



Assemblymember

# Vivian E. Cook

## Reports to the People

Spring 2014

Dear Neighbors:

This year marks the 237<sup>th</sup> Legislative Session which convened on January 8, 2014. I am pleased to provide you with this news report which contains a wealth of important information on the 2014-15 New York State Budget. The spending plan totals \$138 billion and continues the state's fiscal discipline by holding spending growth to less than 2 percent for the fourth consecutive year. This budget provides much-needed tax relief while working to create jobs and ensure a better economic outlook for New York State. The budget also makes a commitment to invest in the education of our children in addition to making needed reforms to Common Core.

The final state budget agreement reflects the Assembly Majority's commitment to the working families of New York. It provides essential funding to educate our children and to alleviate the tax burden on families and helps create a better economic environment that will create jobs.

I am also pleased to share with you our success with securing \$30 million for the long awaited York College Academic Village and Conference Center. York College administrators and many students have met with me and members of the Queens delegation to discuss the details of the new proposed building. As a result of this much-needed funding, this project will create an approximately 165,000-square foot facility that will be the new home of the School of Business with state-of-the-art classrooms, computer labs and conference rooms that will be available for use by the community. The facility also will serve as the campus student center with offices for student government, clubs, student activities and services, and a bookstore. This addition to the York campus will benefit the community and New York City by creating construction jobs and a number of permanent employment opportunities. The state-of-the-art facility will transform downtown Jamaica, and be the beacon of Southeast Queens.

Sincerely,

Vivian E. Cook

## York College Day in Albany



Assemblymember Cook is pleased to welcome Dr. Marcia Keizs, President of York College, faculty, administrators, and students of the York College Social Work Club to Albany on their annual lobby day.



Assemblymember Cook greets Mr. Isiah Abney, York College student and member of the Social Work Club.

## Youth Action Day



Assemblymember Cook meets with representatives of the Campaign for Summer Jobs during their annual Youth Action Day where 300 young people travel to Albany to meet with their legislators to discuss the importance of the Summer Youth Employment Program.

# HIGHLIGHTS OF THE 2014 - 2015 NEW YORK STATE BUDGET

## Historic investment in education

The 2014-15 state budget increases school aid by \$1.1 billion, or 5.4 percent, which is \$551 million over the executive budget proposal.

Included with this increase is \$251 million in additional funding for Foundation Aid and \$602 million in restorations to the Gap Elimination Adjustment (GEA), helping to reduce the negative financial impact on schools statewide.

“Every child in New York deserves to benefit from a great education,” Assemblymember Cook said. “With an increase in school aid of more than 5 percent, significant funding for statewide full-day Universal Pre-K and a bond act proposal to modernize classroom technologies, this year’s state budget represents New York’s largest investment in our children’s future in recent memory.”

## Increased education funding for NYC schools

The 2014-15 state budget allocates more than \$8.6 billion to New York City schools, an increase of over \$435 million more than last year and more than \$203.2 million over the executive budget proposal. The budget also dedicates \$300 million per year for two years for Universal Pre-Kindergarten (UPK) in New York City.

“The future success of our children is dependent on how we prepare them for it today,” said Assemblymember Cook. “Every child deserves to have a first-class education. This year’s state budget makes a significant investment in education to ensure every child has the opportunity to succeed.”

## Reforming Common Core

The 2014-15 state budget incorporates recent legislation passed by the Assembly that helps fix the flawed implementation of Common Core. It protects students from unfair consequences based on test results and ensures the security of sensitive student data. The reforms also:

- ban standardized tests for students in grades K-2;
- prohibit Common Core test scores from solely or primarily determining grade promotion;
- delay the use of test results from becoming part of the permanent record for students in grades 3-8;
- make changes to assessments for students with disabilities and English language learners pursuant to a federal waiver submitted by the State Education Department (SED);
- significantly limit the amount of classroom time used for test preparation and assessments;
- direct SED to provide tools, resources and materials to assist teachers in professional development related to the new standards;
- place restrictions on the sharing of student data and requiring SED to appoint a chief privacy officer who will serve a three-year term;
- require the student privacy officer to set guidelines for sharing student data and develop policies to deal with any data breaches;
- require third-party vendors to notify the school or SED of any data breaches and establishing penalties for failing to do so;
- create a “Parents Bill of Rights” that places limitations on sharing student data with third-party vendors;
- provide for the elimination of inBloom and require SED to request that all student information already provided to inBloom be deleted; and
- allow schools to opt out of sharing private student information with similar entities and certain privately run data dashboards.

“All of us want higher standards for our children. And, while the intent behind Common Core is laudable, there is no question that the rollout has been seriously flawed,” Assemblymember Cook said. “As we continue to work on addressing each area of concern, the state budget takes immediate action that will reduce stress and anxiety for students, parents and educators, eliminate unnecessary testing and protect student privacy. It’s critical that we address these problems now.”

## Making college education more affordable

The 2014-15 state budget helps grow our higher education system by providing \$10.4 billion for SUNY and \$4.3 billion for CUNY. This year’s budget also helps students and parents by increasing funding for the Tuition Assistance Program (TAP) for the first time in 14 years and restores funding for other college opportunity programs.

“The key to a bright and successful future is a college education,” Assemblymember Cook said. “Making higher education accessible to everyone is one of my top priorities and that is why I’m disappointed

an agreement couldn’t be reached on the DREAM Act. While this year’s final budget helps make that goal more attainable for some, I will continue to work to ensure it is attainable for all.”

This year’s state budget provides an additional \$20.2 million for community colleges, increasing base aid to SUNY and CUNY community colleges by \$75 per full-time equivalent (FTE) student, bringing the total to \$2,497 per FTE. This is the third consecutive budget increase in community college funding.

## Boosting TAP, other college opportunity programs

To help students afford the rising cost of college, the budget increases funding for TAP for the first time in 14 years. The maximum TAP award will be increased by \$165 for a maximum award of \$5,165 per full-time equivalent (FTE) student.

The budget also provides \$102 million in funding for college opportunity programs, an increase of \$4.2 million over the executive proposal. The funding restores cuts and provides a 3 percent increase for the Educational Opportunity Program (EOP), the Search for Education, Elevation and Knowledge (SEEK) program and the Higher Education Opportunity Program (HEOP).

## Reducing the property tax burden

This year’s budget provides significant property tax relief for homeowners across the state by offering a two-year property tax credit in the form of a direct check, provided that a local government and school district stay within the 2 percent property tax cap. To benefit for a second year, schools and localities would have to propose a detailed cost-cutting plan. This measure will not only help families save money but will also incentivize efficiency, saving taxpayers over \$1.5 billion over the next 3 years.

“In a time where many are already struggling to get by, property taxes shouldn’t be pricing families out of their own homes,” said Assemblymember Cook. “This essential relief will help lower the property tax burden on Southeast Queens families and help make our community more affordable.”

The budget also offers tax relief for New York City residents by providing \$85 million in tax credits for homeowners, condominium and co-op owners and renters by implementing a “circuit breaker” plan. The “circuit breaker” will run for 2 years and will factor in household income for the property tax break.

## Keeping New York affordable

In last year’s budget, the Assembly fought to phase out the 18-a utility surcharge imposed on energy bills. This year’s budget accelerates the phase-out, lowering the surcharge rates by \$200 million annually for both residential and commercial customers and \$600 million over the next three years.

“With utility prices climbing, it’s more important than ever to reduce costs for consumers,” said Assemblymember Cook. “The 18-a utility surcharge is an unnecessary burden on ratepayers. Driving more relief to homeowners is crucial, because speeding up the phase-out will ease the strain on already tight family budgets.”

## Supporting small businesses and MWBEs

The budget also includes \$1 million to support the Minority- and Women-owned Business Enterprise (MWBE) Development Lending Program, a \$365,000 increase from the executive budget proposal. A new MWBE Investment Fund is also included within the lending program. The fund would provide critical financial support to foster the development of new and emerging ideas and promote the long-term financial performance and success of early-stage MWBEs.

“MWBEs and other small businesses are the drivers of our state’s economy. We need to be sure we are doing everything we can to help them compete,” Assemblymember Cook said. “Removing barriers for small businesses allows them to participate in the rebuilding of our economy.”

## Expanding the NY Works Program

Furthermore, the budget expands the NY Youth Works Program, which encourages businesses to hire unemployed, disadvantaged youth, ages 16 to 24, by connecting it to community colleges. Tying the occupational training component of the NY Youth Works Program to the Job Linkage Program will help encourage more employers to hire inner-city youth, said Assemblymember Cook.

## Strengthening New York’s child care system

The 2014-15 state budget provides funding to increase access to quality, affordable child care. The provisions include:

- \$34 million for more than 4,500 additional subsidized child care slots;
- disregarding the earned income of teenagers under 18 in the

## HIGHLIGHTS OF THE 2014 - 2015 NEW YORK STATE BUDGET

household for the purpose of determining a family's child care subsidy eligibility; and

- requiring child care providers to post their most recent inspection report in a prominent place.

"It has become nearly impossible for working families to find affordable and reliable child care," Assemblymember Cook said. "The state budget addresses New York's child care crisis so families don't have to break the bank to afford safe, nurturing care for their children."

### Two percent COLA for caregivers of the elderly and disabled

The state budget includes \$13 million to support 2 percent salary increases for direct care workers, including those caring for the disabled at nonprofits licensed by the state. The first Cost of Living Adjustment (COLA) will take place on Jan. 1, 2015, and the second increase will go into effect on April 1, 2015. These caregivers assist the most vulnerable New Yorkers, and this pay increase will help ensure a well-qualified and adequately staffed human services workforce, Assemblymember Cook noted.

"Direct care workers look after and assist those who need help the most," Assemblymember Cook said. "Their pay should reflect the enormous responsibility they take on at work every day."

### Public campaign financing

This year's budget establishes a pilot program for public campaign financing in the 2014 state Comptroller race. The program's centerpiece is a 6-1 match of contributions up to \$175, funded by the surplus money in the state's Abandoned Property Fund. In addition, the program will cap campaign contributions at \$6,000 per person for candidates participating in the public finance system. Further, participating candidates must agree to take part in at least one debate for both the primary and general election. Contributions from lobbyists, anonymous donors, campaign vendors and transfers from political parties or committees will not be matched by public funds.

"The Assembly Majority has long pushed for a public campaign finance system and did so again this year by passing the Fair Elections Act," said Assemblymember Cook. "It's unfortunate the state Senate failed to step up and pass this legislation that was supported by so many across the state. The pilot program established for the Comptroller race is a step in the right direction and will show the benefits of a public campaign finance system."

In addition, a new enforcement unit will be created within the state Board of Elections that will have independent authority to investigate violations of the Election Law via a Chief Enforcement Counsel. The budget legislation also strengthens disclosure requirements for independent expenditures for communications which refer to, and advocate for or against, a clearly identified candidate and are communicated to a general public audience.

### Investing in vital health care programs

"You shouldn't have to jump through hoops to receive adequate health care," Assemblymember Cook said. "One of my top priorities is to make certain each and every New Yorker has the care they need and deserve."

The final budget agreement continues to ensure proper health care is available for our most vulnerable populations. The final budget rejects the governor's recommendation to eliminate allowing spousal refusal, restoring \$10 million. The practice of spousal refusal protects healthy spouses from being required to spend their life savings to care for ill spouses in need of long-term care.

"We work a lifetime to be able to relax, enjoy and have a sense of stability upon retirement," Assemblymember Cook said. "No one should have to lose everything in order to afford care for an ill spouse. We need to show the elderly the respect they deserve by preserving spousal refusal."

In recognition of the need for health care research, the budget plan also provides \$7 million in support for the Spinal Cord Injury Research Fund. Additionally, the budget provides \$4.1 million for the expansion of eligibility for the Elderly Pharmaceutical Insurance Coverage (EPIC) program by increasing the income limit for the deductible plan from \$35,000 to \$75,000 for those who are single and \$50,000 to \$100,000 for those who are married.

The budget also invests in our health care systems' infrastructure by including a new \$1.2 billion capital program. The funding will support projects that improve financial stability and increase efficiency of health care providers. These funds will complement the \$8 billion federal Medicaid Waiver program that will reinvest savings into the transformation of New York's health care system.

### Supporting families

The budget takes into account the challenges parents face as they make decisions regarding their families. Specifically, the plan provides an additional \$1 million for infertility services as well as \$750,000 for family planning services.

"Women – and families – need our support as they decide what is best for their own future," Assemblymember Cook said. "Providing help as they attempt to grow their family is vital."

The budget also provides \$3.9 million to support the payment for Early Intervention Services, which are critical in helping infants and toddlers with developmental delays that can be remedied early on with appropriate care.

### Strengthening housing programs

"Obtaining affordable housing continues to be a struggle for many working families," Assemblymember Cook said. "The budget continues to support programs that help to solve this problem so every New Yorker has safe, quality housing available to them."

Specifically, the budget restores \$2.2 million to the Neighborhood and Rural Preservation programs. These programs aim to revitalize neighborhoods around the state to restore the vibrancy of communities, resulting in more affordable housing and an increased positive economic outlook, Assemblymember Cook noted.

The budget also restores \$742,000 in funding for the New York City Housing Authority Tenant Watch Program. In addition, the budget increases the income limit for the Senior Citizen Rent Increase Exemption (SCRIE) from \$29,000 to \$50,000 for a two-year period.

In addition, \$200,000 is provided for a grandparent housing study, which could shed light on the increasing occurrence of children living with a grandparent or elderly relative and its affordable housing implications.

The budget plan also outlines how over \$312 million in funds received from the mortgage foreclosure settlement with JPMorgan Chase will be used. The funds will be spent over several years to aid New Yorkers facing housing and foreclosure issues by:

- providing funding for housing counselors;
- running state and local foreclosure assistance hotlines;
- operating state and local foreclosure mediation programs;
- providing legal assistance; and
- creating housing remediation and anti-blight projects.

## A Note of Thanks...



### New York State Defenders Association, Inc.

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April 16, 2014

The Hon. Vivian E. Cook  
NYS Assembly  
939 Legislative Office Bldg  
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Dear Assemblymember Cook:

I am writing to thank you for your assistance and commitment in helping NYSDA receive its needed \$2,089,000 in the final SFY 2014-2015 budget. We are happy that we can always count on you to come to the aid of the Public Defense Backup Center.

Deeply grateful for your fidelity to our cause, I am personally glad we are on this journey toward justice together.

Peace,

Jonathan E. Gradess  
Executive Director

JEG/dld

### **Making roadways safer for drivers**

The budget agreement continues New York's efforts to crack down on those who text while driving by implementing stricter penalties on young and new drivers convicted of the offense. Upon first conviction, the driver will have their license suspended for 120 days, and upon a second conviction, their license will be revoked for a full year.

"Texting, talking or using your phone in any other way while driving is simply not safe for anyone on the road," Assemblymember Cook said. "New York continues to be a leader in curbing this dangerous behavior in order to save lives."

### **Supporting commuters by protecting MTA funding**

The final budget rejects the governor's proposal to sweep \$40 million in MTA operational funds to pay down MTA debt service. The budget ensures \$10 million of this funding remains dedicated for mass transit needs.

Assemblymember Cook noted that while paying down debt service is needed, it shouldn't come at the expense of MTA riders who have dealt with continual fare increases as well as service cuts. By rejecting the diversion of these funds they can be used for their intended purpose, whether it be for service improvements or to prevent future fare hikes.

### **Protecting and improving the criminal justice system**

The budget includes funding to direct the Commission on Youth, Public Safety and Justice to make recommendations on increasing the age of juvenile jurisdiction in the state's criminal justice system. Currently, New York is one of only two states in the nation that prosecutes 16- and 17-year-olds as adults.

"A 16-year-old is still a child; we must take that into consideration when prosecuting these young adults," Assemblymember Cook said. "This budget takes a needed step to reevaluate how our state's criminal justice system treats teenagers in order to ensure fairness in the law."

The 2014-15 budget provides \$12.2 million in support for Alternatives to Incarceration (ATI) programs. Further, the budget provides:

- \$2.2 million for Prisoners' Legal Services;
- \$2.1 million to the New York State Defenders Association; and
- \$600,000 for immigrant legal services for students and families.

The budget also restores \$2.83 million in civil and criminal legal services grants, \$600,000 for Edward Byrne Memorial Justice Assistance Grants (JAG) and \$2.2 million to domestic violence-related civil and criminal legal services providers. It also provides an additional \$100,000 for the Office of Indigent Legal Services.

### **Supporting the state's agricultural industry**

The budget provides \$8.45 million in increased funding to agriculture programs, including the following:

- Farm Viability Institute: \$1.1 million;
- Agribusiness Child Development: \$1 million;
- NY Apple Growers Association: \$544,000;
- Cornell University Rabies program: \$460,000;
- NY Wine and Grape Foundation: \$287,000;
- FarmNet: \$216,000;
- Maple Producers Association: \$150,000; and
- Tractor Rollover Protection Program: \$150,000.

"New York's agriculture industry is a major component of our state's economy," Assemblymember Cook said. "By ensuring that this essential industry is receiving the support it needs, we are not only safeguarding its survival, but investing in its growth."



## **Assemblymember Vivian E. Cook's**

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