

# THE COUNCIL OF THE CITY OF NEW YORK OFFICE OF COMMUNICATIONS



CITY HALL  
NEW YORK, NY 10007  
TEL: 212-788-7116  
FAX: 212-788-7126  
[www.nycouncil.info](http://www.nycouncil.info)

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Contact:  
Sarah Faulise Mikutel  
212.788.7125

## **Council Overrides Mayoral Vetoes, Passes Health Care Security Act** **\*\*Important Education Legislation Introduced\*\***

**New York, NY** – City Council Speaker Gifford Miller held a press conference with other Council Members, United Federation of Teachers President Randi Weingarten and advocates to highlight some of the major legislation to be introduced and voted out of the full Council.

### **HEALTH CARE SECURITY ACT p**

Int. 468-A will require employers in the City’s grocery and food retail industries to provide health care to their employees, thereby stemming the growing trend of not offering such coverage. The legislation will also apply to so-called “big box” stores, such as Wal-Mart, which sell groceries.

“When businesses in our City are forced to cut health insurance for their employees just to stay competitive, we have a solution: level the playing field and make sure all industry employers are providing coverage,” Speaker Miller said. “This bill will not only protect some of New York’s hardest-working residents, it will save taxpayer dollars by reducing the strain on public health facilities.”

“Our City’s public health care system is struggling with the growing crisis of employers not offering coverage, forcing employees into the public system,” Council Member Christine C. Quinn, who is chair of the Health Committee and who introduced the legislation, said. “Requiring supermarkets to spend the industry’s prevailing amount on health care is a pro-business response that protects responsible employers as well as the taxpayers of our City.”

More and more, employers in the grocery, construction, laundry and hotel industries are dropping health coverage for their employees in order to compete with those that have already done so. New Yorkers who lose employer-based coverage are forced to rely on public health services, thereby increasing the burden on taxpayers. The Health Care Security Act would create a pilot program, instituting a health care requirement within the grocery industry. The bill would provide employers with broad flexibility in how they institute the health care requirement.

## **OVERRIDING MAYORAL VETOES**

### **Tenant Empowerment Act**

The Council will override the Mayor's veto of the Tenant Empowerment Act, which gives tenants the opportunity to buy their buildings if owners decide to exit affordable housing programs.

"The City has funded millions to build affordable housing while at the same time tens of thousands of affordable units are being lost as owners leave Mitchell-Lama, Section 8 and other housing programs," Speaker Miller said. "This bill allows tenants to come together to maintain and keep their building at a rate they can afford."

Tenant Associations of certain kinds of subsidized housing will have the right to purchase their building once an owner removes the development from the existing subsidy program. Sale of the development to an owner who will maintain rental affordability overrides the tenant right to purchase.

"I thank the Speaker for his outstanding leadership in this veto override," Council Member Alan Jay Gerson, who introduced the legislation, said. "Int. 186-A is a bill which will preserve affordable housing and is needed now more than ever. I remain saddened by the failure of Mayor Bloomberg to work with the City Council to protect middle- and low-income tenants and hope he understands the message sent to him through this veto override."

"We are grateful to Speaker Gifford Miller and the City Council for overriding the Mayor's veto of the Tenant Empowerment Act," Marie Christopher, President of the 210 Stanton Street Tenants Association, a project-based Section 8 building on Manhattan's Lower East Side, said. "This bill will give tenants like me a real tool to preserve our homes and keep them affordable. We call on the Mayor to drop his opposition and work with us to provide the funding that will be needed to save this affordable housing."

A change in the approach to affordable housing, including the way the City treats programs such as Mitchell-Lama and Section 8, is necessary. On the City level, legislators must make plans to continue to have affordable rental units in New York City, and Lower Manhattan in particular. Through this preservation initiative, New York City could save far more affordable units than it could hope to construct, and at a far lower cost to the City.

It is expected that enactment of the right of ownership will prompt civic and community organizations to step forward and assist tenants with requisite financing for purchase. Management entities will have to answer to tenant associations and not-for-profits will compete with other organizations for the job of facilitating purchase and of building management. Tenant oversight, as well as competition between management applicants will cut down waste and over-billing, as mismanagement diminishes in response to tenant oversight and direct competition, saving the taxpayers money.

### **Food Stamps**

The Council will also override the Mayor's veto on a package of legislation to improve the way New Yorkers gain access to food stamps.

"These bills makes sense when at least two million New Yorkers are in danger of going hungry," Speaker Miller said.

"The Mayor's resistance to the common sense steps to increase access to food stamps in these bills is puzzling, especially given the announcement last week that New York City won a grant of nearly \$1 million to develop an online food stamps application, as required by Int. 594-A," Council Member Bill de

Blasio, chair of the General Welfare Committee, said. “Our vote makes it clear that the Council is committed to finding ways to serve as many as half a million New Yorkers eligible for food stamps who still do not receive them.”

“This is a common-sense plan that values families, rewards hard work and cuts out red tape,” Council Member Eric Gioia, said. “This is exactly the kind of plan you would expect the Mayor to embrace. It is bringing private-sector business practices to an inefficient government bureaucracy.”

Int. No. 615, introduced by Council Member de Blasio, will require the Human Resources Administration (HRA) to implement and maintain a procedure that enables food stamp applicants to submit applications by facsimile. Int. No. 594, introduced by Council Member Gioia, will require HRA to adopt procedures that allows applicants to obtain and submit food stamp applications via the Internet. Int. No. 593, also introduced by Council Member Gioia, will require the HRA to distribute food stamp applications at emergency food programs like pantries and soup kitchens.

### **EDUCATION LEGISLATION**

A resolution will be introduced to call on the State to establish an Independent Institute for Research and Accountability to oversee the City’s Department of Education. Another resolution will be passed to support a referendum on class size reduction in New York City’s public schools.

“Last September, the United Federation of Teachers filed more than *11,000* complaints about classes that exceeded 34 students in a class—*exceeded 34*,” Speaker Miller said. “How can students learn in such a crowded environment?!”

He added, “The Mayor is not committed to class size reduction. He has repeatedly obstructed efforts to reduce class size in City schools; he only wants to devote 2 percent of the money from the Campaign for Fiscal Equity lawsuit to reduce class size; and he has used the Charter Revision Commission to deny the voters of this City an opportunity to be heard on this issue.”

“Everyone knows that smaller class size is key to student success,” Council Member Robert Jackson, said. “Mayor Bloomberg promised us reform and he needs to keep that promise. If the Mayor will not do what needs to be done to reduce class size, then the citizens of New York and I, as a member of the City Council, will help him.”

In July, a coalition called New Yorkers for Smaller Classes gathered more than 70,000 signatures calling for a referendum to require that CFE money be used to reduce class size in the City’s public schools. His latest actions to block the ballot initiative have been challenged by New Yorkers for Smaller Classes. The City Council will file an *amicus* brief with the court to support the class size reduction initiative’s placement on the 2006 general election ballot. If the Mayor continues to block efforts to hold a referendum, the Speaker said the Council will explore other options, including the possibility of a special election.

Lillian Rodríguez-López, President of the Hispanic Federation and Chair of New Yorkers for Smaller Classes, said, “It is deeply unfortunate that this administration continues to obstruct the will of New Yorkers on an issue of such importance to our children’s education and the future of this City. Our coalition is challenging the Corporation Counsel’s ruling in court and hopefully the courts will rule as they did in the CFE case, on the side of our children.”

“We’re pleased that Speaker Miller and the City Council have again demonstrated their support of the effort to give voters a chance to be heard on the issue of lowering class size, if not this year, then in 2006,” UFT President Weingarten said. “Small class sizes, along with quality teachers and a laser-like focus on low-performing schools are the essential ingredients in our long-term fight to have real education reform, and voters should have the right to decide whether kids in this City are entitled to the same class sizes as those around the State.”

In August 2003, the coalition filed petitions with the City Clerk with more than 100,000 signatures calling for the creation of a Charter Revision Commission to decide whether a question regarding class size limits should be put before voters in a referendum. The Mayor similarly fought that petition and prevented the class size referendum from going before the voters by creating his own Charter Revision Commission whose ballot question on nonpartisan elections took precedence for placement on that year’s ballot.

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