



STATE OF NEW YORK | EXECUTIVE CHAMBER

ANDREW M. CUOMO | GOVERNOR

For Immediate Release: September 12, 2012

GOVERNOR CUOMO ANNOUNCES STATEWIDE PARTNERSHIP TO IMPROVE ACCESS TO LEGAL SERVICES FOR VULNERABLE NEW YORKERS

Governor Andrew M. Cuomo today announced a partnership between the State Office for the Aging, the State Office of Court Administration and the New York State Bar Association to find new ways to better provide affordable legal services to senior citizens and New Yorkers with disabilities.

"Access to affordable legal services is of utmost importance, particularly for senior citizens and residents with disabilities," Governor Cuomo said. "This partnership builds on efforts the state has already taken to ensure that New Yorkers with disabilities are treated fairly and have proper access to the same avenues of justice that are available to others."

The collaborative effort will identify the legal needs and barriers to justice faced by older adults and individuals with disabilities. The partners involved in the effort will develop a strategic plan to more effectively use existing resources, including attorney *pro bono* programs, to target areas of greatest need.

For older New Yorkers and individuals with disabilities, access to affordable legal services can be a critical factor in their ability to continue to live in their homes and communities of choice. Financial, health care, and family problems can also pose complicated legal issues. To determine the adequacy of existing programs, the partnership will assess legal needs and identify legal assistance programs and resources. It will survey legal services providers, attorneys, judges, the general public, and county-based agencies on aging that administer the State Office for the Aging's Legal Assistance Program.

It also will develop an inventory of legal resources and perform an access-to-justice gap analysis. A "Think Group"-composed of attorneys, judges, health care professionals, experts on aging and disabilities, and others-will devise a blueprint for enhancing access to affordable legal services by the targeted populations and their caregivers.

The partnership is expected to yield a variety of educational programs and tools, including an interactive website, a series of community forums to raise awareness about the legal issues often

faced by the targeted populations, an elder preparedness self-assessment tool, an elder law treatise for attorneys and other professionals, and strategies for increasing the availability of free and low-cost legal services. The partnership was facilitated by Robert Abrams, Esq., a long-time practitioner and advocate in the field of elder law.

Greg Olsen, Acting Director of the New York State Office for the Aging said, "We are thrilled to be part of this exciting partnership. The New York State Office for the Aging administers a Legal Assistance Program for older adults who, due to economic or social need, would not likely be able to obtain the assistance of an attorney, impeding access to justice. These citizens have a right to receive the help they need in seeking justice related to issues around housing, health and long-term care, financial exploitation, physical and mental abuse, guardianship, employment, discrimination, caregiving, and many more."

New York State Chief Administrative Judge A. Gail Prudenti said, "Ensuring meaningful access to justice for all New Yorkers is fundamental to the court system's constitutional mandate and a priority for Chief Judge Jonathan Lippman. The legal services needs of the elderly, those with disabilities, and other vulnerable populations continue to grow as we grapple with the persistent effects of the economic downturn. I am delighted that the Office of Court Administration, the New York State court system's administrative arm, has been given the opportunity to be a part of this collaborative, multifaceted undertaking that seeks solutions, compatible with today's fiscal realities, to enhance legal access for members of these populations and their caregivers. Having access to adequate, affordable civil legal services is so crucial in achieving just outcomes, often making the difference between having shelter and becoming homeless, and securing or losing access to health care and other basic needs. I look forward to the progress that this unique partnership will bring to this critical area."

Seymour W. James, Jr., President of the New York State Bar Association, said, "The ability to access legal advice can make an enormous difference in the well-being of older adults and individuals with disabilities. Our members help address these needs by volunteering countless hours of *pro bono* services each year. The New York State Bar Association is pleased to join efforts to determine how best to meet the legal needs of these vulnerable populations."