

Dear neighbors and community,

Happy April! As Budget negotiations start to wind to a close, my office is looking forward to a productive remaining two months of this year's legislative session. Here are a few updates from Albany and the District:

# Legislative Update



## **Budget Update:**

On Monday April 7 and Thursday April 10, the Legislature passed and the Governor signed “extenders” to ensure that New York State upholds its financial obligations as we work to pass the Budget beyond the April 1 deadline. Several critical topics are still being debated in the Budget process, a few of which I will highlight below:

- **Changes to Discovery Laws** - The Governor’s initial budget proposal in January included changes to discovery, a process within a criminal trial during which the prosecution releases to the defense council the evidence that will be used during trial. Discovery was reformed in 2019. These reforms replaced the previous “blindfold law,” which allowed prosecutors to withhold evidence until just before trial, often leading to uninformed plea deals and wrongful convictions. Under these reforms prosecutors are required to automatically provide all relevant evidence to the defense within 15 days of arraignment. This includes police reports, witness statements, and other materials that could influence the outcome of the case. Defense attorneys must also share certain evidence with the prosecution, promoting a more balanced exchange of information. Both parties are obligated to disclose new evidence as it becomes available, ensuring ongoing transparency throughout the legal process. Judges have increased authority to enforce discovery obligations and can impose sanctions for non-compliance, including case dismissal in severe instances. Some prosecutors

and law enforcement have argued that the reforms have led to an increase in arbitrary dismissals. As a result, the governor has proposed rollbacks that would essentially undo the 2019 reforms giving discretion to prosecutors to determine what evidence they deem relevant and are therefore responsible to disclose (thus not holding them responsible to get all the relevant evidence) before officially stating that they have shared all relevant evidence and are therefore ready for trial. I have analyzed the data that was used to justify the rollbacks and have found that the data used does not justify the argument. [Here is a link to my explanation](#). A majority of my colleagues and leadership share my concern that the rollbacks would undo the benefit that the reforms created which was a significant reduction in wrongful convictions.

- **Expanding Involuntary Commitment** - Involuntary Commitment is the short-term hospitalization or treatment of an individual with a mental illness without their permission to do so and is currently used in cases where an individual is in imminent physical danger of harm to themselves or others. The Governor has proposed to make it easier to hospitalize individuals who cannot care for themselves due to mental illness, even if they haven't recently engaged in violent behavior. The intent is to expand current standards by allowing intervention when individuals are at substantial risk of harm due to their inability to meet basic needs like food, shelter, or medical care. Critics have highlighted the obvious diminishing of a person's liberty as a result of this expansion. Those individuals who would be targeted under this expansion are also those who are significantly more likely to be homeless and have mental health and/or substance use disorders. Given that this intervention is short-term and a person would be released into the same circumstances, the involuntary commitment would not only not solve the underlying issues and would most likely exacerbate a lack of trust in both government and the healthcare system. Critics are advocating for expanding supportive housing and other supportive services as a more compressive and effective solution. [I have included in this document a statement I have written outlining my support and rationale for this proposed solution.](#)
- **"Bell-to-Bell" Phone Use Ban in Schools** - In her January budget proposal, the Governor included a statewide ban on phone usage in schools during the entire day, including during breaks between classes. This proposal was added to curb distractions from academics in schools, something that most people would agree is a serious issue. The Assembly and Senate, after receiving opposition on this from organizations such as the NYS School Boards Association, Council of School Superintendents and the School Administrators Association of NYS have opted for less of a one-size-fits-all approach, suggesting instead that control over these bans happen at a more local level with input from community members.

- **Face Mask Ban** - Governor Hochul made a partial face mask “ban” a late addition to her budget proposal. The Governor’s proposal includes exceptions for individuals wearing masks for religious or health reasons. Bill [A3133](#) provides the language for this new proposal, which creates the crime of “masked harassment.” A person would be charged with masked harassment if they wear a mask to intentionally hide their face while threatening violence against another person or a group of people. Restrictions on masking in New York are not new. During the COVID pandemic, mask bans that had been in place since 1845 were repealed by the legislature. This 175 year-old ban was passed to facilitate the state crack down on protesters angry about the price of rents on large estates, [and the bans have since been used to target other protest movements](#) including the anti-war protests of the 1960s, [May Day marches in Times Square](#), the Occupy Wall Street protests, and to criminalize transgender and gender diverse individuals/groups. Masking restrictions have also led to selective enforcement by police against Black and Latinx people as was seen during COVID, when the [vast majority of social distancing tickets were handed out to those demographics](#). It is important to note that New York’s existing laws against [menacing](#) and [hate crimes](#) already cover the behaviors the Governor seeks to stop with this proposal, regardless of whether a mask is worn during the act. Last year the governor negotiated a modified version of the [Hate Crime Modernization Act](#) into the final enacted Budget, which expanded the list of offenses that can be prosecuted as hate crimes and created an entirely separate charge of harassment called “bias” harassment. In my office, we have also received many emails from constituents highlighting concerns of potential negative consequences to those that need to wear a mask for either health or religious reasons. Even though the language of the Governor’s proposal exempts them from this ban, they may still be targets of ridicule and discrimination by those who interpret all mask wearing in the context of intending to hide one’s identity and having malicious intent. I have shared my opinion as the Assemblymember for this district that I do not support this proposal as a last minute entry into the negotiations of the budget behind closed doors.

#### **Newly Introduced Bills:**

[A7550](#) - Landowners can currently receive significant real property tax reductions (up to 80%) for managing at least 50 acres of their land for timber production, through a DEC-approved timber management plan. This bill will reduce the acreage of land required to qualify for that reduction to 10, and provide the same tax relief for landowners who place at least 10 acres of forested land under a conservation easement, ensuring that land will permanently remain wild forest land. Additionally, this

bill will provide municipalities with state assistance to compensate them for lost tax revenues from these designated areas.

[A7245](#) - This legislation will allow the [Higher Education Services Corporation \(HESC\)](#), which provides financial aid to students throughout New York, to begin considering an applicant's change in income due to the loss of their employment when determining eligibility for award amounts for the [Tuition Assistance Program \(TAP\)](#).

[A6727](#) - Distribution warehouses, which are large storage, sorting, and redistribution facilities for fulfilling e-commerce orders, are responsible for a heavy amount of vehicle traffic. These facilities are disproportionately located in disadvantaged communities in New York. New York's climate goals require that 100% of newly sold medium and heavy-duty vehicles be emission free by 2045. To meet this requirement, these warehouses must be updated with electric charging infrastructure. However, these updates are not happening and could hinder the state's ability to accommodate electric vehicles and meet the requirement of current law. This bill requires that all new heavy distribution facilities (those over 50,000 square feet) and those undergoing additions or alterations have at least one electric charging station present to support goals of electrification.

# Around the District





### **Women of Distinction Celebration**

You may remember receiving a request from my office in February, for the name of a woman in your life whose efforts have greatly impacted you or your community in a positive way. This took place in advance of Women's History Month, during which each Member of the Assembly is asked to choose one nominee from their District to join them at a Women of Distinction celebration in Albany. Every one of the many nominations my office received held stories of resilience, courage, compassion, and deep generosity. Each story highlighted profound work that these women do in our communities in the background without any reward or recognition but because simply they are called to do the work. A slideshow detailing the accomplishments of these amazing women can be viewed [here](#).

While we could only bring to Albany one of the twenty-three women whose names were submitted to the office, we were determined to honor the brilliance, nobility, courage and power of every single woman nominated. Our community is infinitely stronger because of their work and dedication. On Friday March 25, my staff and I held a celebration at Serendipity Catering and Bar (formally Coltivare) to round out the final week of Women's History Month, inviting all of the women who were nominated as well as the

person that nominated them and their families. A big thank you to all the sponsors who made the event possible:

[Finger Lakes Wealth Management](#), [Tompkins Chamber of Commerce](#), and [Serendipity Catering](#).



### **CENTRO Starts Services in Cortland**

This past Monday, March 31, I attended a ribbon cutting ceremony to celebrate the start of services in Cortland by the [Central New York Regional Transportation Authority \(CENTRO\)](#). CENTRO currently manages bus routes in a large area of Central New York. Decades ago, when state law was passed establishing CENTRO as an authority, it included Cortland County in the authorized service area. At the time the county established its own countywide transportation management system that in recent years has been administered by TransDev. As a result of proposed contract changes with TransDev, the County Legislature voted to make the switch last year to CENTRO. CENTRO is committed to the current staff from the outgoing county's transportation management, to significantly expand the bus service area, and to lower the bus fare from \$1.50 per ride to \$1.00.



Public transportation is important for a thriving community including access to job opportunities, educational opportunities, doctor appointments, grocery stores and to public services and events. Although a majority of individuals and families have access to cars in Cortland and the surrounding counties not everyone does and public transportation is the great equalizer for any community ensuring a vibrant community. Public transportation is also environmentally friendly, taking cars off the road that otherwise would be contributing to greenhouse gas emissions and traffic congestion in our cities. You can view my full remarks at this ceremony [here](#).

Here's a look at what is currently being proposed in the NYS Budget to support a robust launch of CENTRO in Cortland county:

- Authorization for Cortland County to transfer the dispersant of State Transportation Operating Assistance (STOA) for ridership to CENTRO
- A \$1 Million, one-time increase in STOA funds, to support bus operator retraining, office setup, maintenance equipment upgrades, repairs and to ensure a smooth transition to CENTRO.
- An increase in available capital funding for Non-MTA transportation in New York, which CENTRO can apply to for a new transit facility in Cortland.

# Community Resources

Senator Lea Webb, Assemblymember Anna Kelles,  
& the Public Utility Law Project Present

## Utility Assistance Clinic

**Thursday, April 24**

*Randall Middle School  
Gymnasium  
31 Randall St. Cortland, NY 13045*

**4-7pm**

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

Please be sure to bring:



- 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)



with community partners:



Cortland County  
— NEW YORK —



NYSERDA  
Regional Clean  
Energy Hub

AGREE  
Alliance for a Green Economy



Public Service  
Commission



### Utility Assistance Clinic:

On Thursday, April 24, I will be co-hosting a Utility Assistance Clinic in Cortland, at Randall Middle School. As with our similar event in Tompkins County last month, my office will be working with the office of Senator Lea Webb and the Public Utility Law Project (PULP) to help constituents determine eligibility for assistance options with large



utility bills, and connect people directly with programs they qualify for that can help reduce utility cost burdens. See the poster above for participating organizations.



*Designs created by the winners of the 2024 “I Voted” and “Future Voter” sticker contests*

### **Tompkins County “I Voted” Sticker Contest / “Future Voter” Sticker Contest**

Each year, Tompkins County joins several other counties throughout the State in asking students to channel their inner artist and create a new sticker to be distributed at polls during the next election cycle. This program is charming, but also a helpful tool in educating Tompkins County kids about local, state, and federal elections, engaging them in the process and providing a unique token to voters for making the effort to get out to the polls. **This year, submissions are being accepted until May 26**, after which locals will be able to vote on their favorite piece of art. The winning drawing will feature as the official “I Voted” sticker handed out during the next election. The contest is divided into two age groups, with [different rules](#):

- “I Voted” sticker contest is open to students grades 6-12.
- “Future Voter” sticker contest is open to students grades K-5.

Rules and more information on this contest can be found at the Tompkins County Website [here](#). We look forward to seeing all of the creative art our local students will submit, and to highlighting the winner later in the year!

In good health,

Anna Kelles, Ph.D.  
Assemblymember, 125th A.D.

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