



December 10, 2024

Dear Community,

This last month has been a profound roller coaster for many of us. As I entered into Thanksgiving week, I found myself needing to take some time to breathe and set my own resolve for the period ahead. Snuggle family, both humans and fur babies, and remind myself that these simple things are everything and can never be taken for granted. It was a time to remember why and what I am fighting for and feel gratitude for the fact that I am privileged to have the freedom to fight for things I believe in.

It continues to be a time of reflection as we move towards the darkest day of the year. A time to breathe and make peace with the humbling truth that I cannot please everyone in my role but I can hold everyone and everything with a feeling of care. For this I wanted to say thank you to all of you, who choose to stay connected and engaged and who show up with all your hearts. You inspire me to keep breaking open and to grow.

I hope the holidays are meaningful to each and every one of you.

(p.s. Don't forget to join us for our **2nd Annual Holiday Open House & Community Reuse Gift Wrapping Extravaganza** on **Friday, December 20th from 4pm - 7pm** at my Ithaca District Office at 130 E. State Street).

How to participate in the Holiday Open House & Community Reuse Gift Wrapping Extravaganza:

STEP 1: Wednesday, December 11th and 18th from 12pm - 4pm Come by my district office at 130 E. State Street (above Mia restaurant) to drop off any wrapping supplies you have lying around not being used, wrap your presents, or just come to pick up supplies to take home and wrap until your heart's content. **Please call 607-277-8030 to make alternative arrangements.**

You can also drop off wrapping supplies in our drop box in the atrium of the Visitor's Center at the Tompkins County Center for History & Culture, 110 N. Tioga St., Ithaca during their open hours. Monday through Saturday from 10am - 5pm)

STEP 2: Join us for our Holiday Open House & Community Reuse Gift Wrapping Extravaganza on December 20th from 4pm - 7pm at 130 E. State Street and enjoy treats and good cheer!

STEP 3: Unwrap presents carefully with loved ones during the holidays, save any undamaged paper and keep it for next year's presents or bring it back to our office for next year's Holiday Open House & Community Reuse Gift Wrapping Extravaganza!



Around the District

Preschool Story Hour at the Cortland Free Library



Here, I am reading to a group of preschoolers at the Cortland Free Library on Nov. 14th

During my time off-session, it's always a highlight to spend time with the community, especially with my littlest constituents. I was thrilled to be a guest at the [Cortland Free Library](#) on November 14th. I can truly say one of the best experiences I've had in this position. My little inner 6-year-old could not have been happier! We read together a wonderful book called "Seals on the Bus" by Lenny Hort during the preschool story hour. We all let loose and made funny animal sounds as each new group of animals joined the mayhem - from monkeys, geese, snakes, and sheep to the lion bus driver who got more and more harried as the busride progressed. By the time the humans joined the busride their only cry was "help, help, help!" We then went around the room talking about our favorite animals we would want to join us on the bus and what noises they would make to add to the cacophony. I learned from one very wise young participant named Chloe that in the case your dog is sprayed by a skunk, you can use dish soap, baking soda and vinegar to get rid of the smell. Using tomato sauce is just a myth. Thank you to Cortland Library Youth Services for hosting me. This event brought me and my staff a moment of much-needed levity after a contentious election season!

Virgil Community Living Center Tour



I spoke with Steve Terwilliger, developer of the Virgil Community Living Center, and Teresa Baker, event coordinator at the center, during a tour of the facility on Nov. 14th

I got to see firsthand the work being done at the former Virgil Elementary School as it is converted into an apartment complex and community center for individuals who are 55 and over during the tour on November 14th. The [Virgil Community Living Center](#) was purchased in November of 2023 by Steve Terwilliger, who is converting the school into an apartment complex. There will be 22 apartments ready to rent this month, and space for services such as massage, yoga, health visits and a restaurant on-site. The community center in the complex is open to the public and applications are currently being accepted for the apartments. There will be five two-bedroom and 17 one-bedroom units on site all served with highly energy efficient air-source heat pumps. Terwilliger's vision was to

retain the building in the heart of the community, which had been a concern of community members when faced with the 2019 closure of their beloved community school. At that time, the Cortland School District, facing declining enrollment and rising maintenance costs among their five elementary schools, made the decision to close Virgil and Parker Elementary school. The revamped building maintains some aspects of the elementary school - such as heartwarming artwork and murals adorning the walls and a playground - while converting the majority of the building into comfortable living for senior residents. With the playground and walking trails on the grounds, residents will have an inviting space for their families and young grandchildren to visit. This innovative reuse of space is exactly what is needed in our communities, creating new housing instead of letting what would have been vacant buildings languish. I was thrilled to see this vision coming to life.

LawNY Clean Slate Act Panel



I had the privilege of speaking on the LawNY Panel with (left to right) Robin Elliot, COO of Finger Lakes ReUse, Richard Rivera, Assistant to the Director for Special Initiatives at the Center for Community Alternatives (CCA), Sherron Brown, Higher

Education Representative at Opportunity, Alternatives, Resources (OAR), Jason Hoge, Supervising Reentry Attorney at LawNY, and Tony Sidle, Reentry Outreach/Justice Impacted at Alliance of Families for Justice (AFJ) about the Clean Slate Act, moderated by Professor Ian Greer of the Cornell Industrial and Labor Relations School.

I joined [Legal Assistance of Western New York \(LawNY\)](#) at the Tompkins County Public Library to speak on a panel about the [Clean Slate Act](#) on November 18th. In November of 2023, Governor Hochul signed the Clean Slate Act into law. The new legislation went into effect on November 16th of this year. Clean Slate Allows individuals with past convictions to move forward with their lives once they have demonstrated a sustained period of law-abiding behavior. It serves to reduce barriers to employment, housing, and education, which are crucial for successful reintegration into society. For states that have implemented clean slate it reduces recidivism rates, increases wages for those formerly incarcerated (approximately 22-25% per person annually) and therefore creates greater economic stability for communities disproportionately impacted by the criminal justice system, and eliminates the need for lengthy and expensive court processes, making relief accessible to more people. More specifically, the law automatically seals conviction records for most civil purposes three years after an individual's most recent misdemeanor conviction and eight years after a felony conviction. To be eligible to have their conviction records sealed, the individual cannot have any other criminal convictions during that time.

In New York, about 2.3 million people are estimated to have criminal records. Sealing these records (excluding violent crimes and sex offenses) could significantly expand the available workforce, particularly in sectors experiencing labor shortages. It is estimated that sealing these conviction records could unlock up to \$12.6 billion annually in lost wages.

Importantly, record sealing is not expungement as records are not destroyed and can be accessed by law enforcement, courts, and

employers that are required by law to obtain a criminal background check.

With the current record-sealing system, only .2% of those eligible to seal their records have done so successfully. Outreach is needed so that people know the law exists and that they are eligible to apply. At this educational event alone, staff for LawNY were able to open 10 individual case files, and of those 10 cases all the individuals were eligible for Clean Slate record sealing.

Northside Community Apartments Ribbon Cutting



Here, I am cutting the ribbon with fellow state and local officials at the newly constructed Northside Community Townhome Apartments in Ithaca.

On November 19th, it was my distinct pleasure to gather at a ribbon cutting for the newly rebuilt and expanded Northside Apartments. I joined Brenda Westfall, Executive Director of Ithaca Housing Authority, Bruce Levine of 3d Development Group LLC, Lenny Skrill, Deputy Commissioner of the NYS Division of Housing and Community Renewal, NY State Senator Lea Webb, Ithaca Mayor Rob Cantelmo, former and current Aldermen George McGonigal and Ducson Nguyen of the City of Ithaca Common Council, and many others, including contractors and workmen who helped build the complex, as well as residents who live there. This amazing project includes 82 all-electric and energy efficient apartments available to households earning up to 60% of area median income, thereby allowing many families to live in what would otherwise be an unaffordable neighborhood. It is an important act of economic and racial justice that supports the integrity of our community as well as being a substantial investment in the Northside of Ithaca. To view a video of my speech at this event, click [here](#).

Museum of The Earth Tour



Senator Lea Webb and I tour the Museum of the Earth with Paleontological Research Institution (PRI) Director Warren Allmon on Nov. 19th.

Senator Lea Webb and I had the pleasure of joining [Paleontological Research Institution](#) (PRI) Director Warren Allmon for a tour of the [Museum of the Earth](#). PRI's Museum of the Earth was established in 2003 to provide the public with a unique opportunity to explore our world through a mix of natural history displays, interactive science features, and art exhibitions. The museum's 8,000-square-foot permanent exhibition takes visitors on a journey through 4.5 billion years of history, from the Earth's origin to the present day. Through hands-on, visual exhibitions and outreach, the Museum of the Earth

encourages critical thinking about life on Earth in the past and today, and how our species is affecting the natural world. PRI and the Museum of the Earth are dedicated to Earth science and environmental education. They have many offerings, including the Community Accessibility Program (CAP), which was developed and continues to grow, based on our community's needs to ensure that Earth science and environmental education is available to everyone regardless of resources or special needs.

CAP consists of:

Pay-What-You-Wish Weekends, the Young Naturalist Access Program (YNAP), not-for-profit organizations and government agencies' sponsored memberships for employees and clients (Email membership@priweb.org to learn more), free or reduced admission for those who receive SNAP food assistance benefits, free or reduced admission to currently serving military personnel and their families, including National Guard and Reserve, and admission passes for Finger Lakes Library System libraries that can be checked out by cardholders for free general family admission to the Museum of the Earth and the Cayuga Nature Center.

I encourage all of my constituents to visit the Museum of the Earth and the Cayuga Nature Center to see for themselves all of the incredible Earthly wonders that PRI offers to our community. PRI works diligently to provide natural history and climate science education to our children and families and I hope you all will join me in supporting their invaluable work.

Dryden High School Lion's Den Food Pantry Visit



Here, I am pictured with Dryden High School students and staff at the Dryden Lion's Den Food Pantry on Nov. 20th.

On November 20th, I had the pleasure of touring the Lions Den Food Pantry, located within the Dryden High School, an example of a fruitful collaboration between the [Food Bank of the Southern Tier](#) and [Dryden School District](#). Through the collaboration, Dryden students run the pantry, which operates as a club within the school. In doing so, they gain credit for their Career and Financial Management business class, taught by Nichole Gunn, (and also TC3 college credit for that course). They also gain real life career experience, learning customer service skills and money management. The pantry is so impactful that some students have reported that if it wasn't for access to free food through the pantry, their family would not be able to consistently put food on

the table. The pantry also puts together food boxes for Thanksgiving and Easter, donating a full meal for families that are in need. It is inspiring to see partnerships like this take root in our local schools, but the challenge is finding a sustainable funding model. One possible option is to expand the state and federal access to the [Hunger Prevention and Nutrition Assistance Program](#) (HPNAP) funding that is currently available only for public pantries, to pantries within the school setting. The funding for pantries within the school setting is currently limited to the Healthy Pantry Initiative (HPI), under the umbrella of HPNAP- which provides one-time funding for materials and supplies to help pantries promote healthy foods. Dryden received an award of \$500 through HPI funds to launch the program, but the bulk of the funding that made this pantry possible came from a local donation of \$15,000, which paid for the brand new refrigeration units. Approximately another \$3,000 makes the purchase of food through the food bank at wholesale price possible. I urged the district to document the impact that the pantry has on students so that any funding partner can clearly see the impact this program has on both hunger for students and their families but other impacted measures like academic performance. Students who showed us the pantry spoke to how exposure to this class has sparked a desire to pursue a career in business another meaningful outcome of the program that can be tracked over time. Thank you to the students for talking to me about their incredible work at the pantry, to the Food Bank of the Southern Tier and to the Dryden School District for making this available to families in need!

Community Resources

Insurance Issues Town Hall



 Assemblymember Anna Kelles

HOW TO FIX HEALTH INSURANCE PROBLEMS

Learn how **Community Health Advocates** can help you when something goes wrong with your insurance plan or if you are uninsured and need to access coverage and care

DECEMBER 18, 11 A.M – 12 P.M
Tompkins County Public Library
101 East Green Street
Ithaca, NY 14850

To RSVP: email JD Drader
jdrader@hsctc.org



Human Services Coalition

 **CSS** Community Service Society

CHA is a program of the Community Service Society (CSS) funded by the New York State Legislature and the New York State Department of Health. The Human Services Coalition of Tompkins County is one of the agencies in the CHA Network that provides services in Assembly District 125

Join us for an informative Town Hall at the Tompkins County Public Library on December 18th at 11 a.m., to learn more about how

[Community Health Advocates](#) (CHA) can help you navigate health insurance dilemmas, negotiate your medical debt, and help you navigate the complicated healthcare system when you're experiencing a medical crisis. Hosted by the [Community Service Society](#) (CSS), which provides CHA services statewide, the Town Hall will feature local case studies showing examples of how these advocates have and can help people locally. CSS partners with Community Based Organizations (CBO's) across the state, and in Tompkins and Cortland Counties, they partner with the [Human Services Coalition](#) of Tompkins County for these services. If you think you could benefit from an advocate, call the CHA helpline at 888-614-5400 or you can call HSC directly at 607-273-8686.

Volunteer Tompkins Promotes Platform

Volunteer Tompkins, a program of [United Way of Tompkins County](#), is recruiting volunteers to view and utilize [Volunteer Tompkins](#), a page where you can create your volunteer profile and be matched with potential volunteer opportunities across the county. Additionally, if you are a non-profit organization in need of volunteers, reach out to rhinton@uwtc.org for information and resources.

Statewide Senior Action Council Urges Caution about AI

[StateWide Senior Action Council](#) is offering seniors tips on how to recognize Artificial Intelligence (AI) healthcare scams. For example, AI can generate realistic-looking fake medical claims, or realistic patient data or fake identities to submit fraudulent claims and can create convincing fake audio or video recordings of doctors or patients to support false claims or prescriptions. To report Medicare fraud, errors or abuse you can call NYS Medicare Fraud Helpline at 800-333-4374 or visit www.nysenior.org.

State Grant Opportunities

Click here to view Speaker Heastie's December [Grants Action News](#) which contains a list of upcoming funding opportunities available. The list includes

a wide and varied list of state and federal grants each relevant to different eligible groups from nonprofits, local governments, and centers of higher education.

Tompkins/Cortland Transit Connections Improved

[Cortland County Transit](#) and [Tompkins Consolidated Area Transit](#) have coordinated schedules so riders of public transit can transfer more easily between the two transit systems. The schedule changes are meant to accommodate Cortland County residents commuting to Tompkins County in the morning and returning in the afternoon.

- **FROM CORTLAND COUNTY:** For passengers traveling from Cortland County to Tompkins County, riders should board the Cortland Transit Route 6 bus and transfer onto the TCAT Route 43 bus at the Dryden Village bus stop.
- **FROM TOMPKINS COUNTY:** For passengers traveling from Tompkins County to Cortland County, riders should board the TCAT Route 43 bus and transfer onto the Cortland Transit at the Dryden Village bus stop.

Code Blue Warming Centers For Those In Need

Cortland:

The warming center at the Grace and Holy Spirit Church at Court Street is open from 11 a.m. to 6:30 p.m. Monday through Friday. The Code Blue overnight shelter at The Salvation Army on South Main Street is open from 6:30 p.m. to 10:30 a.m. during the week, and 24 hours a day on weekends and holidays.

Tompkins:

Tompkins County is operating a Code Blue warming center in a vacant County-owned building on 300 North Tioga St, Ithaca to shelter individuals experiencing homelessness under the Code Blue program for 2024/2025. The building, formerly a bank branch, has been refurbished to allow for temporary use as an emergency congregate shelter.

Code Blue is a New York State-mandated program that provides funding for counties to provide shelter during the cold weather months when temperatures are 32°F or below with wind chill.

In good health,



Anna Kelles, Ph.D.

Assemblymember, 125th A.D.

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