September 1, 2017

The Honorable Carl E. Heastie
Speaker of the Assembly
Room 932, Legislative Office Building
Albany, New York 12248

Re: Annual Report of the Committee on Judiciary – 2017

Dear Speaker Heastie:

As Chairperson of the Assembly Standing Committee on Judiciary, I am pleased to present to you the Committee’s Annual Report for the 2017 Legislative Session.

The Annual Report reviews the work of the Committee on Judiciary and highlights many of its major initiatives. It also includes a brief overview of various budgetary matters that concern the courts of the state and other areas within the committee’s purview.

The Judiciary Committee tackled many high profile issues in 2017, including protections for domestic violence victims, children and families, tenants and homeowners, workers and consumers, speech safeguards and the elderly and disabled.

A top priority of the Committee each year is ensuring that funding is added to the state budget for civil legal services for low-income New Yorkers. The Judiciary Committee remains a strong advocate for providing civil legal services to those in need. This year, the Assembly continued its support for civil legal services in New York State by restoring its traditional funding as well as an increased appropriation for civil legal services through the Judiciary budget.

I would like to acknowledge the hard work of the members of the Committee on Judiciary and all of the members of the Assembly for their continued commitment to its work and to progressive legislation. As always, your continued support is deeply appreciated.

Sincerely,

Helene E. Weinstein, Chairperson
Assembly Standing Committee on Judiciary
2017 ANNUAL REPORT
NEW YORK STATE ASSEMBLY
STANDING COMMITTEE ON JUDICIARY

Helene E. Weinstein, Chair

MEMBERS OF THE STANDING COMMITTEE

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Michele R. Titus
Charles D. Lavine
Kenneth P. Zebrowski
David I. Weprin
Edward C. Braunstein
Aravella Simotas
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Matthew J. Titone
David Buchwald
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Andrew Goodell
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Staff
Daniel Salvin, Assistant Secretary for Program & Policy
Richard Ancowitz, Counsel
Amy Maggs, Associate Counsel
Justin Birzon, Associate Counsel
Sarah Beaver, Committee Clerk
Nadia Gareeb, Counsel for Helene Weinstein
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I. COMMITTEE JURISDICTION

The Assembly Committee on Judiciary has jurisdiction over legislation affecting all aspects of both state and local courts. It has primary jurisdiction over amendments to the State Constitution, Civil Practice Law and Rules, Judiciary Law, Uniform Court Acts, Family Court Act, Surrogate's Court and Procedure Act, Domestic Relations Law, Estates Powers and Trusts Law, Uniform Commercial Code, Lien Law, Debtor-Creditor Law, General Obligations Law, Real Property Law, Real Property Actions and Proceedings Law, Civil Rights Law, Partnership Law, Eminent Domain Procedure Law and Indian Law. The Committee also shares budgetary oversight of the Office of Court Administration and the Department of Law with the Assembly Ways and Means Committee. In addition, all proposed amendments to the New York State Constitution are considered by the Judiciary Committee.

The highlights that follow demonstrate the breadth, diversity, and importance of the Judiciary Committee's work in 2017.
II. LEGISLATIVE ACCOMPLISHMENTS

A. PROTECTING DOMESTIC VIOLENCE VICTIMS, CHILDREN AND FAMILIES

1. Increasing the Age of Consent for Marriage – Chapter 35 A.5524B[Paulin]/S.4407B[Lanza]

This law prohibits marriage of minors less than 17 years of age and bolsters court oversight and protections for 17-year-olds that do seek to marry.


This law, which was part of the 2017-2018 budget, requires the Office of Court Administration to develop a phased-in program to translate, in writing, all court orders of protection into the top 10 most frequently used languages in the courts of each judicial department.

The following bills were passed by the Assembly only.


This measure would recognize the unique nature of domestic violence and its impact upon victims, and would allow additional time to victims to bring their claims in court. In most cases, this measure would expand the statute of limitation from one to two years.


By providing uniform access to court ordered forensic mental health evaluation reports and underlying data by litigants, their counsels and the attorney for the child in child custody and visitation cases, this measure would address due process concerns with limited access to information that has significant bearing on parental rights to their children.

3. Protecting Victims from Having to Choose Between Safety and Housing – A.2919[Lavine]/S.405[Robach].

This legislation protects the right of domestic violence and crime victims to request assistance without fear of losing their housing. This legislation would provide that victims of domestic violence and crime victims have the right to request police and emergency assistance without penalty or reprisal from a local nuisance ordinance.


In recognition of the financial barriers to fleeing domestic violence, this measure would authorize the family court to order spousal support when issuing an order of protection.

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1 All references to chapters, except where otherwise noted, are to chapters of the laws of 2017.

This measure would allow parents to plan for the future care and custody of their children in the event of a major life disruption resulting from immigration consequences.


This measure would extend the duration of caregiver designation by a parent or guardian from six months to twelve months.

**B. PROTECTING TENANTS AND HOMEOWNERS**

1. **Protections for Elderly Facing Foreclosure of Reverse Mortgages – Part FF of Chapter 58 – A.3008C Budget/S.2008C Budget.**

In light of the rise in reverse mortgage foreclosure filings, the Assembly fought to ensure that the elderly facing foreclosure of their reverse mortgages have equal protection under our foreclosure laws. The measure ensures that all homeowners, including seniors with reverse mortgages, should have the same protections of our foreclosure laws such as receipt of pre-foreclosure notices and entitlement to mandatory foreclosure settlement conferences.

The following bills passed the Assembly only.

1. **Establishing Time Restrictions to Remove or Remedy Dangerous Housing Conditions – A.255[Dinowitz]/S.350[Peralta].**

This measure would set a 60-day limit on the time within which a property owner must remedy a dangerous building violation, by requiring landlords to make necessary repairs in a timely fashion or risk losing control over the property.

2. **Increased Protections for Homeowners from Deed Theft Scams – A.1408 [Weinstein]/S.6171[Hamilton].**

This legislation would close existing loopholes in the law to both prevent fraudulent deed theft and mortgage scams, but to also increase the likelihood that a victim will have the opportunity to seek recovery in court. It would also give the District Attorney tools for civil remedies related to fraudulent deed transfers.

3. **Protections for Tenants in Homes Facing Foreclosure – A.2803[Williams]/S.5655 [Klein].**

This measure would uniformly extend protections for tenants in foreclosed homes to all lawfully residing tenants, regardless of when they enter into their leases – before or after the commencement of a foreclosure action.

This measure would require that parties in proceedings before New York City Housing Court who are not fluent in English are provided with an interpretation of certain housing court documents, including stipulations, in their native language.


This measure would direct the Department of Financial Services to create a website allowing seniors to compare the cost, rate, and service features of reverse mortgage products.

The following bills were reported by the Assembly Judiciary Committee and were pending at the conclusion of session.

1. **Defense of Standing – A.1498[Weinstein]/S.6093[Savino].**

This homeowner protection measure would ensure that only legally entitled parties are able to bring foreclosure suits against homeowners, and would preserve homeowners’ related defenses.

2. **Strengthening the Law Related to Good Faith Home Purchasers – A.1569[Mosley]/S.4663[Avella].**

This measure would close a loophole in the current law that allows deed scammers to hide behind the excuse that they had no notice that the property they purchased was fraudulently transferred to them.

3. **Relates to Providing Recourse for Manufactured Homeowners – A.2682[Thiele]/S.3231[LaValle].**

This bill would permit manufactured homeowners to challenge unjustified rent increases by manufactured home parks.


This measure would prevent fraudulent deed transfers by increasing the accountability of notaries.

C. **ADMINISTRATION OF JUSTICE**


This law extends carve-outs for mandatory e-filing in foreclosure and consumer credit cases at the trial level courts. It also expands mandatory e-filing in Appellate Divisions to all classes of cases.

This law provides a legal cause of action against the taking of harassing or annoying video images of residential backyards.

3. **Expanding Venue in a Civil Action – Chapter 366 A.8032[Rosenthal]/S.6031 [Ranzenhofer].**

This law permits actions to be commenced based upon where a substantial portion of the events leading to the claim arose.

The following bills passed the Assembly only.


This measure would remove barriers faced by New Yorkers with limited English proficiency in New York City Housing Court. It requires translation of certain housing court documents, in non-payment cases, in the seven most common languages in New York City.

2. **Strengthening New York’s Anti-Slapp law – A.5292[Weinstein]/S.2183[Alcantara].**

SLAPP (Strategic Lawsuits Against Public Participation) actions are designed to stifle the public’s right to free speech and petition about matters of public concern. This is accomplished by bogging people down in court with the time, expense, and energy of defending against frivolous lawsuits. This legislation would strengthen existing law by ensuring that people who are faced with frivolous litigation filed by parties who object to a citizen’s participation in matters of public concern are able to recover attorneys’ fees incurred in defending themselves.


This legislation would render admissible the statement of a party’s agent or employee, provided that the statement was on a matter within the scope of that employment or agency relationship, and made during the existence of the relationship. This measure follows the approach of the Federal Rules of Evidence.

4. **Presumption of Authenticity – A.6048[Zebrowski]/S.4869[Bonacic].**

This bill would create a presumption of authenticity for documents obtained during discovery, which would have the effect of streamlining the introduction of such documents into evidence, and allowing certain trials to move along more quickly.

5. **Streamlining the Procedure Surrounding Service of Subpoena and Delivery of Records – A.6047[Titone]/S.4867[Bonacic].**

The measure would allow a subpoena duces tecum to be made returnable to the attorney or self-represented party who originally served them. This bill would avoid the burdensome requirement of having to examine subpoenaed records within the busy confines of the record room in the courthouse.

The following bills were reported by the Assembly Judiciary Committee and were pending at the conclusion of session.
1. **Providing Innocent Farmers an Affirmative Defense – A.600[Abinanti]/S.523 [Young].**

This legislation would grant farmers an affirmative defense against patent infringement suits which assert that the farmer is using seed with patented traits. The affirmative defense would permit the farmer to defend such suits by showing that they did not knowingly introduce such patented seed onto their property.

2. **Ensuring the Availability of Certain Benefits for Exonorees – A.3894[Quart]/S.53 [Hoylman].**

This legislation would ensure that persons exonerated after a wrongful conviction will be entitled to the same re-entry services as other formerly incarcerated persons. This legislation would also ensure additional benefits for exonorees intended to ameliorate the collateral consequences of their wrongful conviction.


This bill would enable expedited court proceedings against property insurers by property owners for claims which result from a state disaster emergency, such as Superstorm Sandy.

**D. PROTECTING CONSUMERS IN ARBITRATION**

1. **Authorizing Arbitration or Mediation Proceedings on Saturday and/or Sunday when All Parties Consent Thereto – Chapter 215 – A.8154[Simanowitz]/S.6077A[Felder].**

This measure authorizes arbitration or mediation proceedings to be conducted on any day of the week on consent of all parties and the tribunal, thus providing flexibility to parties who may otherwise be conflicted by lost time from work or school.

The following bills passed the Assembly only.

1. **Requiring Arbitrators to Follow the Law – A.1370[Weinstein]/S.6060[Avella].**

Existing law does not require arbitrators to follow the law when rendering arbitration decisions. This measure would allow a participant in an arbitration to have an arbitration award vacated in court if the arbitrator demonstrated a manifest disregard of the law.

2. **Requiring Arbitrators to Set Forth a Basis for their Decisions – A.6372[Titone]/S.6225[Lanza].**

Under current law, arbitrators typically are not obliged to explain why they reached a decision favoring one party or the other. This measure would require arbitrators to do so, thereby better informing parties about their rights to challenge the decision.

The following bills were reported by the Assembly Judiciary Committee and were pending at the conclusion of session.
1. **Allowing Consumers a Convenient Place of Trial – A.1328[Weinstein]/S.1533[Avella].**

Consumer contracts frequently require consumers to arbitrate or litigate disputes in a faraway venue. This bill would give consumers the ability to arbitrate or litigate in the county of their residence, notwithstanding any contract language to the contrary.

1. **Allowing Consumers a Right to Rescind Contracts – A.2485-A[Simotas].**

This measure would give the Courts the ability to reform consumer and employment contracts in order to better meet the reasonable expectations of the parties to the contract.

3. **Comprehensive Arbitration Reform – A.6983[Titone].**

This measure would, among other things, set requirements designed to ensure consumer and employment arbitrator impartiality and neutrality.

**E. WORKERS AND CONSUMER PROTECTIONS**


This measure provides clarity for agricultural tourism ("agritourism") proprietors and professionals by establishing processes for recognition and dissemination of the inherent risks involved with participating in agritourism activities such as U-Pick Christmas trees, farm and winery tours, hiking, hunting, and other forms of outdoor recreation.

The following bills passed the Assembly only.

1. **Enhancing Protections and Disclosures Required in Consumer Contracts – A.1085[Dinowitz]/S.6069[Squadron].**

This legislation would require plain language to be used in certain consumer contracts involving transactions valued at $250,000 or less, an increase from present law which specifies $50,000.

The following bills were reported by the Assembly Judiciary Committee and were pending at the conclusion of session.

1. **Protecting Workers from Employers who Illegally Withhold Wages – A.628[Rosenthal]/S.579[Peralta].**

The Securing Wages Earned Against Theft (SWEAT) Act would ensure that assets of the employer will be available to compensate wage theft victims who obtain judgment against their employers, thereby increasing the likelihood of recovery.

2. **Extending the Statute of Limitations for Toxic Tort Claims – A.4845[Ramos].**

This measure would extend the time within which a plaintiff may bring a legal action for the injury caused by a toxic ecological factor.

Currently, citizens are not permitted to sue debt collectors who violate state law during collection efforts. This legislation would allow private citizens to enforce their own rights, where the government either cannot or will not do so.

**F. PROTECTING ELDERLY AND DISABLED**

The following bill passed the Assembly only.

1. **Waiver of Certain Fees in Guardianship Proceedings – A.5363[Titus].**

   This measure would encourage representation of incapacitated individuals by exempting principals in guardianship cases filed under Article 81 of the Mental Hygiene Law from the $45.00 filing fee for civil motions.


   This legislation would simplify the current power of attorney form, introduce protections for those who accepts an acknowledged power of attorney in good faith, and make a number of technical amendments to assist the elderly and disabled.

The following bills were reported by the Assembly Judiciary Committee and were pending at the conclusion of session.


   This measure would prevent the misuse of guardianship proceedings for the primary purpose of collecting bills and would thereby put an end to a disturbing practice by some nursing homes.

**G. TRUSTS AND ESTATES AND GUARDIANSHIPS**

1. **Clarifying the Prudent Investor Act – Chapter 278 – A.1482[Weinstein]/S.2079 [Bonacic]**

   This bill clarifies the effective date of a trustee’s power to adjust from income to principal or from principal to income.

The following bills passed the Assembly only.

The Marriage Equality Act was enacted on June 24, 2011 (2011 Sess. Law News of N.Y. Ch. 95). This legislation would make conforming changes to the Estates Powers and Trusts Law and the Surrogate’s Court Procedure Act.

2. **Clarifying Rules Governing the Commissions of Donees of Powers in Trust – A.6046[Buchwald].**

This bill would amend the Surrogate’s Court Procedure Act to create and clarify rules governing the commissions of donees of powers in trust, including donees of powers during minority. It would conform such commissions to the existing rules governing commissions of trustees.

3. **Clarifying Procedures Regarding the Establishment of a “Pour Over” Will – A.6809 [Stirpe]**

This proposal would remove a conflict with an Estates Powers and Trusts Law section (N.Y. EPTL §7-1.18) and clarify that the trust need not hold any assets prior to the individual's death.

4. **Enhancing the Privilege and Protections Between a Personal Representative and the Attorney to Lifetime Trustees – A.7088[Weinstein].**

This measure would include lifetime trustees in the definition of fiduciaries to whom the attorney-client privilege applies.

The following bill was reported by the Assembly Judiciary Committee and was pending at the conclusion of session.

1. **Protecting the Estates of Divorced Individuals from Wrongful Distribution – A.6229 [Seawright]/S.6503[Bonacic].**

This legislation would require a beneficiary of an estate who is related to the decedent’s previous spouse to prove that such distribution was intended by the decedent.


This legislation would establish a right of publicity for deceased individuals and a registry to publicly post such interests upon thereby giving notice to people who may seek to use an individual's right of publicity in New York State for advertising purposes, or for the purposes of trade, fundraising, or solicitation of donations.

H. **CONSTITUTIONAL AMENDMENTS REPORTED BY THE COMMITTEE**

1. **Providing for the Forfeiture or Reduction of Pension Benefits by Public Officials who Breach the Public Trust – A.1749[Buchwald]/S.418[Croci].**

This proposed constitutional amendment which received second passage this year, allows for certain state and local public officers convicted of a felony involving breach of public trust to be subject to the forfeiture of pension benefits. Upon second passage this year, the measure was presented on the ballot for voter consideration and became law.

2. **Health and Safety Projects on Forest Preserves – A.8301[Englebright]/S.2414[Little].**
This proposed constitutional amendment authorizes public utility lines and bike paths within the Adirondack forest preserve. It also establishes land banks within such preserve for public safety projects. Upon second passage this year, the measure was presented on the ballot for voter consideration and became law.

The following constitutional amendments passed the Assembly only.

1. **Allowing Persons who will be 18 Years Old at the Time of a Presidential Election to Vote in Primary Election if 17 Years of Age at the Time** – A.3549[Cusick]/S.3979[Savino].
   
   This proposed constitutional amendment would allow persons who will be 18 years old at the time of a presidential election to vote in primary election if they are 17 years old at the time. Our laws currently allow such 17-year-olds to be eligible to enlist in the armed forces and fight in a war but not have the ability to vote. To date, Indiana, Kentucky, Maine, Maryland, Mississippi, Nebraska, North Carolina, Ohio and Virginia already allow this practice.

2. **Authorizing Ballot by Mail** – A.7623[Vanel]/S.840[Comrie].
   
   This proposed constitutional amendment would allow any voter who wishes to vote by mail to request such a ballot without the necessity of declaring any reason for doing so. Under current law, the New York State Constitution only allows absentee voting if a person expects to be absent from the county in which they live, or absent from the City of New York or, because they are unable to vote in person due to illness or physical disability.

3. **Clean Air and Water** – A.6279[Englebright]/S.5287[Carlucci]
   
   This proposed constitutional amendment would amend the State Constitution’s bill of rights to include a right to clean air and water and a healthful environment.

   
   This proposed constitutional amendment would guarantee equal protection of the laws of New York to persons on the basis of sex.

   III. **JUDICIARY BUDGET / PUBLIC HEARING ON THE IMPLEMENTATION OF THE STATE BUDGET ON THE JUDICIARY**

   This hearing provided a synopsis of the current state of the Judiciary with an emphasis on court backlogs, constraints on court resources, and judicial vacancies. It examined, generally, Judiciary’s anticipated fiscal needs for the 2018-2019 SFY. The hearing also examined the State’s ability to provide access to justice to low-income New Yorkers through its funding of civil legal services. Witnesses included the Office of Court Administration, the New York State Bar Association, the New York City Bar Association, the Empire Justice Center, New York Legal Assistance Group, Mobilization for Justice, and Legal Services-NYC.
IV. NEW YORK STATE'S JUDICIARY FUNDING

The 2017-2018 State budget adopted without change the Judiciary's budget request in the amount of $2.18 billion, an increase, in terms of the General Fund Operating Budget, of $42.7 million, or 2 percent over last year. The court's budget absorbs statutorily mandated salary increments for represented non-judicial employees, statutorily mandated increases for indigent legal defense, supplemental funds for IOLA, a much-needed increase in funding for civil legal services to address the crisis in legal services funding. With this year's Judiciary budget, the Office of Court Administration will maintain current staffing levels, filling just a limited number of positions critical to operations, and plans to keep courtrooms open to the public until 5 p.m. each day.

V. FUNDING FOR LEGAL SERVICES

In 2017, the Assembly built on its support for civil legal services in New York State by supporting an increased appropriation for civil legal services through the Judiciary budget by $15 million for a total of $100 million to help bridge the tremendous gap between civil legal service needs of low-income New Yorkers and the availability of services to meet these needs. As part of the SFY 2016-17 budget, the Assembly also restored its traditional funding for civil legal services in the amount of $2.83 million and $609,000 for domestic violence programs. Further, the SFY 2017-18 enacted budget appropriated $109.64 million for the New York State Office of Indigent Legal Services, representing an increase of $10.24 million from the prior year – of which $8.68 million is to continue to implement the Hurrell-Harring settlement agreement. In addition, as a part of the 2017-2018 budget, a measure was enacted that will require the state to gradually increase criminal defense funding over the next six years according to a plan developed by the Office of Indigent Legal Services. The plan will ensure defendants have counsel at arraignment, establish new caseload standards so that attorneys can devote sufficient time and attention to each case, and ensure that attorneys receive effective training and have the necessary qualifications and experience. When fully implemented in 2023, it is anticipated that the state will increase funding to counties and New York City through the Office of Indigent Legal Services by approximately $250 million annually.
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Total Number of Committee Meetings Held: 11