

April 24, 2017

Testimony of
Ruth Lowenkron, Disability Justice Director
on behalf of
New York Lawyers for the Public Interest
before
The New York City Council’s Committee on Women’s Issues
in support of
Int. No. 1500 and Int. No. 1520

Good morning. My name is Ruth Lowenkron and I am the Director of the Disability Justice Program at New York Lawyers for the Public Interest (NYLPI). Thank you for the opportunity to present testimony today. For the reasons set forth by my colleague, Laura Redman, NYLPI strongly supports Int. No. 1500 and Int. No. 1520. NYLPI respectfully requests, however, that the bills also address inequality in New York City on the basis of disability.

I. New York Lawyers for the Public Interest

For the past 40 years, New York Lawyers for the Public Interest (NYLPI) has been a leading civil rights and legal services advocate for New Yorkers marginalized by race, poverty, disability, and immigration status. Through our community lawyering model, we bridge the gap between traditional civil legal services and civil rights, building strength and capacity for both individual solutions and long-term impact. Our work integrates the power of individual legal services, impact litigation, and comprehensive organizing and policy campaigns. Guided by the priorities of our communities, we strive to create equal access to health care, achieve equality of opportunity and self-determination for people with disabilities, ensure immigrant opportunity, strengthen

local nonprofits, and secure environmental justice for low-income communities of color.

Our full-time staff of 32 includes lawyers, community organizers, social workers, legal advocates, development professionals, and administrators.

In the past five years alone, NYLPI advocates have represented thousands of individuals and won campaigns improving the lives of millions of New Yorkers. Our work with community partners has led to landmark victories, including integration into the community for people with mental illness; access to medical care and government services for those with limited English proficiency; increased physical accessibility of New York City public hospitals for people with disabilities; cleanup of toxins in public schools; and equitable distribution of environmental burdens.

In addition, NYLPI's Pro Bono Clearinghouse provides critical services to strengthen non-profits throughout every community in New York City. Drawing on volunteer lawyers from New York's most prestigious law firms, we help nonprofits and community groups thrive by providing free legal services that help organizations overcome legal obstacles, build capacity, and develop more effective programs. Through educational workshops, trainings for nonprofit leaders, individual counseling and a series of publications, the Clearinghouse is at the forefront of helping nonprofits maximize their impact on communities in each of your Districts.

NYLPI's Disability Justice Program works to advance civil rights and ensure equality of opportunity, self-determination, and independence for hundreds of New Yorkers with disabilities every year.

II. Addressing Inequality on the Basis of Disability in New York City

Persons with disabilities constitute 11.3% of New York's population.¹ The size of the community alone warrants measurement of inequalities. Moreover, the disability community is among the poorest minority in New York, with a 30.1% poverty rate,² compared to a poverty rate of 11.9% among those without disabilities.³ Only 33.4% of

¹ Erickson, W., Lee, C., & von Schrader, S. (2016). 2015 Disability Status Report: New York. Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Yang Tan Institute on Employment and Disability, p. 5.

² Id. at 6.

³ Id. at 41.

persons with disabilities who are of working age are employed,⁴ and even fewer (20.5%) are employed full-time.⁵ In stark contrast, those without disabilities are employed at a rate 77.6%,⁶ with 57.7% employed full-time.⁷ The median income for persons with disabilities working full-time is but \$41,700,⁸ while the non-disabled community enjoys a median income nearly double that (\$73,800).⁹

These inequities in the disability community cry out for the detailed measurement and comparisons at regional and national levels which are proposed for gender and racial groups. Further support for the need to measure and address disability inequality is based on the grim discrimination statistics of the disability community. An extensive study by the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development even determined that, at least in the housing arena, there is “[m]ore adverse treatment against persons with disabilities than against Blacks and Hispanics.”¹⁰

Notably, if New York were to mandate measurement of disability inequality, it would follow in the footsteps of numerous government entities, such as London, as discussed by Ms. Redman. In fact, Article 31 of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities mandates that member countries collect such disability data.

I would be happy to provide the Council with any guidance it might desire with respect to implementing the disability inequality assessment, and I would gladly spearhead a coalition of disability advocates who stand behind my request for including a disability cohort.

On behalf of your myriad constituents with disabilities, NYLPI asks that the City Council require the Mayor to include information on disability inequality in the City’s annual report on social indicators.

⁴ Id. at 5.

⁵ Id. at 6.

⁶ Id. at 31.

⁷ Id. at 35.

⁸ Id. at 39.

⁹ Id.

¹⁰ U.S. Dep’t of Housing and Urban Development. 2005 “Discrimination Against Persons with Disabilities: Barriers at Every Step.” Washington, D.C. The Urban Institute, p. 55.

III. Conclusion

Thank you for your time. I can be reached at (212) 244-4664 or RLowenkron@nylpi, and look forward to the opportunity further to discuss my proposal, and any other aspect of disability justice for New Yorkers.