



January 16, 2024

Dear Neighbors,

We've jumped right into the legislative session with many critical issues to address, and I have been busy attending press conferences, meetings and events to voice support for bills and budget priorities! Below are highlights from the week!

## State of the State

Governor Kathy Hochul gave her State of the State address on January 9, outlining the successes and challenges in New York State and highlighting her priorities for the year that will serve as the basis for her State Budget proposal, which she will release today. It was dynamic (and crowded!) in Albany as the full Senate and Assembly gathered with the Governor's team, State leaders, and guests to listen to the speech. With a budget deficit leading into this season, the discussions about how to lead the state through this next year will be intense and invariably tense at times, as any important debate worth having should be. Overarching themes will create bridges like the mental health crisis and workforce development, including the

technology race between states and countries. More emphasis needs to be put on the biggest crisis of our times, climate change. And the continued discussions around fostering sustainable public safety, affordable and accessible housing, childcare, and healthcare will be lively, if not also occasionally heated. I am looking forward to working with my colleagues to advance solutions to needs facing New York that were highlighted in the speech and look forward to honest, robust dialogue. You can read the entire [State of the State book](#) online for an in-depth review of the Governor's priorities, but I've outlined key take-away goals of the Governor below that we expect to be address in today's Executive budget proposal:

### **Public Safety**

- While gun violence has been reduced by 33% in the State, certain crimes, such as domestic violence, retail theft, and hate crimes have stayed steady or increased.
- NY will implement targeted strategies to combat crime, including joint cooperation with federal and local authorities and will focus on the sale of illegal cannabis.

### **Mental Health**

- Mental health is the defining challenge of our time, and we need to focus on both accessibility and affordability to expand services that had been deprioritized for years.
- Invested \$1 billion for outpatient services, inpatient beds, and youth mental health resources. Adding focus on the impacts of social media on youth mental health.
- Expand mental health courts so that the most vulnerable can get help and not just cycle through the justice system
- Utilize \$200 million from the Opioid Settlement Fund to bolster addiction services

### **Housing**

- Rents and mortgages have become unaffordable for New Yorkers due to housing shortages. While housing was a major battleground issue last year, we still need to build more housing.
- Outward migration is a problem we need to discuss, and housing is part of it. Many New Yorkers are moving to neighboring states, including New Jersey, Connecticut, and Pennsylvania.
- Plan to develop housing on under-utilized state-owned land

### **Affordability and Consumer Protections**

- Significant investments in childcare
- Fully funding Foundation Aid for K-12 schools
- Prohibit predatory student loan services and protect residents from manipulative debt collectors
- Addressing payment structure of disability leave that has not increased in 35 years
- Protecting New Yorkers from being sued for medical debt

### **Additional Executive Priorities**

- Expanding outdoor swimming access and safety
- Evaluation of children’s reading instruction including teaching of phonics
- Increasing civic engagement and new Office of Service and Civic Engagement, led by Lieutenant Governor Delgado



# Legislative Update

## **Advancing Climate, Jobs and Justice**

The climate crisis is accelerating. We only have to look at recent flooding events, record-breaking heat, wildfire smoke-filled skies, and extreme weather patterns for evidence. This past week I joined NY Renews and several colleagues in both the Senate and Assembly for a virtual press conference advocating for the People's Climate, Jobs and Justice Budget and a package of legislation that will advance our climate goals mandated by the Climate Leadership and Community Protection Act (CLCPA). The budget proposal for \$1 billion from our current \$230 billion budget will launch shovel-ready projects in transportation, housing and energy programs with good-paying, union jobs. We cannot afford not to pass it because the fiscal impact of inaction is so much greater.

In the package of legislation, I am proud to sponsor the [Just Energy Transition Act](#) (JETA), which will turn our oldest and most inefficient fossil fuel-powered facilities into renewable energy plants, creating jobs and improving air quality in nearby communities. JETA directs state agencies to design a plan to redevelop these sites in a way that makes sure the lights stay on and affected workers get to keep their jobs or are trained to take over the jobs on site in the new renewable energy infrastructure. The additional bills in the package, such as the [NY HEAT Act](#) and the [Climate Change Superfund Act](#), also offer real solutions to the climate crisis. I will continue to advocate throughout the legislative session that we take action and pass these critical bills!



## **Strengthening Upstate Economies with the Unemployment Bridge Program**

The pandemic highlighted the number of essential workers who work without any kind of financial safety net since they do not qualify for traditional unemployment insurance (UI). They are farm workers, construction day laborers, cleaners and janitors, childcare providers as well as freelance and

self-employed workers. During the pandemic in 2021, we were able to secure one-time unemployment funding for these workers excluded from UI when they lost their jobs. This past week I joined with the Worker Justice Center of NY, the Workers Center of Central New York, and additional organizations on a virtual panel to advocate for a permanent Unemployment Bridge Program ([A4821](#)).

Workers who make less than \$56,000/year and worked at least 3 calendar months in the last 12 months who lost their employment through no fault of their own would be eligible. In Upstate communities, the program would cover approximately 90,000 workers. Funding the program benefits entire communities and stabilizes our state economy. When workers are stable, they are able to stand on their own, find new jobs, and contribute to the prosperity of our whole society. When workers become destabilized without support, it is exponentially harder to get back on their feet, and our entire economy becomes destabilized. The program proposal is revenue-neutral as funding would come from a Digital Ad Tax. I encourage you to read more on the [Unemployment Bridge Fact Sheet](#), and if you'd like to lend your support to the bill, sign the [online petition](#).



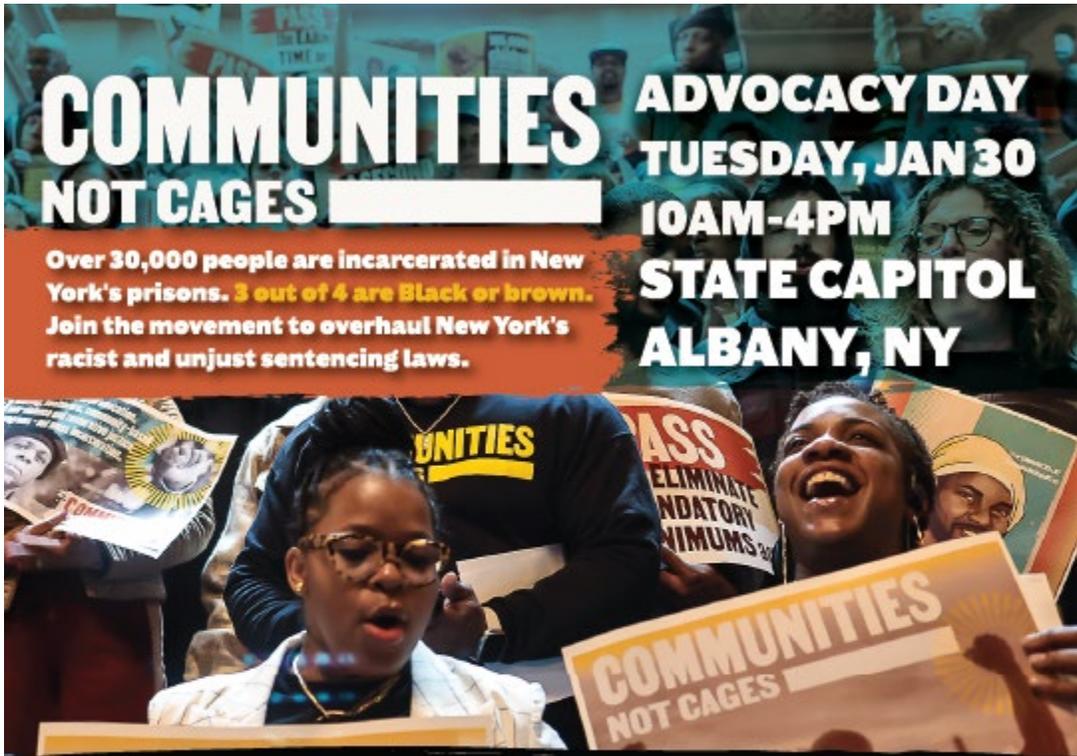
**Advocating for Increased TAP Funding**

The [New York State Tuition Assistance Program \(TAP\)](#) provides critical college financial aid to families to make college more affordable. And as a proud SUNY alumni of Binghamton University, I know the importance of public higher education. I joined Assembly colleagues for a press conference in Albany as we pushed to #TurnOnTheTAP, to raise the \$80,000/year maximum income threshold for families and to increase the minimum award to \$1,000. These levels have not been reassessed or notably adjusted in years and are out of date with the cost of living and cost of education. In addition, we need to expand TAP eligibility criteria to include graduate students and microcredential programs. There are too many vacant jobs in New York that we cannot fill. Microcredential programs can offer the necessary training and credentialing students need to enter a career - or to change careers - more quickly, and we need to equitably aid students enrolled in these programs. There are also many vacant jobs right now that require graduate degrees and certifications. To fill these needs, like mental health practitioners, we must make tuition assistance programs open to New Yorkers seeking graduate programs to fill these critical gaps.



## **Sentencing Reform Advocacy Day**

[Communities Not Cages](#) is hosting an Advocacy Day in Albany on January 30 calling for a number of sentencing reforms, including [The Earned Time Act](#) bill that I sponsor. New York spends more than \$3 billion each year to incarcerate more than 30,000 individuals in state prisons. The Earned Time Act is a commonsense piece of legislation that can prepare individuals to effectively reenter society from the carceral system by empowering them to transform their lives through education, job training and consistent good behavior. Earned time is a powerful incentive for transformation used extensively throughout the country in both red and blue states to a degree far exceeding what we do here in New York. We are leaving a powerful tool of rehabilitation on the table, and it is a missed opportunity proven to decrease violence between people incarcerated and against staff within the prison system and against probation officers upon release. Currently only a fraction of those incarcerated are eligible for earned time, but this bill would expand eligibility and the amount of time eligible for earned time credit. If only a few are eligible, this will not create the culture shift towards safety and transformation that other states have enjoyed. If our goal is public safety for all, then this is a common-sense measure to achieve this goal. [RSVP here](#) to connect with Communities Not Cages if you are interested in joining the day!



**COMMUNITIES NOT CAGES**

**ADVOCACY DAY  
TUESDAY, JAN 30  
10AM-4PM  
STATE CAPITOL  
ALBANY, NY**

Over 30,000 people are incarcerated in New York's prisons. **3 out of 4 are Black or brown.** Join the movement to overhaul New York's racist and unjust sentencing laws.

Join us at the State Capitol for rallies, press conferences, and meetings with lawmakers to support transformation and bring our loved ones home.  
Questions? Email Garrett at [gsmith@communityalternatives.org](mailto:gsmith@communityalternatives.org).

**RSVP: [bit.ly/CNCJan30](https://bit.ly/CNCJan30)**

Transportation + Food Provided

Around the District

## **Utility Assistance Event in Cortland**

The first of two Utility Assistance events that I am hosting with Senator Lea Webb and the [Public Utility Law Project](#) will be this week in Cortland. All residents are welcome to attend to connect with organizations and utility companies to determine eligibility for local, state and federal programs to reduce their utility bills. Please help spread the word to your friends and neighbors who may also benefit from attending!

Attendees should plan to bring: 1) Your utility bill; 2) A form of identification; 3) Copy of benefits award letter from HEAP, SNAP, SSI or other public assistance (if you have one); and 4) Proof of income (paystubs, bank statements) if you have not yet applied for HEAP or SNAP.

### **Cortland County**

Thursday, January 18 from 4 - 7 pm

SUNY Cortland Student Life Center

8 Pashley Drive, Cortland

\* Tompkins County residents: Save the date for Jan 25 Utility Assistance Event in Ithaca

# Utility Debt Relief

## PUBLIC OPEN HOUSE

Thursday, January 18

*SUNY Cortland*  
*Student Life Center*  
*8 Pashley Drive, Cortland*

**4-7pm**

### ***Save money on your utility bills!***

We will help you determine eligibility for various debt relief options and connect you with programs that can help reduce energy bills this winter. There will be free application assistance.

#### **Be sure to bring the following with you:**

- Your utility bill
- A form of identification
- A copy of your benefits award letter from HEAP, SNAP, SSI, or other public assistance (if you have one)
- Proof of income if not yet applied for HEAP or SNAP



*Hosted by*  
**Senator Lea Webb**  
**Assemblymember Anna Kelles**  
**Public Utility Law Project of New York**



*with support from*  
**Cortland County Dept. of Social Services, Cortland County Office for Aging,**  
**Cornell Cooperative Extension, NYSEG, Public Service Commission**

## **Stewart Park Splash Pad Groundbreaking**

I was able to do some “heart-work” – moments that bring simple and pure joy – by attending the Groundbreaking Ceremony at Stewart Park for the new splash pad. I grew up spending countless days of my childhood squealing with delight and running through the vertical water jets of this splash pad on hot sunny days. These are fond memories I deeply cherish. I was thrilled to secure \$250,000 in state funding to help the completion of this project that will create a fun, free and completely accessible water play feature in Ithaca for all children from in and outside our community. The new splash pad will be 50% bigger than the existing one with engaging features for both young and older children. Thank you to Friends of Stewart Park for your leadership and dedication to enhancing our beautiful City park. I can’t wait to see the finished project!



# Community Resources

**"Food for Thought" Event in Cortland focuses on Medication for Opioid Use Disorder (MOUD)**

[Cortland Prevention Services](#) and the [Mental Health Association of Cortland County](#) will host a lunch-time workshop focused on Medication for Opioid Use Disorder (MOUD). Speakers will include representatives from [Cayuga Addiction Recovery Services \(CARS\)](#), [Family and Children's Counseling Services](#), and [REACH Medical](#). Registration has been extended to January 17; email Jennifer Sylstra at [jsylstra@familycs.org](mailto:jsylstra@familycs.org) to attend.



# FOOD FOR THOUGHT

New Opportunities for Medication Treatment for People with Opioid Use Disorder in Cortland

Medication for Opioid Use Disorder (MOUD) is an evidence-based clinical standard of care that has been shown to reduce risk of overdose and help support recovery by reducing cravings or withdrawal symptoms.

Please join us to hear from regional providers about new MOUD services and efforts to make MOUD more accessible. Cayuga Addiction Recovery Services (CARS) will share about their new Cortland Clinic which will offer methadone, Family and Children's Counseling Services will discuss their new, low-threshold MOUD program, ROAR, and REACH Medical will discuss a street outreach pilot program to increase MOUD inductions.

## WEDNESDAY, JANUARY 24

11:30-1:00  
CORTLAND ELKS LODGE  
9 GROTON AVE, CORTLAND  
THIS EVENT IS FREE, WITH LUNCH INCLUDED!

Please register by January 12 Jennifer Sylstra  
Email: [jsylstra@familycs.org](mailto:jsylstra@familycs.org)



**Cortland Prevention Resources**  
A division of Family & Children's Counseling Services

Food for Thought programming is a collaboration of:



**MHA**  
Mental Health Association  
OF CORTLAND COUNTY

## **Tompkins County Office for the Aging Annual Public Hearing**

The Tompkins County Office for the Aging will be conducting its annual Public Hearing on Tuesday, February 6 at 11:00 am at the Danby Community Church, 1859 Danby Road, Ithaca. The Public Hearing provides a venue for community members to learn about programs and services provided by the Office for the Aging. It is also an important opportunity for the public to offer feedback about issues affecting older adults in our community and to provide input for the department's plan for 2024. Community members are also invited to provide input through a [brief survey](#) or by calling 607-274-5482 and having a staff person record your feedback over the phone. For additional information, visit the [Office for the Aging website](#).

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In good health,



Anna Kelles, Ph.D.

Assemblymember, 125th A.D.

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