

Assemblyman Jeffrey Dinowitz

Reports to the People of the 81st Assembly District

Este noticiario está disponible en español en nuestro sitio Web o en nuestra oficina.

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Temporary Office Hours during COVID-19 are Monday-Thursday from 10am-3pm. Appointments strongly preferred and will be outdoors only.

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Serving the communities of Kingsbridge, Kingsbridge Heights, Marble Hill, Norwood, Riverdale, Van Cortlandt Village, Wakefield, and Woodlawn

OUR COMMUNITY BENDS, BUT WE DON'T BREAK

COVID-19 Pandemic Upeuds Life As We Know It

Since the last newsletter I mailed in early 2020, pretty much everything in New York State has changed. Our community witnessed one of the most horrific losses of life in recent memory as New York City was a global epicenter of the COVID-19 pandemic. We got the local spread of this virus under control over the summer, but it seems likely that it is only a matter of time before another outbreak begins. It pains me to watch some federal leaders threaten the progress that we have made in New York, especially as so many of us made enormous sacrifices to keep people safe – whether it was losing a job or having hours reduced, working as a frontline worker at the height of the pandemic spread, or losing a loved one to the virus.

We are confronting numerous crises simultaneously: a health crisis from inadequate federal support for testing and essential medical equipment, exacerbated by longstanding demographic disparities among underlying health conditions that increase fatality risk of COVID-19; an economic crisis brought on by depression-level unemployment rates, exacerbated by longstanding inequities between the ultra-wealthy and the vast majority of people who have to work for a living; a societal crisis magnified by the George Floyd murder, exacerbated by longstanding racial disparities that has been particularly prevalent in our criminal justice system but is noticeable in many aspects of daily life for people of color.

But the reports of our beloved city's demise are greatly exaggerated. We have been through tough times before and bounced back due to the dedication and ingenuity of New Yorkers, and I firmly believe that we will not only emerge from these crises but that we will emerge stronger and more vibrant than ever. I hope that we look back on the year 2020 as the year that got us to finally address public health disparities by guaranteeing universal and affordable health care for all. I hope we will decide to address growing income disparities by investing in the lives of working people instead of whatever boosts stock market prices. And I hope we will see that 2020 was the year that we finally turned the corner on racism, anti-Semitism and all forms of prejudice, discrimination and hatred.

My own district office has been working hard to provide constituent services by telephone and email. We have been inundated during this crisis by a many-fold increase in constituent requests for assistance. We try to respond as quickly as possible and we have successfully resolved most, but not all, issues. We have re-opened our physical office on a somewhat limited basis. Currently we are open Monday through Thursday from 10 a.m. to 3 p.m. and as public health guidance permits. As we reopen safely, both in my office and in businesses everywhere, it seems readily apparent that we will not be getting back to "normal" any time soon.

Throughout my tenure as an Assemblyman, my favorite part of this job is meeting and talking to people about their concerns in our community. As community meetings are held virtually and in-person events are largely cancelled, it is difficult to have the organic conversations that have inspired my work on behalf of our neighborhoods. I encourage each and every one of you to send me emails and call me with your ideas on how to improve our community. Working together is how we will get through this difficult time, and I continue to be grateful to be your Assemblyman.

Making Sure People Have What They Need To Stay Safe



I was proud to help give away food boxes, school supplies, face masks, hand sanitizer, and more to members of our community and to local organizations that help people in need during this difficult period. Along with Congressman Eliot Engel, Congressman Adriano Espaillat, State Senator Jamaal Bailey, Council Member Andrew Cohen, and other community leaders we have been able to host many events to ensure people have the items they need to be safe during the COVID-19 pandemic. Thank you to Kingsbridge Heights Community Center, Mosholu Montefiore Community Center, the Riverdale Y, Church of the Mediator, West Bronx Housing & Neighborhood Resource Center, Riverdale Neighborhood House, Saint Frances of Rome Food Pantry, Emerald Isle Immigration Center, Kingsbridge Library, Project Bravo, FreshDirect, and everyone who has helped distribute essential items to people in need throughout the 81st Assembly District.

Fighting For Electoral Reforms

The recent election (the results of which were not known at the time this newsletter was written) has brought to light a number of important voting reforms that we passed or that we need to pass soon.

I am very proud that the new law that I authored, which allowed voters to apply for an absentee ballot based on fear of becoming infected or transmitting a disease, has enabled a record number of New Yorkers to vote by mail this year. My law covers all elections through the end of 2021 and expands the definition of "temporary illness" as an excuse for absentee voting. The legislature is midway through a process to amend the state constitution to allow for no-excuse absentee voting and if we act quickly enough – we could have no-excuse absentee voting in New York State beginning in 2022.

I am also continuing to fight for additional electoral reforms, such as removing the de facto poll tax on absentee ballots by requiring postage paid return envelopes to be provided by the Board of Elections. We need to implement ballot tracking statewide, establish a network of ballot drop boxes throughout the community (not just at poll sites), more early voting locations, and do everything we can to eliminate barriers to voter participation.

FREE Notary Service

Our office provides free notary service during temporary COVID-19 office hours, 10 a.m. to 3 p.m. Monday through Thursday. Please bring two forms of identification, at least one with your photo and signature, if you would like your signature notarized. Please be aware that all notaries are being done outdoors at this time.

COMMUNITY UPDATE

Education in the Time of Pandemic

There may be no more challenging issue to confront during the COVID-19 pandemic than how we handle education in an equitable way. The health and safety of our students, teachers, staff, and their families has to be our number one priority. However, I am extremely concerned that this pandemic will intensify pre-existing inequality within our school system, especially for those without reliable access to internet or computers at home and those without parents or guardians who are able to consistently facilitate remote learning at home.

At the time this newsletter was written, New York City public schools were mostly open under a hybrid approach for students who opt in, with an option for fully remote learning. Nearly three quarters of families have chosen all-remote learning because of concern over the virus. Private schools and colleges have largely been allowed to make their own decisions about reopening as long as certain statewide pandemic metrics continue to be met. Child care facilities are allowed to operate as well.

In my opinion, there will always be a risk of another COVID-19 outbreak until we have a vaccine that is widely distributed. The idea of schools being reopened without adequate protections in place, such as widespread rapid testing, sufficient ventilation in every room, at least one school nurse per school facility, dedicated space for isolating potentially sick individuals, and more is very frightening to me.

I am deeply frustrated by the Department of Education response to this pandemic. Key decisions were continually delayed, making it impossible for anyone to plan for the school year, and there doesn't seem to have been enough consideration given to how we prioritize in-person learning. I support the concept of ensuring that our youngest and neediest students are given access to in-person classrooms ahead of older, more autonomous students. Under this model, Kindergarteners and District 75 students would be given first priority, followed by each successive year until all DOE space citywide has been safely filled in accordance with public health recommendations. It might be a little more difficult logistically, but we must recognize that not all students are equally capable of remote learning and that developmental stages are not the same across all children.

NOTICE: Wear A Mask

To help protect at-risk individuals and essential workers from exposure to COVID-19

New Yorkers need to wear masks or face coverings in public when social distancing isn't possible.



FLU SHOTS SAVE LIVES I am incredibly proud that hundreds of our neighbors were immunized against the flu this year at my annual series of flu shot events. Every year, the flu kills large numbers of New Yorkers. As we brace ourselves for a second wave of COVID-19, it is even more important that we take steps to protect ourselves from the flu. If you have so far been unable to get your flu shot, please talk to your physician or visit your local pharmacy to ask about how you can do so at no cost!

Housing Update for Tenants, Shareholders, & Homeowners

The below information is intended to provide a general overview of resources that may be available to help people stay in their homes. Please feel free to contact my office with specific questions about your circumstances and we will help you figure out what your options are. All cases handled by my office are strictly confidential unless we are given explicit, affirmative permission to contact entities on your behalf.

TENANTS: The Tenant Safe Harbor Act, which was one of my bills that was signed into law at the end of June, prohibits evictions for nonpayment of rent for people who experienced financial difficulty during the COVID-19 period (defined as March 7 until all aspects of New York's reopening are complete). Although tenants may still face monetary judgments, this debt will be disconnected from a tenant's right to stay in their home. Tenants may still be evicted for debt that existed prior to the pandemic or accrues after the emergency order ends as well as for violations of lease terms (known as a holdover proceeding). Please also remember that there are many new tenant protections that were implemented in 2019 as part of the Housing Stability and Tenant Protection Act, especially regarding preferential rents (rent concessions), ending the deregulation of stabilized apartments, and capping Major Capital Improvement or Individual Apartment Improvement rent increases. If you are worried that your landlord is trying to evict you or if you have questions about your lease or housing situation, please contact my office. We may be able to help directly or we can also help connect you to civil legal services providers if necessary.

SHAREHOLDERS: I am continuing to fight for co-op shareholders to be treated fairly under the law, such as mandating reverse mortgage eligibility (and protections) for co-op owners. The relationship between residents and property owners is more complicated in co-ops because the landlord is essentially the people who live in the building. Personal mortgages may be able to be refinanced on a case-by-case basis by contacting your servicer. I have also passed legislation in the Assembly that would eliminate pre-payment penalties on mortgages for co-ops (A2667). That bill is awaiting action in the State Senate.

HOMEOWNERS: If you are concerned that you will not be able to make your mortgage payments or have already defaulted on payments, please contact your servicer and try to work out an arrangement with them. Most mortgage servicers are offering relief to homeowners, including short-term forbearances and long-term changes to mortgage terms. You should also consult an attorney to help figure out the best option going forward. New York State also has a Homeowner Protection Program (HOPP) that may be able to connect you with mortgage assistance programs and free legal services for those who qualify. Please also remember that there are existing property tax relief programs such as STAR, Enhanced STAR, and SCHE/DHE that you may be newly eligible for.

Protecting Workers Right to Organize



I was deeply troubled by what appeared to be a violation of labor laws that are intended to protect unionized grocery store workers. After the Key Food Supermarket in North Riverdale was sold to new owners this summer, all of the former employees who were members of RWDSU Local 338 were fired (despite city laws saying they have to be kept on for at least 90 days). Many of these workers were long-time members of our community dating back to when this supermarket was an A&P.

It is my understanding that most (if not all) unionized workers were hired back, but I am still concerned about back pay and what happens after the 90-day period is up. I am pleased that the new owners backed down and finally hired back these workers, but I will certainly be keeping close watch and stand ready to fight for all workers' right to organize.

COMMUNITY UPDATE

Stopping the Scourge of Dangerous Driving and Drag Racing



A rally and press conference for Safe Streets was organized by Council Member Andrew Cohen and me at Independence Avenue and West 232nd Street, next to Seton Park, P.S. 24, RKA M.S./H.S. 141, and Spuyten Duyvil Library, to call attention to the need for increased enforcement against dangerous drivers and improved infrastructure to prevent speeding.

Dangerous driving has long been an issue throughout New York City, but it has clearly gotten much worse over the course of this pandemic. This problem is not confined to one street or neighborhood; it is all over my district and the city as well. There have been reports of drag racing, excessively loud cars, running of red lights and stop signs, weaving in and out of traffic, and much more. It is unacceptable, and we need our City to step up and take action before somebody gets hurt – or worse.

I have been working to address these problems on several fronts:

The shortest-term solution is to increase enforcement. These dangerous drivers are not following the law, and I believe the police should be ticketing, confiscating, and/or arresting where necessary. I have encouraged the local precincts to enlist the help of State Police if they need it.

We also need to make street safety improvements in chronic problem locations. This might include installation of additional speed humps or bumps, additional red light and speed cameras, narrowed roadways, stop signs or traffic lights, and more. We are all pedestrians in our community at one point or another, and it is essential that pedestrian safety is prioritized in the municipal budget.

Lastly, we need to make changes so that the police have more tools to utilize when combating dangerous driving. I have introduced legislation to add mufflers and noise to the annual vehicle inspection requirements. There are also bills (which I support) to increase penalties for drag racing and excessive vehicle noise. Based on the feedback I have been getting from constituents, I believe that there is a significant amount of overlap between cars that are modified to make huge amounts of noise and cars whose drivers engage in dangerous driving behavior. Hopefully, by empowering the enforcement of noise standards we are also cracking down on dangerous drivers.

Help Keep Our Parks Pleasant



a) Weeding at Sedgwick Avenue and Fort Independence Street along Jerome Park Reservoir; b) Park cleanup at Williamsbridge Oval; c) Gardening at Bissell Gardens in Wakefield

Although many things are different during the COVID-19 pandemic, one thing that apparently will always be true is that our Parks are first on the list for funding cuts during times of economic hardship. Less money from the City for park maintenance means fewer workers to help pick up trash and empty garbage cans as well as less frequent weeding and mowing.

I am very proud of everyone who has come out over the summer and fall to help with our Community Cleanups that my office has hosted alongside Council Member Andrew Cohen, State Senator Jamaal Bailey, and local organizations such as Van Cortlandt Park Alliance, Friends of the Williamsbridge Oval, and other local parks organizations. I am

also proud of people who have organized their own cleanups, such as Jerome Park Friends and Neighbors and Stewards of Henry Hudson Park. We have done these cleanups so far at Williamsbridge Oval, Brust Park, Seton Park, Van Cortlandt Park, Jerome Park Reservoir area, and more, and I am excited to continue helping out where we can to keep our parks clean (even if an ideal world would have fully funded parks maintenance budgets).

NOTICE: Devastation to MTA Finances puts Henry Hudson Bridge Rebate & Metro-North Discount on Hold

Unfortunately, the long-anticipated Henry Hudson Bridge toll rebate for Bronxites that I fought so hard for, and Metro-North intracity discount did not begin this summer as expected. Due to dramatically reduced usage of for-hire vehicles (the money for these programs came from a surcharge imposed on rides beginning or ending south of 96th Street in Manhattan), there are not sufficient funds available right now for the rebate and discount. Compounding the issue here is that fare box revenue from the subways, buses, and regional commuter rails is also dramatically reduced and the MTA has had to spend immense amounts of money to keep our transit safe and clean for riders and workers. I am optimistic that once the funding situation has been stabilized (ideally through the allocation of federal funds) that we will finally be able to begin these programs. Please note that the MTA has suspended all similar programs around the state as well as the implementation of their 2020-24 Capital Plan (which includes accessibility improvements in places like Mosholu Parkway – 4 Train, West 242nd Street – 1 Train, and Woodlawn Metro-North). I will continue to fight for the implementation of the Henry Hudson Bridge rebate for Bronxites, full accessibility in our mass transit system, increased bus frequency, and more. As it becomes clear whether New York State will receive sufficient disaster relief funding from the federal government, we should have a better idea of when these goals will be achieved.

New York State Faces Massive Budget Woes

Even before the COVID-19 pandemic hit New York and forced us to spend billions of dollars on fighting the pandemic's spread (not to mention decimating our revenue projections for tax collection), we were up against a difficult financial situation. Our state has some serious financial obligations that we must figure out how to fund – Medicaid, Foundation Aid for our public schools, MTA transit infrastructure, and much more. Estimates of our state budget deficit were at \$13.1 billion when we passed the budget in April and the deficit will only continue to grow as tax revenues are diminished and public health expenses increase.

The time has come to drop the pretense around taxing the super wealthy. Every time this concept comes up, we are presented with baseless claims that the wealthy will flee our city if we raise taxes on ultra-millionaires and billionaires. Well, every time taxes have been lowered for the super wealthy they don't flock to our city so I am very skeptical that the reverse will be true. Particularly in recent years, they have benefited from federal tax cuts while working people are increasingly being asked to shoulder the burden of our societal obligations. To be clear, there are a very small number of people that this tax proposal would impact.

Some have suggested taxing pied-à-terres (which are multi-million dollar second homes that are predominantly owned by out-of-state millionaires and billionaires), creating new tax brackets for high income earners, ending the stock transfer tax reimbursement (which is only 1-5¢ per share of stock, and would largely impact super wealthy people who disproportionately control the vast majority of stocks on the market), and other areas where the wealthiest among us (mostly corporations) have been allowed to avoid paying their fair share.

The reality is that New York has expenses due to COVID-19 that we will be unable to pay for as a state on our own. We do not have the same ability as the federal government to print money, or absorb debt. Nor do we have the ability to leverage trillions of dollars in resources to make the kinds of investments we need for safe schools, functioning transit, and more.

Protecting Workers & Consumers in Albany

In non-COVID news, I am proud that I was able to pass several bills in the Assembly that would protect both consumers and workers.

Limit Auto-Renewal Contracts: Consumers are one step closer to having an easier time escaping from predatory promotional deals and notorious difficult-to-cancel gym memberships. This legislation would require businesses making automatic renewal or continuous service offers to clearly present the terms of the agreement and it would prohibit businesses from charging consumers without their affirmative consent. It would also mandate that consumers be able to terminate an automatic renewal or continuous service agreement online if that is how they originally signed up. The bill has passed both chambers and is waiting for the State Senate to deliver it to the Governor for his signature. (A3173A)

Restrict Employer Access to Private Social Media: This legislation would prohibit an employer from requesting access to social media accounts of prospective employees as a condition of hiring, continuing employment, or disciplinary proceedings. The bill has passed in the Assembly but is waiting for the State Senate to pass it as well. (A2479)

Prohibit Credit History Employer Discrimination: This legislation would prohibit the use of consumer credit history in hiring, employment, and licensing determinations. Credit histories have been shown to often have material errors that go undetected or uncorrected, and there is little to no evidence that shows a correlation between credit history and job performance. The bill has passed in the Assembly but is awaiting action in the State Senate. (A2611)



Peaceful demonstration in Van Cortlandt Park after the murder of George Floyd in Minneapolis.

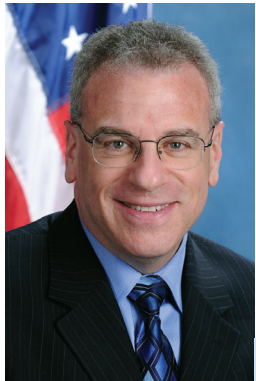


Big, Bad, Billion Dollar Bank

Access to banking services is a public right, and I am furious to learn that Chase – a multinational corporation that generated \$115 billion in revenue during 2019 – has announced that they will be closing the only bank in southern Riverdale. The Knolls Crescent branch serves a tightknit community where many people have limited mobility, whether they are seniors who rely on walkers or wheelchairs or new parents who use strollers. Although many services can be done digitally, many seniors do not have smart phones (or if they do, they do not use them for banking services). There are also certain bank functions that need to be done in person, like withdrawing cash or getting a cashier's check.

Already, hundreds of neighbors have organized in opposition to this announcement and I have made it clear in writing and on the telephone with executives from Chase that they are making a bad choice. We will continue exploring every option we have to protest this decision.

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City Reneges on Promise at 4747 Bronx Boulevard

In stark contrast to the devoted attention that affluent Manhattan neighborhoods have gotten with respect to the placement of homeless shelters, the City continues to ignore our working class community in Wakefield. The Wakefield area has been shouldering more than its fair share of our societal burden to help people in need, and some years ago the City promised they would not turn 4747 Bronx Boulevard into a homeless shelter.

It turns out that the City lied to us. Although I am sympathetic to the need to safely house people during a pandemic, the way our community has (not) been engaged in this process is unacceptable. There was no notification to any community members before the NYC Department of Social Services opened operations at 4747 Bronx Boulevard and the City has thus far refused to give our community any kind of assurance that they don't really mean "permanent" when they call

this a "temporary" shelter.

I continue to pressure the Department of Social Services to commit to conduct this process transparently and equitably throughout the city. They should have objective metrics that are rooted in public health guidance for when it will be safe for homeless residents to return to higher density shelters. They should disclose the number of high-need congregate resident facilities that are already in the Wakefield community (even if they aren't technically operated by the City). The Department of Social Services Commissioner, Steven Banks, should participate in a public dialogue about the decisions that he is making. Along with Community Board 12, State Senator Jamaal Bailey, Council Member Andrew Cohen, and Congressman Eliot Engel, we will continue to fight for equitable treatment between Wakefield and places like the Upper West Side.