

Covenant for Justice

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Executive Director's Report: A New Governor Shakes Up Albany

On Day 1, Gov. Eliot Spitzer began making changes in Albany, and they just keep on coming. IINYS members have greeted many of the Governor's proposals with a sigh of relief, such as the education funding plan outlined in his budget, his plan to expand access to health care coverage, his support for embryonic stem cell research, and his inclusion of \$2.6 million to support education and outreach for emergency contraception. On the other hand, we are opposed to a proposed tuition tax credit for religious school tuition and concerned about a NYS Court of Appeals case to be heard this spring concerning the death penalty in New York.

The Governor's budget is being reviewed by the Legislature's Fiscal Committees. The Assembly and Senate have now completed seven of the 12 bipartisan forums on the proposed budget. Meanwhile, the Administration opened up a 21-day comment period and many special-interest advocacy groups took advantage of the opportunity, including organizations with which we are allied.

IINYS will be sending out statewide Action Alerts by e-mail to our members as things heat up. If you would like to receive these alerts, please make sure we have your current e-mail address. (If you got this newsletter by e-mail, your e-mail address is up to date.)

Assuming the budget is passed on time, or close to it, much will be settled by the time we hold our annual Interfaith Advocacy Day, but we anticipate that other issues will still be on the table, including the Healthy Teens Act, Marriage Equality, and embryonic stem cell research. These and other issues will need the support of communities of faith, reason and compassion. This year, IINYS is being joined by Reform Jewish Voice of NYS during our annual Interfaith Advocacy Day on Monday, April 23rd in Room 711A of the Legislative Office Building. We will also have an Interfaith Legislative Briefing and Dinner on Sunday, April 22nd, at Congregation Beth Emeth in Albany. For more information, see the enclosed registration form or visit www.interfaithimpactnys.org.

ROBB SMITH, EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR

IINYS Update on Issues

Health Care

- **Healthy Teens Act:** New York State currently funds abstinence-only sex education. The Healthy Teens Act (A2856/S1342) will fund comprehensive, age-appropriate, medically accurate sex education for youth. IINYS strongly supports this bill and will make it a prime focus of our annual Interfaith Advocacy Day.
- **Human embryonic stem cell (hESC) research:** The Governor has included significant funding for regenerative medicine, including stem cell research, in his executive budget for the fiscal year that begins April 1. This is a faithful delivery on a campaign promise that will benefit all of us, but especially those who live with disabling diseases. We have joined with New Yorkers for the Advancement of Medical Research in strongly supporting hESC research.
- **Universal health care:** Gov. Spitzer proposes expanding Child Health Plus and Family Health Plus while making the application process easier. This plan could give up to 1.5 million currently uninsured New Yorkers access to health care insurance. IINYS strongly supports these proposals. At the same time, we want to emphasize that the real goal is to achieve universal health care coverage as soon as possible, and we continue to support the concept of a commission charged with examining the options and coming up with recommendations on how best to achieve this goal. In December, IINYS Executive Director Robb Smith testified at the Assembly hearing on universal access to health care coverage and noted that a single-payer financial pool appears to offer maximum savings. (See www.interfaithimpactnys.org for the complete testimony.)
- **Emergency Contraception:** The Executive Budget includes a \$2.6 million initiative to support education and outreach for emergency contraception. IINYS strongly supports this initiative, which is one of the first of its kind in the nation. In addition, by adding over-the-counter (OTC) EC to the New York State Medicaid formulary, Governor Spitzer has ensured low-income women now have timely and equal access to over-the-counter EC within the same time frame as other adult women.

Education

Gov. Spitzer proposed a new school funding formula that will dramatically increase investment over the next four years by \$7 billion throughout the state, targeting the investment where it is most needed. IINYS strongly supports this proposal as crucially needed in the effort to offer a better environment for all students of New York to grow and succeed. If you have a Republican Senator, now is the time to call or e-mail and indicate your support for this portion of the budget. Go to www.ourkidscantwait.org for more information and an e-advocacy link. Governor Spitzer's budget proposal will not take away money from any school district.

- To further success in school for all, IINYS supports the governor's proposals to make four-year-old pre-kindergarten universally available throughout New York State over the next four years; use new resources to provide smaller class sizes, more qualified teachers and quality after-school programs (among other proven strategies); and put appropriate accountability measures in place.
- IINYS opposes a proposed tax deduction for tuition expenses for parents whose children attend religious public schools, which would be a violation of the principle of church-state separation written into the NYS Constitution.
- IINYS also opposes any increase in charter schools unless it can be shown that results in current schools are leading to positive educational outcomes for their students. Charter schools also should not be a financial burden to local school districts, many of which are already struggling to provide a quality education for their students.

Civil Rights

- **Marriage Equality and Gender Expression Non-Discrimination Acts:** If you haven't done so, there's still time to call your Assembly Member and State Senator to ask them to cosponsor the Marriage Equality and GENDA bills. They are being reintroduced by Assemblyman Richard Gottfried and Senator Thomas Duane. Marriage equality is a top priority for the IINYS/RJV-NYS Interfaith Advocacy Day.
- **The Dignity for All Students Act:** This bill would protect students from harassment. IINYS is part of the Dignity for All Students Coalition, where we are represented by the Rev. Steve Clunn. The coalition is meeting regularly to develop strategies to get the bill (A03496/S1571) passed this year. The sticking point is around language that specifically protects students with gender variant identity and expression, which IINYS considers essential. This language was included last year in the Assembly bill but not in the Senate anti-bullying bill. IINYS will be providing an update on this legislation. E-mail interfaithimpactnys@verizon.net if you are interested in participating in efforts to get the bill passed.

Criminal Justice Reform

- **Death Penalty:** Did you know that there still is one person on death row in New York? The appeal of John Taylor will be heard this spring by the New York State Court of Appeals. IINYS has signed on to an amicus brief opposing the death penalty in this case. When it is heard, two new justices who could change the outcome will be on the court. Some legal observers say that this court may not follow their 2004 decision that struck down the death penalty by a 4-3 vote. With a state senate that continues to call for reinstatement of the death penalty, a new Governor who has said he would support the death penalty in certain circumstances, and a changing membership on the Court of Appeals, we must continue to be vigilant in our opposition and rally public support in favor of abolition at every opportunity.
- **End Special Housing Unit (solitary confinement) for prisoners with psychiatric disabilities:** The SHU bill (A4870/S333) would put an end to the inhumane, solitary confinement of prisoners with psychiatric conditions. This legislation was passed in both the Assembly and the Senate last year but vetoed by Gov. Pataki. According to Mental Health Alternatives to Solitary Confinement, a coalition of over 60 organizations and hundreds of advocates and mental health professionals, "Solitary confinement is known to cause mental breakdown in normally healthy individuals. For people with psychiatric conditions, it can only be called torture, with self-injury and, sadly, suicide being the all-too-common result." MHASC has launched a campaign to pass this legislation by March 13 (see www.boottheshu.org).
- **Sentencing Reform:** The Rockefeller Drug Laws still need to be reworked, and there are many other policies that need review. We are hopeful that the **Commission on Sentencing Reform** proposed by Gov. Spitzer will result in recommendations that reduce excessively harsh sentences and provide alternatives to incarceration, including programs that offer restorative justice, promote successful prison to community transitions, and are less disruptive to families.
- **Other Reforms:** We are pleased to see increased funding for the Public Defenders in the budget, along with a host of reforms in the area of corrections, including improving prospects for community re-entry, ending excess phone charges for inmates, and improving mental health treatment.

Environment

Gov. Spitzer's budget includes 166 new staff positions related to the environment, maintains \$500,000 for environmental justice grants, and establishes a new Climate Change office within the Department of Environmental Conservation that will focus on global warming and the Regional Greenhouse Gas Initiative. He also proposes to expand the bottle bill to include noncarbonated beverages. IINYS is tracking the need for advocacy to support these initiatives and will send alerts and updates as needed.

Calendar

Binghamton: IINYS is co-sponsoring a forum at the Unitarian Universalist Congregation of Binghamton on Sunday, March 25, from 2 to 4 pm. The Rev. Dr. Richard S. Gilbert, former IINYS Chair, will preach at the morning services and speak at the forum. IINYS Executive Director Robb Smith will also speak.

Rochester: 14TH annual legislative briefing, “**Why Stem Cell Research in New York**” featuring Dr. Howard Federoff, Rev. Peter Peters, and Dean Ronald Hansen. Sunday, March 18, 2007, 1:30 pm, at Temple B'rith Kodesh Chapel, 2131 Elmwood Ave. Call 585-442-4111 for information.

Albany: Pre-Advocacy Day Briefing and Dinner at Beth Emeth, Sunday, April 22, 4-8 pm. **IINYS/RJV-NYS Interfaith Advocacy Day**, Rm. 711A, Legislative Office Building, Albany, Monday, April 23, 9:30 am to 3:30 pm. See www.interfaithimpactnys.org for registration form or enclosed flyer.

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Don't forget to renew your membership!