

April 1, 2008

Senator Velmanette Montgomery  
New York State Assembly  
Legislative Office Building 306  
Albany, NY 12247

Dear Senator Montgomery:

I write on behalf of the Social Welfare Committee of the Association of the Bar of the City of New York to urge you to lend your full support to legislation that would increase the basic welfare grant for needy New Yorkers for the first time since 1990. As you know, the State of New York has a distinctive history of aiding its neediest residents, a responsibility that is delegated to the State Legislature by Article XVII, section 1 of the State Constitution.

Today, the Legislature has the opportunity to act on this critical charge in way that will have an immediate, positive impact on the neediest of New Yorkers. Legislation proposed by the Assembly would raise the “standard of need” reflected in the State Social Services law, section 131-a, for the first time in eighteen years. Such a change is sorely needed. The current grant level reflects an outdated expectation that a family of three can live on \$238 a month, not including the cost of housing. In rough terms, this means we expect such a household to spend no more than \$55 a week (or \$8 a day) to cover such expenses as the cost of food items not covered by food stamps, excess rent and excess utility costs, clothing, transportation, as well as other personal essentials. In 2008, this grant level relegates New Yorkers receiving welfare to an income level equivalent to only 50 percent of the Federal Poverty Level, about \$8,800 per year for a family of three. Certainly, New Yorkers can do better for our neediest neighbors.

While we realize that that the State is facing a huge budget gap that makes any increase in funding challenging, we cannot ignore the fact that the current downturn in the economy will be the most devastating for those New Yorkers already living below poverty. With the decrease in the value of public assistance, there will be an increase in homelessness, hunger, illness, and unsafe living conditions – all of which will result in greater economic costs to the State.

The Assembly’s proposal, reflected in Assembly Article VII Bill, A9807-B, contains a ten percent increase in the grant per year for the next three years. Accordingly, if passed, this phase-in would mean a family of three would receive \$261.80 per month in 2009, \$287.98 per month in 2010 and \$316.78 per month by 2011. Of course, this will not address the full extent of the inflation that has occurred over the last eighteen years, but would be a start in addressing what has become a crisis situation for many, especially in New York City.

There can be no doubt that government expects a lot from welfare recipients in exchange for their benefits. In turn, government should be expected to provide welfare recipients with a safety net that protects them from the most extreme poverty.

Thank you for your kind consideration of this very important matter. If either you or a member of your staff would like to discuss this matter further, please do not hesitate to call me at 718-340-4408.

Very truly yours,

Wendy Bach  
Chair of Social Welfare Law Committee  
New York City Bar Association