



Assemblymember Jo Anne Simon



Reports to the People

December 2020

Dear Neighbors and Friends,

When times are tough, you can count on New Yorkers to show up for one another.

I am so inspired by the compassion of everyday New Yorkers who have stepped up to help others during this pandemic - making masks, donating blood and medical supplies, or providing food to their neighbors. Brooklynites also devised creative ways to celebrate the good stuff - from birthday parties in the open streets programs to neighbors organizing outdoor graduations for local kids, or neighbors bringing flowers to the Cobble Hill Health Center. This is how we know that Brooklyn is resilient, we will bounce back, and we will do it together.

It has not been easy. I want to express my heartfelt condolences to all those who have lost loved ones to COVID-19. At the time of this writing, New York State has lost 26,955 New Yorkers to the virus, including 19,628 residents of New York City.

With COVID-19 taking so many of our loved ones, we reflect upon how precious life is. I am grateful to the frontline workers who go to their jobs every day to care for sick New Yorkers and to provide our state's core functions. After slowly re-opening, we must now deal with the grim realities of the uptick in COVID-19 cases. It makes me think about how much we rely on going to our local stores and schools and cultural institutions, not just to shop or to learn or be inspired, but because this is where our neighbors and friends are - this is the fabric of our community.

I am also glad that my office has been able to stay in touch with so many of you - we've organized a flu shot drive, blood donation drives, online Java with Jo Anne's, an online town hall for people who are deaf and hard of hearing, checked in on our neighbors, and helped hundreds of people access unemployment benefits and made recommendations on how to fix that archaic system. New York State passed a COVID rent relief bill (with a much-needed expansion coming), initiated an eviction moratorium, provided death benefits for frontline workers who died from COVID-19, ensured more people could access SNAP (aka food stamp) benefits, and provided a significant amount of food relief.

I was also pleased that the Assembly passed my bill to screen people who are incarcerated for the dyslexia, but the Senate did not take up the bill. Our educational system is not a level playing field -- while dyslexia amongst the general population is around 20%, research shows that between 50% - 75% of people who are incarcerated have reading disabilities; too often these disabilities go undiagnosed and/or unaddressed with tragic consequences. Literacy is a matter of social justice, and I will continue to fight for this. On that note, I also want to thank the teachers and the school personnel who have done a tremendous job in a constantly shifting landscape.

After months of a pandemic and recession that has skyrocketed unemployment, we have serious obstacles before us. The legislature will go back into session in January, though session will likely take place remotely. I will continue to push to raise federal and state revenue to address the housing crisis before us. I resolve to do my best to take bold actions to rebuild our state and build a community that is more livable for everyone.

I very much hope that you will join me for my monthly Java with Jo Anne meet and greets - either online or by calling in.

And, please shop local and support our small businesses!

Sincerely,

Jo Anne Simon



Assemblymember Simon and Ameer Baraka, actor and activist, at Dyslexia Awareness Day last year.

Keeping Communication Going During COVID-19

There is no denying that these are stressful times. Grocery runs, medical appointments and essential work have become our new de-facto outings, if at all. We find ourselves relishing our most basic social interactions. The way we interact with each other has changed – and a virtual way of life has been thrust onto us. Over the last year, we have collectively learned how to work Zoom, manage Microsoft teams, stream via WebEx, and join Google classroom. All the while wishing we could go back to the days of bumping into each other in the community. I certainly miss seeing you all in person at “Java with Jo Anne” at our local coffee shops.

While we remain genuinely optimistic about the future – we want to be sure we are meeting the current and pressing needs of the community we serve. We want to hear from you on ways we can better improve our communication to ensure we reach ALL of our community members. Please reach out via mail, phone or digital communications to share your thoughts – we look forward to hearing from you!

Public Hearings on Impact of COVID-19

COVID has brought to light many systemic problems and created new ones. In the state higher education hearing, we heard from students about difficulties with remote learning, fair access to testing, technical obstacles and inequities, needs of students with disabilities, testing & tracing on campus, the need to reduce tuition, and much more.

All told, the legislature held 10 hearings on the impacts of COVID-19, including the impacts on elections, workplace safety and employment, hospitals and congregate settings such as nursing homes and assisted living facilities, economic development and local governments. Many of the issues raised in the hearings will be addressed legislatively in the next session. Certain restrictions have been addressed through modification of Executive Orders, such as visitation policies when loved ones are in congregate settings where family members are often part of the health care plan and without them, patients can deteriorate significantly.



Diploma Privilege

New Proposal to Keep Test-Takers Safe

The New York Bar Exam is normally held twice a year. This year, due to COVID-19, the two day, in-person exam originally scheduled for July was postponed until September, then cancelled and replaced with an online exam which took place in October of 2020.

There were several problems with the online exam, as detailed in the snapshot survey of over 500 exam takers that was conducted by my office and Senator Brad Hoylman's office. We saw an utter failure to provide safe, responsible, and fair testing conditions to law school grads taking the most important test of their careers. Those with disabilities too often were forced to forego key accommodations or risk their exposure to COVID by taking an in-person exam – the very situation the remote exam was created to protect against. Technology problems forced still others to withdraw before or during the test. Further, the exam was done through the use of artificial intelligence monitoring and facial recognition software. This led to computer passwords being compromised and privacy intrusions by hackers.

Law school grads deserved better, and I believe that starts with alternative pathways to licensure, such as proposed in the diploma privilege legislation that I sponsor with Senator Hoylman (A.10794 and A.10846). The bill creates an alternative pathway to licensure during COVID-19, allowing the admission of law school graduates as attorneys in New York without having to take the Uniform Bar Examination (UBE). If law school graduates complete other portions of the licensing process, including the mandated character and fitness review, they would be admitted to the bar. Wisconsin has done this since 1870. Other states have recently instituted diploma privilege, as well. I believe this would be the most equitable option for applicants for the State bar, many of whom have taken on enormous student debt, and who have also found their anticipated jobs have evaporated, leaving them without work and without the ability to practice law.

Criminal Justice Reforms

The killing of George Floyd in Minneapolis by police officers was painful -- and it was also far too commonplace, as we also reflect on the killings of Breonna Taylor and Tony McDade and many others. There is much to do to dismantle the systems of oppression and structural racism that have led to this moment, and I am committed to fighting on the legislative level. I also joined my friends and neighbors locally at several of the demonstrations in Brooklyn this past year.

The legislature passed a package of bills to end police brutality against Black people. I was proud to vote YES to repeal section 50-a of the civil rights law, which hides records of police misconduct from the public. This law has caused so much suffering; 50-a was used to shield the police officer who killed Eric Garner from public accountability. I'm thankful to the record-breaking 8,000 constitu-

ents who contacted me about this. I'm also grateful to the families and friends of the victims of police violence, the advocates, and my colleagues in the Black, Puerto Rican, Hispanic and Asian Legislative Caucus for their long-time leadership to end police brutality.

The legislature passed several other police reform measures, including bills to criminalize the use of chokeholds, ensure that police provide attention to the medical needs of people in custody, require officers to promptly report discharge of a firearm, the STAT Act to provide data collection for police and court activities, prevent biased misuse of emergency services, such as 911, and create an Office of Special Investigation to investigate and, if needed, prosecute deaths caused by police or peace officers.

We have much work ahead of us, including a bill to HALT solitary confinement, allow elder parole, and repeal the walking while trans ban.

Need Hand Sanitizer or a Face Covering?

I have free face coverings available at my district office in Carroll Gardens. Please contact my office before you stop by: 718-246-4889. I also have large jugs of hand sanitizer, so you can bring your smaller bottle to get a refill or you can have a larger jug for your building, school, non-profit, etc. Out of safety concerns for you and our staff, we have a plexiglass barrier at the front door, and we ask that you stand behind it while we assist you.

Face Coverings: Let's Get Rid of the Sales Tax. Wearing a mask is a sign of respect for our neighbors, keeps us healthy, and it's the New York thing to do. I also introduced bill A.10753 to exempt face masks from sales tax to ensure that they are easier for all New Yorkers to get.

Gowanus Rezoning Update

The City of New York has restarted the Uniform Land Use Review Procedure (ULURP) for the Gowanus rezoning, paused due to COVID-19. I support a careful and community-engaged rezoning of Gowanus, but I continue to have concerns about aspects of the plan, particularly the environmental impacts and ensuring that the rezoning addresses local NYCHA capital needs.

The rezoning of Gowanus requires serious attention to neighborhood needs and robust community engagement. This is particularly the case given that the canal is one of the nation's most contaminated waterways and, along with its extremely polluted uplands, is undergoing an historic Superfund Site clean-up. I have advocated for the project to include affordable housing, equitable growth, and green public spaces, and for a century's worth of toxic pollution to be carefully remediated before development takes place. I urge the City to take very seriously its position as a Responsible Party in the Superfund designation and as a steward of the environment generally in this rezoning process.

In an enormous step forward, November marked the long-overdue

beginning of dredging operations to clean up the Canal. We have a long way to go, but I was glad to attend the kick-off. I applaud the incredible work of the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency (EPA), Congresswoman Nydia M. Velázquez, the Community Advisory Group, as well as City and State partners.

The current plan for rezoning and developing the area heads toward the public review phase in January 2021. Several public pre-certification presentations have been held recently to communicate the Department of City Planning details regarding infrastructure, especially sewers and storm water drainage, traffic/transit, public education needs and green public spaces. The EPA has expressed extreme concerns regarding the toxicity at certain sites and the dangers of building there unless remediation is scaled up and fully addresses the remaining contaminants and their fumes for the long term.

I have long advocated for a radical overhaul of ULURP, given it provides little meaningful room at the table for the community. Nonetheless, I encourage you to participate in the process the best you can, and to reach out to my office to receive regular updates.

Election Reforms + Ranked Choice Voting Coming to NYC in 2021

I am very pleased to announce that I voted for and the legislature finally passed a bill to create a system for automatic voter registration. This system will allow state and local agencies to provide the New York State Board of Elections (BOE) with voter registration information for people who submit an application for services or assistance to various agencies.

We also passed several bills to improve the absentee ballot voting system, after we saw so many problems in the June primary. This package of bills allows any voter to obtain an absentee ballot and vote by mail, allows applications for absentee ballots to be processed earlier than 30 days before the election, counts absentee ballots even if they don't have a postmark if it is received at the BOE by mail the day after the election, and allows a number of common defects on an absentee ballot envelope to be fixed by a voter after notice from the BOE.

As you may recall, voters overwhelmingly cast their ballot in 2019 in support of a referendum to initiate Ranked Choice Voting (RCV). RCV will roll out in 2021, which means that you will be able to rank your top 5 candidates in the primary and special elections for Mayor, Comptroller, Borough President, and City Council. You can still just vote for one candidate, if you prefer. I have been a vocal supporter of RCV because it helps avoid costly run-offs and improves the way that candidates campaign, requiring them to build consensus and reach out to a broader group of people. We have made so many critical improvements to our archaic voting laws in the last few years, and this is another initiative that will help build trust in our democratic system and hopefully boost voter turnout. There will be several public education campaigns on this topic, so stay tuned.

Transit Updates

There have been a number of transit updates in the district, per below. I continue to advocate for a second entrance at the York Street Station, along with the DUMBO community. Further, Senator Brian Kavanagh and I have introduced legislation to establish a pilot program that uses mobile or stationary weigh-in-motion systems to enforce restrictions on overweight trucks on the BQE in Brooklyn (A.10223). This legislation is particularly important since overweight trucks contribute to the BQE's crumbling infrastructure.

- **Open Streets:** The City Dept. of Transportation (DOT) has opened streets for pedestrian access to allow residents to get fresh air and take a stroll while maintaining physical distance. nyc.gov/openstreets.
- **New Protected Bike Lanes on Flatbush Ave and 4th Ave!** DOT has completed these bike lane projects, which ensure safer streets for all New Yorkers along these busy corridors.
- **New Jay Street Busway Project:** NYC DOT has implemented a series of new bus priority projects, including a busway along Jay Street, from Tillary to Fulton Street, to ensure faster bus speeds.
- **Brooklyn Borough Hall Subway Station Elevator Repairs:** MTA NYC Transit is replacing the elevators at the Borough Hall 2/3/4/5 station on a project that will continue through Spring 2021. This work will remove ADA access at this station for the duration of the project.
- **New Overnight Express Bus Service.** MTA NYC Transit is providing new overnight express bus service for customers between Manhattan and Brooklyn. The new M99 will follow a route similar to the 2 subway line with multiple stops along Flatbush Avenue at Plaza St. East, Bergen St, Atlantic Ave, and Dekalb Ave.

Free Food Help for Everyone

The Get Food NYC Map (nyc.gov/GetFood) lists food pantries and free "grab & go" meals at schools. All New Yorkers (any age, any status) can pick up free meals at sites throughout the city, even if the school is closed. No ID is required and no one will be turned away. View their website for meal pick-up times, or to find a location, text "NYCFOOD" or "COMIDA" to 877-877.

Seniors Meal Deliveries & Tele-Visits: For meal deliveries, go to nyc.gov/GetFood or call 311 and say "Get Food". If you are feeling lonely - as so many of us are right now - you can also talk to volunteers through the City's Friendly Visiting Program. Call 212-AGING-NYC (212-244-6469).

There are also several local groups providing food:

- Heights and Hills is delivering meals to our older neighbors and checking in with them. 718-596-8789, www.heightsandhills.org
- CHiPS provides food and shelter to young women and children: 718-237-2962, www.chipsonline.org
- Mutual Aid groups are neighbors helping each other with various needs, mostly food. Contact my office for a list or search online.

COVID-19 Resources

COVID-19 Tests

<https://coronavirus.health.ny.gov/covid-19-testing> | 1-888-364-3065

Help with Food, Money, Housing, and Work

access.nyc.gov | 311

Mental Health Help

If you're feeling anxious or stressed, contact NYC Well, a free, confidential 24/7 helpline, staffed by trained counselors.

888-NYC-WELL | Chat online: [NYC.gov/nycwell](https://nyc.gov/nycwell)

NYS Domestic Violence Hotline

1-800-942-6906 | NYC: 1-800-621-HOPE

Blood Donations

NY Blood Center | 1-800-933-2566 | nybc.org

Health Care

You may be eligible for free or low cost health insurance. Open enrollment for 2021 ends on **Jan. 31, 2021**.

1-855-355-5777 | <https://nystateofhealth.ny.gov/>

Unemployment Insurance (UI)

www.labor.ny.gov/signin | 1-888-209-8124

NYS Sick and Paid Leave Benefits

paidfamilyleave.ny.gov/COVID19

New York State Assembly, Albany, New York 12248



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Business Assistance

- [Disasterloan.sba.gov](https://disasterloan.sba.gov)
- nyc.gov/covid19biz | 888-SBS-4NYC
- **NYS:** <https://esd.ny.gov/nyforwardloans-info>
- **Brooklyn Chamber of Commerce:** 718-875-1000 | www.brooklynchamber.com
- State DOL has a Shared Work Program for Employers to Reduce Lay-offs.

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