



Interfaith **IMPACT** of New York State

# IINYS NEWSLETTER

June 2009

## Chaos in the Senate, but... Your Voice Still Counts

As this newsletter is being written, control of the NYS Senate appears to have been captured by a temporary coalition of 30 Republicans and two Democrats; however, the action is being hotly contested. The consensus among pundits: it's all about money and power. There are only a few more days left in the regular legislative session, and while your Senator takes time out for the legislative equivalent of a street fight, the peoples' business is not getting done.

As a non-partisan organization working for the common good, IINYS continues to advocate while the Senate tries to get back to business

When IINYS held our Advocacy and Education Day in May, we recognized that the bills we were concerned about would require bi-partisan votes to pass. IINYS members met with both the Democratic and Republican leadership in both houses. Now, regardless of who controls the Senate, or how messy the politics, your State Senator needs to hear from you before the Legislative session ends.

The last scheduled day of session is Monday, June 22<sup>nd</sup>. If the Senators go home as scheduled, they will have a lot of unfinished work behind them, so there is a good chance that the Senate will come back into session later to make up for lost time. Despite the uncertainty, it's important that your Senator hear from you.

The phone number for the NYS Senate switchboard is **518-455-2800**. Just give the operator the name of your Senator. (If you are not sure who your State Senator is, go to "[Find Your Legislator](#)" under the "Resources" button on our Interfaith Impact web site.) If you want to send an e-mail, here's the link to the Senate directory: <http://www.nysenate.gov/senators>. The directory also includes links to Facebook and Twitter accounts. If you want a face-to-face visit during the regular session, note that Legislators are in their local offices only on Friday.

Issues such as marriage equality, the Reproductive Health Act and the Farmworkers Fair Labor Practices Act are still on the table, and we could see more exciting action on the floor of the Senate this year. To check on individual bills, go to <http://assembly.state.ny.us/leg/> and type in the bill number (see below) or a key word.

To see IINYS position papers, go to [www.interfaithimpactnys.org](http://www.interfaithimpactnys.org) and click on "Position Papers" under the "Legislative Action Center" button. This edition of IINYS News provides a round-up of where our bills stand right now.

# TOP PRIORITY BILLS

There are three bills that need immediate action: Marriage Equality, the Farmworkers Fair Labor Practices Act (also called the “Farmworkers Bill of Rights”), and the Reproductive Health Act.

## **Marriage Equality for Same-Sex Couples** ([A.7732](#), [S.4401](#))

There is a groundswell of support for this legislation. In May, the Assembly passed the Marriage Equality Act by 89 to 52 after a serious and sometimes emotional debate that was a good example of democracy at work. You can see video clips from that debate on the Assembly web site’s press release page, <http://assembly.state.ny.us/Press/20090512a/>.

Now it's up to the NYS Senate to pass S.4401. Chances are good that this bill will come to the floor for debate and a vote sometime this year. Let your NYS Senator know that the progressive religious community supports marriage equality. Ask your Senator to stand on the side of love, compassion and human dignity by co-sponsoring and voting for full civil rights for same-sex couples seeking a New York State Marriage license.

No matter how many times you have already reached out to your Senator on this issue, we cannot emphasize enough the vital importance of contacting your Senator again and again. Marriage equality is front and center in the NYS Senate because advocates have put it there, and the only way to keep it there is to continue making those phone calls and sending those emails and letters.

## **Farmworkers Fair Labor Practices Act** ([A.1867/S.2247](#))

Also called “**The Farmworkers Bill of Rights**,” this legislation grants collective bargaining rights, workers' compensation and unemployment benefits to farmworkers. It also allows laborers on farms a weekly day of rest and overtime pay, and requires safe and sanitary working conditions. It passed the Assembly on June 9<sup>th</sup>.

Tell your Senator that this legislation is a matter of simple economic justice and is long overdue for workers in the agricultural sector.

## **Reproductive Health Act** ([S.05808](#))

This legislation provides a fundamental right to choose contraception and the right of a woman to determine the course of a pregnancy. It also authorizes abortion prior to viability, defines terms and decriminalizes abortion. RHA establishes abortion care as a medical and public health issue, just like every other medical procedure, not as a potential crime. If the U.S. Supreme Court overturns Roe v. Wade, this change will preserve a woman’s right to choose in NY State.

The RHA was announced by Governor David Paterson and recently introduced in the Senate by Sen. Stewart-Cousins. Among the co-sponsors are Sen. Espada, who may be the Senate President Pro Tem, depending on how the Senate sorts itself out, and Sen. Monserrate, the other Democratic Senator who recently voted with the Republicans for a coalition to run the Senate. We expect the bill will also be introduced in the Assembly.

**Please let your Senator and Assembly Member know right away that you support the Reproductive Health Act!**

## OTHER BILLS THAT NEED YOUR SUPPORT

### **Dignity for All Students Act** ([A.3661B/S.1987A](#))

This measure is aimed at ensuring that public school communities provide students with a learning environment free from discrimination. In April, the Assembly passed this bill with overwhelming support. Provisions of the legislation prohibit harassment and discrimination based on race, color, weight, national origin, religion, disability, sexual orientation, gender, or sex.

## **Gender Expression Non-Discrimination Act** ([A.05710/S.2406](#))

The Gender Expression Non-Discrimination will prohibit discrimination based on gender identity or expression. It includes offenses regarding gender identity or expression within the list of offenses subject to treatment as hate crimes. This bill passed the Assembly by a 97-38 vote.

The state has the responsibility to act to assure that every New Yorker is afforded an equal opportunity to enjoy a full and productive life. Too often persons with gender variant identity and expression are subject to discrimination in employment, housing, and job training and denied other opportunities. GENDA will ensure that individuals who live in our free society have the capacity to make their own choices, follow their own beliefs, and conduct their own lives as they see fit and as consistent with existing law.

## **Public Defense Act of 2009** ([A.9793](#))

The Purpose of this bill is to improve the quality of public defense services in New York State. Currently, the quality of defense provided to defendants who can not pay for a lawyer varies by county. Some provide a good defense program; others are completely inadequate. The Public Defense Act of 2009 would create a public benefit corporation charged with implementing state oversight, funding and control of public defense services. It will help provide equal justice across the state. The bill has more than enough sponsors to pass the Assembly. There is no comparable bill in the Senate at this time.

## **The Healthy Teens Act** ([A.01806A/S.3836](#))

This bill would provide a grant to school districts so they can deliver age-appropriate, comprehensive reproductive health care information to teens. For years, the Federal government provided millions of dollars to New York State to teach abstinence-only programs that deliberately failed to provide the information teens need to take control of their reproductive health and their future. Despite promises from the legislative leadership earlier this year, this bill is unlikely to come to the floor for a vote, because it requires grant money.

Interfaith Impact continues to support this bill, but we are also hopeful that the Obama Administration will provide funding for comprehensive sexuality education. Pending the outcome of efforts to create a federal funding stream for this vital initiative, Interfaith Impact is not recommending any action at this time.

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