intrepid and dedicated community members have stepped up to help keep our streets clean by organizing clean-ups throughout the neighborhood. I joined the newly formed Hell's Kitchen Litter Legion to help collect garbage in the West 50s.*



*As we struggle to manage the second wave of COVID-19, it is critical that we continue to wear face coverings and maintain social distancing. Over the months, I have distributed thousands of masks and bottles of hand sanitizer to constituents at pop-up events throughout the district, including at Amsterdam Houses. Call my office to find out where and when my next mask giveaway will be!*

*A huge thanks to the nurses and doctors of Mount Sinai Health Systems and the wonderful staff at Goddard Riverside Community Center for partnering with my office to host a successful outdoor West Side Free Flu Shot Day at Lincoln Square Neighborhood Center.*



## Securing the Future of Telemedicine in New York

While some medical professionals employed telehealth services prior to COVID-19, the pandemic demanded that the medical community quickly bring telehealth services to scale statewide. As telehealth rapidly expanded, it became clear that the law needed to catch up with the technology.

Before COVID-19 struck, New York law only allowed telehealth services to be provided in a video setting. This meant that people who did not have access to video-conferencing technology or smart phones, such as low-income individuals, or those who could not use those services, such as blind individuals or those with visual impairments, could not use telemedicine. To correct this glaring inequity, I authored legislation, which is now law, that allows the use of audio-only telehealth in addition to video services. This new law ensures that every single person can continue to safely receive preventive and other healthcare via telehealth for the duration of the pandemic and beyond.

After working to pass this legislation, it became clear that more work needed to be done to ensure parity between telehealth and in-person/office medical services. I have introduced legislation to require that telehealth visits be reimbursed by insurance companies in the same way as in-office medical visits. Many practitioners can provide quality health care via telehealth, and in addition to helping reduce the spread of COVID-19, virtual medical visits can relieve the burden of travel for elderly or mobility-impaired patients. The convenience of telehealth will increase access to healthcare, and may actually encourage more people to complete well visits and other preventive care.

## Worker Protections for the New Workplace: Home

In just a few short months, the COVID-19 pandemic has changed our lives in ways both great and small. We hope some of those changes – like the need to wear masks and stay away from friends and loved ones are temporary. But others, like telehealth and telework may be here to stay. And if they are, it is vital that we understand how to navigate and regulate these new worlds.

When COVID struck, kitchens, bedrooms and even closets were quickly converted into makeshift workplaces as offices across the state closed. While some have slowly returned to socially distanced offices, other workplaces have made clear their intention to maintain work-from-home policies for the near term or longer. As of this writing, only 20% of all office workers have returned to their physical workspace.

Some employers, concerned about productivity, have implemented aggressive employee monitoring systems that track employees every move while they work from home, their keystrokes, mouse movements and browsing history. Some programs go so far as to require employees to keep their webcam on all day while they work.

While employers have a legitimate interest in maintaining productivity and ensuring employees are not taking advantage of work-from-home policies, employees have an interest in protecting their privacy and maintaining a clear separation between work and home life. With the lines blurred, and many employees balancing childcare and other family responsibilities during the course of a “regular” workday, it is not realistic to require them to sit in front of their computers continuously for eight hours straight.

These new employee tracking programs can be exceptionally intrusive, and many studies have shown that they are not necessarily reflective of an employee’s productivity. And in many cases, rather than encouraging accountability, they breed resentment.

COVID-19 has caused a significant shift in our perception of the workday, and it is vital that we recognize these changes and protect employees’ privacy while balancing the needs of employers to maintain productivity. I have introduced legislation that will regulate employer monitoring to enshrine privacy protections for employees into the healthcare law.



*My annual West Side Shred Day was delayed by COVID-19 this year. Luckily, State Senator José Serrano and I were finally able to hold the event in November, when we accommodated more than 400 people. West Side Shred Day is among the most popular events I host each year, and I am hoping to offer an additional shred day again in the very near future, so long as the weather and COVID-19 permit.*

## Destigmatizing HIV/AIDS and Normalizing Gender Identity and Sexual Health in Medical Settings

New York State has made remarkable strides toward the goal of ending HIV/AIDS. Between 2014 and now, New York has reduced the number of new HIV diagnoses by 31 percent. Along with an aggressive campaign to get pre-exposure prophylaxis (PrEP) and post-exposure prophylaxis (PEP) into the hands of as many people as need it, the State has made progress toward destigmatizing the HIV/AIDS.

In hopes of building on that progress, I have introduced two important pieces of legislation. The first will prohibit insurance companies from denying coverage or charging more to people who take PrEP and PEP. The medications help prevent the spread of HIV and are recommended by Centers for Disease Control to be taken by those who are at higher risk of contracting the virus. Given this, I was shocked to learn that insurance companies were discriminating against people who would benefit from these revolutionary drugs. Together, access to them has saved innumerable lives, and it is vital that we remove every barrier to access.

In addition, I am working with a broad coalition of public health and advocacy organizations to help further destigmatize HIV/AIDS and other sexually transmitted infections (STIs) by requiring medical professionals to complete training in sexual health, and requiring them to learn about gender identity, expression and sexual orientation. Despite our progress, many healthcare providers are still uncomfortable having frank conversations about sexual health and well-being because they lack an understanding about LGBTQIA+ issues. These often-difficult conversations are vital to ensuring general health. Engaging in open and honest dialogue around these issues can also help encourage individuals to be tested for HIV/AIDS and other STIs.

Recognizing that the relationship between doctor and patient is an important one that must be built on trust, my legislation helps provide medical professionals with the tools they need to create an environment where conversations about sexual health and well-being can freely and easily be had.

## Getting Ghost Guns Off the Streets

New York State has some of the strongest gun control laws in the nation. Despite that, new technology has created opportunities for gunmakers to skirt both federal and state law in ways that were not even possible five years ago.

Most ghost guns are digitally produced via 3D printing. Others are sold as “you build it” kits: the firearms are 80% assembled and the purchaser follows simple instructions to complete building the gun. Regardless of how they are produced, these guns are not registered and do not have serial numbers, which make them nearly impossible for law enforcement to trace. As a result, people with criminal records or who would not otherwise pass a background check can easily evade the laws to acquire an illegal and untraceable firearm.

I have introduced legislation to strengthen New York’s gun laws by prohibiting possession of a ghost gun by anyone other than a licensed gunsmith. The bill will also prohibit the sale of ghost guns for any purpose and will require anyone manufacturing or assembling a firearm to be a licensed gunsmith. It would require gunsmiths to serialize any firearms, rifles, shotguns and unfinished firearm frames they manufacture and assemble and register those not otherwise covered by federal law.

I am working with Everytown for Gun Safety, Moms Demand Action and other anti-gun violence groups on this legislation and other measures. New York must continue to take aggressive action to keep every resident safe from gun violence. This legislation is an example of the kind of reasonable gun reform that we need to implement in every state across the nation.

## Ending the Puppy Mill Pipeline

As the months of quarantine wore on, many people turned to animals for comfort and companionship. While bringing a new animal into one’s home should be cause for joyful celebration, sadly if you bought your pet from a pet store, it was likely a product of a puppy mill. Puppy mills are animal breeding factories where animals are kept in cramped and filthy conditions, forced to give birth to litter after litter, without regard to their health or welfare. The breeding animals are often denied veterinary care, access to sunlight and air and food and clean water.

The vast majority of pet stores across the State of New York, and elsewhere, sell animals that are the products of puppy mills. And when you buy an animal, you are unwittingly supporting this egregious form of cruelty. Though the federal government is supposed to regulate breeders of this kind, enforcement of the already weak standards is poor, and the industry has shown no interest in complying with those standards.

It has become clear that the only way to stop the cruelty of puppy mills is to cut off the pipeline at the stores. That is why I am working to pass legislation to prohibit the sale of dogs, cats and rabbits in pet stores statewide and instead allow these shops to showcase animals that are available for adoption.

In this way, we stop the pet-store-to-puppy-mill-pipeline at its source and help to ensure that every animal up for adoption has a chance to find a loving home. Pet stores will continue to attract customers by showing live and healthy animals available for adoption and then sell pet food, toys and supplies. I look forward to working to pass this legislation in the upcoming session.



*I joined a clean-up day at Verdi Square Park organized by the Broadways Malls Association, Friends of Verdi Square Park and OneBlock UWS. In addition to working with neighbors to keep our community clean, I also hosted a Rat Academy with neighborhood and block associations during which the New York City Department of Health and Mental Hygiene provided information and education about effective methods to control and mitigate rodent populations. If you notice an increase in trash or rodent activity on your block, please give my office a call.*

## Protecting Our Earth

Climate change has and will continue to be one of the most pressing issues of our time. We are beyond the point at which dramatic action is needed to slow and reverse the most dangerous impacts of unmitigated global warming. We must prioritize funding for environmental protection because climate change poses an existential threat to our planet.

While New York has taken dramatic action to reduce greenhouse gas emissions, we must continue to push for sustainability improvements that will help our state to realize a future that is built on clean, safe and renewable energy sources.

Clean water is not just essential for proper health and hygiene, it is also vital for disease prevention. I will fight to continue funding for the Water Infrastructure Improvement Act, which provides grants to municipalities that help finance clean water projects for both sewage treatment projects and drinking water.

On the topic of funding, it is crucial that the Environmental Protection Fund (EPF), which has provided more than \$2.7 billion over the last 20 years to environmental projects, continues to be robustly funded.

We must fight to restore the Mother Nature Bond Act, which was poised to be on the ballot in November 2020 but was pulled because of the impact that COVID-19 has had on the state’s financial situation. The funds from the Bond Act would have been used to reduce flood risk for vulnerable communities, to make investments in infrastructure, restore fish and wildlife habitats, preserve open space and recreational opportunities for underserved communities and better prepare New York for the impact of climate change.

When budgets are stretched thin, it is often funding for environmental projects that gets cut first. We no longer have the luxury of deprioritizing the environment. We are beyond the tipping point and must take aggressive action to stop climate change and protect our environment for future generations.

And as we fight to win these important victories for the environment and more, it is vital that we do all that we can as a state to encourage environmental stewardship at a young age.

I have introduced legislation to require climate change education in schools and to provide schools with grant funding to implement the climate change curriculum.

This legislation will help encourage climate literacy among the next generation of climate activists and will provide schools and educators with the support they need to get it done.

## Impacts of COVID-19 on Students and Families

Nearly every sector of our society has been upended by COVID-19, but few have been disrupted as much as students and their families. Public schools have been abruptly closed and opened with little notice. Deadlines have been moved without warning, and admissions and other schedules have been abandoned. Many children have struggled to learn, some because of malfunctioning or undelivered devices, technology problems, poor communication and because for many remote learning is a poor substitute for in-person education. Many parents are juggling work and school schedules, working around the clock to find childcare and balance the competing demands on their limited time.

Understanding that the impacts on students, particularly young children and those with disabilities, have the potential to be significant and long term, I have been urging the DOE to address the inequities in the system. Students of color and low-income students in temporary housing have been disproportionately impacted by the DOE’s shortcomings. Other cities have managed to educate students safely, while also addressing their social and emotional development. After nearly a year, it is inexcusable that the New York City Department of Education (DOE) has not been able to provide certainty and safety to public school students, their families, teachers, administrators and staff. The DOE also has a responsibility to address comprehensively the consequences of this tumultuous school year with plans for student learning after the pandemic ends. Please contact me if you would like to share your family’s education story.

## Advocating for Open Streets on the West Side

The Open Streets Initiative was designed in the age of COVID-19 to create safe areas for New Yorkers to walk, meet neighbors and enjoy the outdoors while remaining physically distant during the COVID-19 pandemic.

I advocated for Open Streets and was pleased when the City of New York responded to by designating more than 100 miles of public streets citywide as open streets. These areas, temporarily closed to vehicular traffic, have provided space-starved New Yorkers with access to light, fresh air and room to roam.

Given the popularity of the Open Streets program, I and others were surprised when the West End Avenue (WEA) Open Street, which spanned West End Avenue between 86th and 97th Streets, was abruptly closed.

After hearing from many of you, I convened a meeting with the New York City Department of Transportation (DOT), the New York City Police Department (NYPD) and WEA residents to identify ways it could be reopened. I am working with community members to tap a partner to maintain the open street on weekends. This approach will ensure the area will be safe for pedestrians during weekend days and available for drivers at other times.



*When an elderly constituent living in Lincoln Towers needed help completing her SCRIE (Senior Citizen Rent Increase Exemption) renewal, my staff and I visited her home to help her complete her application. We were happily surprised with a visit by Association of Tenants of Lincoln Towers President Anne Perryman, who stopped by to say hello.*

## Beware, it's Scam Season

The holiday season is a time for celebration and reflection. It is also the time of year when scammers intensify their efforts to take advantage of trusting senior citizens and others. Please be on high alert and do not give your Social Security number, bank account or other confidential financial or personal information to anyone over the phone or Internet.

Scammers will often use threats to scare you into giving away your information. Trust your instincts! If you have suspicions, get as much information from the caller as you can and then verify it with a trusted third party, such as my office. You may also contact the Office of the New York State Attorney General at 800.771.7755 or <https://ag.ny.gov/bureau/consumer-frauds-bureau> or the New York State Division of Consumer Protection at <https://www.dos.ny.gov/consumerprotection/> or 800.697.1220. or the Office of the New York State Attorney General at 800.771.7755 or visit <https://ag.ny.gov/bureau/consumer-frauds-bureau> or the New York State Division of Consumer Protection at <https://www.dos.ny.gov/consumerprotection/> or 800.697.1220.



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*New York City Comptroller Scott Stringer and Shelly Fine, President of the Board of Directors of the West Side Federation of Senior and Supportive Housing (WSFSSH), joined me at the 72nd Street subway to chat with West Siders and distribute masks and hand sanitizer. As the second wave of COVID-19 bears down on New York, it is vital that we continue to take precautions to keep each other healthy and safe.*

*WSFSSH has been incredibly busy during this time, executing its mission to provide supportive housing and compassionate property management with on-site social services. Its mission is to provide safe and affordable housing that supports the dignity of each individual and enhances community both inside and outside their buildings.*