



Assemblymember

Anna Kelles

Assembly District 125



February 20, 2024

Dear Neighbors,

It was another full week in Albany focused on the New York State Budget! This was the last week of the day-long budget hearings, and like many of our area schools, the Legislature is on a one-week winter break from active session. Assembly Members and staff will use this time outside of session to review the information gathered through weeks of expert testimonials and executive budget proposal analysis to work toward creating the collective Assembly One House budget proposal. This draft will most likely be released the first week of March.

Read on for the week's highlights!

State Budget

Mental Hygiene Budget Hearing

The Mental Hygiene Budget Hearing occurred this week, covering areas of the budget related to Office of Mental Health (OMH), Office for People with Developmental Disabilities (OPWDD), and Office of Addiction Services and

Supports (OASAS). As a member of the Mental Health Committee in the Assembly, I had the opportunity to participate in the hearing and pose questions and comments to departmental leadership and advocates.

Major topics of the hearing were the workforce shortage across the nonprofit sector serving OPWDD, OMH, and OASAS programs and the wages of Direct Support Professionals (DSPs). DSPs do critically important work caring for and supporting individuals with disabilities. We've not invested in this workforce for years and now have severe workforce shortages with vacancy rates up to 25-30% in some non-profit agencies. I had the opportunity at the Budget Hearing to share the data of years of high inflation compared to the Cost-of-Living Adjustment (COLA) for DSPs, which clearly has not kept pace, and for many years over the last decade was kept completely flat. The Governor's budget proposes a 1.5% Cost of Living Adjustment (COLA) for direct support professionals, but we need to minimally support a 3.2% COLA to match the current inflation rate as a step to rebuild this workforce and uphold care for vulnerable New Yorkers. [Watch a video of my comments.](#)



Housing Budget Hearing

New York is in a housing crisis, and the cost of housing is the number one cause of housing insecurity. According to a [recent report from the NYS Comptroller](#), cost burdens in New York “are among the most severe in the nation” with one in five households paying more than 50 percent of their income for housing costs, and “significant racial disparities” still exist among households suffering from housing insecurity.

We need more housing stock of all types, including market-value, affordable, and supportive housing, but building new housing takes years to get through the State Environmental Quality Review Act (SEQR) review, funding processes and actual construction. New Yorkers are in need of housing *now*. As a member of the Assembly Housing Committee, I shared my thoughts at the Housing Budget Hearing this week that we can do both – build new housing and at the same time, enact affordability programs and tenant protections to ensure access to affordable housing now. We need investments like the Housing Access Voucher Program and Good Cause Eviction to protect tenants and make rents more affordable. [Watch a video of my comments](#) or read more in a [recent Spectrum news article](#).



NYS Rural Advocates Housing Rally

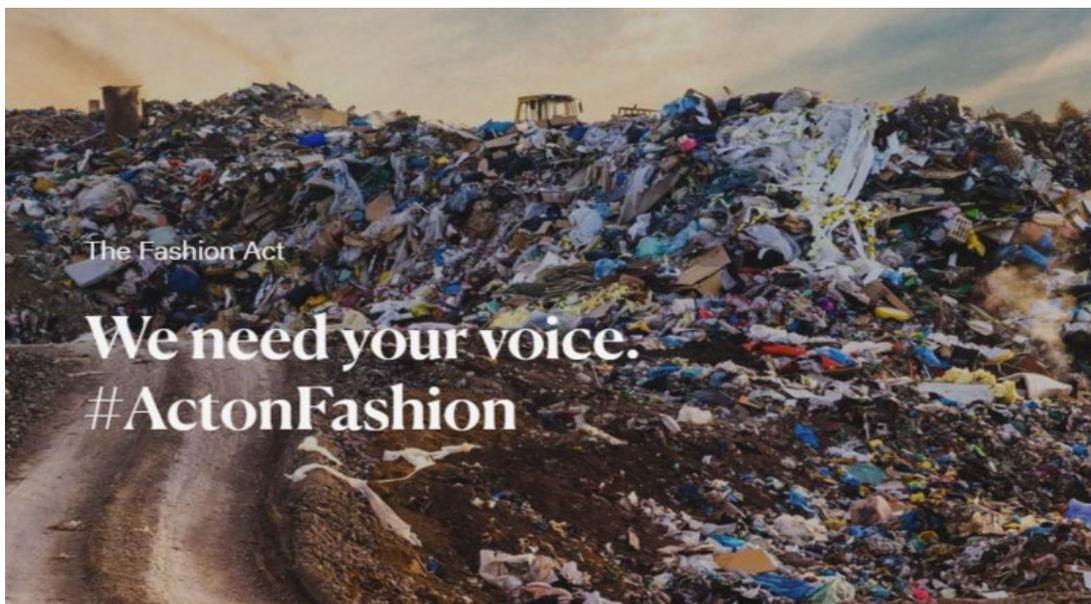
I was proud to add my voice to a housing rally in Albany organized by NYS Rural Advocates to support funding in the NYS Budget for Rural Preservation Companies (RPCs) and Neighborhood Preservation Programs (NPPs). RPCs provide critical assistance in rural areas, assisting municipalities with grant-writing for funding for new housing construction and community projects as well as manage affordable housing units. The companies work to prevent homelessness, help replace deteriorated mobile homes, and help adapt homes for mobility issues. [Watch a video of my comments.](#)



Legislative Update

Yale Sustainability Fashion + Policy event

I was thrilled to participate in the Yale Center for Business and the Environment panel discussion on [Sustainable Fashion + Policy](#). I joined an amazing panel of experts from industry and policy to discuss the rise of fast fashion and the fashion industry's impact on the climate crisis. I was able to share more about [The Fashion Act](#) that will set industry environmental and labor standards for brands and retailers who do business in New York, the fashion capital of the world. You can watch a recording of the panel on @yaleCBEY's YouTube channel.



From the Governor

Tuition Assistance Program (TAP) for Non-degree Workforce Programs

Microcredentials are a short, focused set of college classes that prepare individuals for specific in-demand jobs. They can be an effective way to gain the necessary training and skills to advance in a career - or to begin a new career - in a shorter timeframe than a full degree program. I'm excited that Governor Hochul [announced](#) available financial aid through New York's Tuition Assistance Program (TAP) for 283 non-degree programs at SUNY and CUNY beginning this spring semester. This financial aid for workforce development programs will make a pathway to a career more affordable for many individuals and families.

In the district, Tompkins Cortland Community College offers 13 eligible programs in on-campus, online or hybrid delivery modes. You can [search SUNY eligible programs](#) or [connect with Tompkins Cortland Community College](#) to learn more.

Community Resources

988 Suicide and Crisis Hotline

The recent Mental Hygiene hearing highlighted for me the need to remind the community about the [988 Suicide and Crisis Lifeline](#). 988 is an easy-to-remember, nation-wide number that you can call or text during a mental health crisis to be connected with free, confidential support from a trained crisis counselor. Mental health distress issues could include thoughts of suicide, substance use crisis, or emotional distress. More than 98% of 988 contacts are resolved at the first point of contact, with no need for any additional services to be dispatched, and the caller is referred to additional support services for future needs. However, calling 911 during a mental health crisis will likely dispatch law enforcement. As law enforcement are not trained mental health counselors, their response may not resolve the crisis and has the possibility of escalating a crisis. If you or someone you know is experiencing a mental health crisis, it is important to know the difference between 911 and 988 and to direct your call to the appropriate number for the response needed.



Free February Break Activities with theLearningWeb

This week, [theLearningWeb](#) is hosting fun, food-related February break activities for youth in Ithaca to enjoy. Those ages 11-18 can attend programs throughout the week, experiencing what goes on behind the scenes at some of Ithaca's local culinary hotspots and getting the opportunity to speak with and learn from skilled professionals.

Activities will be held Tuesday 2/20 (at Purity Ice Cream), Wed. 2/21 (at Wegman's), and Thursday (at Ithaca Bakery). On Friday 2/23, theLearningWeb will host a cooking class to celebrate and showcase skills gained throughout the week. Daily program times are scheduled from 9am to 12pm, with drop off beginning at 8:30am. These activities are free and lunch is provided daily, so contact David or Abbey to sign up as soon as possible!

Contact David (david@learning-web.org, (607) 275-0122 ext.113) or Abbey (abbey@learning-web.org (607) 275-0122 ext.112) to sign up or for additional information.



Image from Freepik

In good health,



Anna Kelles, Ph.D.

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