

NYLPI

**JUSTICE THROUGH
COMMUNITY POWER**

**Testimony of
Christopher Schuyler, Senior Staff Attorney
New York Lawyers for the Public Interest, Disability Justice Program
To the New York City Council
Committee on Higher Education and
Committee on Mental Health, Disabilities and Addiction
Regarding Int. No. 0660-2022 and
Accommodating College Students with Disabilities
November 2, 2022**

Good afternoon,

My name is Christopher Schuyler, and I'm a Senior Staff Attorney with the Disability Justice Program at New York Lawyers for the Public Interest (NYLPI). As a person who stutters, among the invisible disabilities referenced during today's hearing, I am personally invested in the issue of improving the accommodations process for college students with disabilities. NYLPI has recently ramped up its work securing accommodations for college students and individuals taking licensing exams.

NYLPI supports the goals of Int. No. 0660-2022 (Int. No. 660) which requires the Mayor's Office for People with Disabilities (MOPD) to establish a program to help high school students with disabilities who are graduating in the current school year to obtain accommodations at institutions of higher education. *See* November 2, 2022 Committee Report of the Legislative Division (Committee Report). As part of this program, MOPD will (1) develop and implement a system of shared information with institutions about students' special education services, (2) provide students with student advocates for related supports, (3) conduct outreach on the program, and (4) annually submit a report on the program and the outreach to the Mayor and the Speaker of the Council and post it on its website. *Id.*

As the Committee Report makes clear, college students seeking accommodations are largely on their own, in contrast to the assistance many received earlier in their academic careers. Seeking accommodations can be a dizzying process, with mountains

of paperwork, doctor's appointments, endless messages to their college's disability services offices, and when necessary, appealing denials. It is also an extremely stressful process for students with disabilities, given the stakes at hand. In many cases, without accommodations, they may be unable to continue schooling.

NYLPI recently worked with a student who is immuno-compromised, and due to her fear of contracting Covid, requested that the college permit her to continue pursuing her degree remotely. Though she submitted voluminous doctors' records diagnosing her condition, her college initially denied her request. Distraught, and without knowing where to turn, this individual came to NYLPI. Fortunately, after negotiations, the college granted the student's request. Given that Covid has made clear how effective remote schooling can be, this process should not have been so difficult.

NYLPI supports Int. No. 660 as it will lead to greater representation of students with disabilities in college classrooms, and later in the workplace. Expanded disability representation in colleges is crucial because, among other reasons, (1) diverse academic environments, which include people with disabilities, are more dynamic, (2) people with disabilities are historically underrepresented in classrooms and underemployed in the workplace, (3) increased representation will lead to reduced bias and stigma against people with disabilities, particularly people with disabilities who also belong to racial and other minority groups, (4) increased representation will, in turn, lead to more people with disabilities electing to self-identify, and (5) greater numbers of college-educated people with disabilities entering the workforce will improve the economy by expanding the taxpayer base and reducing the numbers of people with disabilities receiving government benefits.

In addition, NYLPI encourages implementation of the following suggestions:

- MOPD needs to ensure that colleges simplify their accommodation request processes and remove needless barriers, including with respect to appeals.
- MOPD must regularly meet with stakeholders and advocates, including NYLPI and Disability Rights New York (New York's Protection and Advocacy office), to discuss its efforts with respect to this program.
- MOPD's annual reports must include information about denials of accommodations, while maintaining student anonymity.
- MOPD must ensure that Covid-related accommodations, including remote schooling, are more freely granted.

Finally, we urge the Council to exercise robust oversight over MOPD as it develops and implements its program.

Thank you for hearing my testimony today. Please feel free to reach out to me with any questions.

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About New York Lawyers for the Public Interest

For over 40 years, NYLPI has been a leading civil rights and legal services advocate for New Yorkers marginalized by disability, race, poverty, 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 representation, impact litigation, organizing, and policy campaigns. Guided by the priorities of our communities, we strive to achieve equality of opportunity and self-determination for people with disabilities, secure environmental justice for low-income communities of color, create equal access to health care, ensure immigrant opportunity, and strengthen local nonprofits.

About NYLPI's Disability Justice Program

NYLPI's Disability Justice Program has long fought for equal access to education for people with disabilities, including recent wins with securing accommodations for college students and law school graduates seeking professional licenses. These recent wins are built on foundations laid by our historical efforts in this area, including with the landmark case, Bartlett v. NY State Bd. of Law Examiners, 156 F.3d 321 (2d Cir. 1998), and other earlier actions.