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SUFFOLK COUNTY LEGISLATURE

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PRESS RELEASE

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Putting a Finger on It

Following Cuomo's Call for New York City to End "Fingerprints for Food Stamps" Gregory Calls on County's Department of Social Services to Provide a Full Report of its Welfare Fraud Prevention Practices

AMITYVILLE, NY— Last week in his annual State of the State Address, New York Governor Andrew Cuomo called on Mayor Bloomberg to end New York City's "Fingerprints for Food Stamps" application and fraud prevention program. Today, his first action after being appointed chairman of the Suffolk County Legislature's new Human Services Committee, Majority Leader DuWayne Gregory (D-Amityville) called on the County's Department of Social Services (DSS) to provide the Legislature with a full cost/benefit analysis of the department's fraud prevention activities.

Some major news outlets covering the Governor's call for New York City to discontinue its controversial finger scanning prerequisite got a major part of the story wrong. They erroneously reported that, "five years ago, New York State stopped requiring that all applicants for food stamps be electronically fingerprinted, leaving the Big Apple and Arizona as the only jurisdictions to continue the stigmatizing practice." In point of fact, Suffolk County DSS does have a finger scanning requirement.

About four or so years ago, the State did rule that local DSS districts could, for a variety of hardship reasons, exempt Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (S.N.A.P., formally Food Stamps, a Federal program administered by the State) applicants from the finger imaging requirement. Those hardship exemptions can be for a person who is working, needs child care, has no transportation, is sick/disabled. Instead, the State requires that an applicant verify their identity by presenting either: photo ID, driver's license, a passport, naturalization certificate, medical records or adoption certificate. In addition to authenticating an applicant's identity, SNAP regulations also require verification of: address, marital status, household composition, age, citizenship, income and resources.

BUT when a person is applying for Temporary Assistance **IN ADDITION** to SNAP, the County **DOES** require their finger to be imaged.

"It's not a criminal offense to be poor or to need help. But it is a crime against humanity if society turns its back on those in need, or needlessly forces them to be further stigmatized when they seek assistance," says Gregory. "I believe we can and must deliver these services in way that preserves people's dignity while also protecting the taxpayer from getting ripped off by fraud or abuse."

— MORE, MORE, MORE —

The new Majority Leader made the request to DSS Commissioner Greg Blass in a cordial phone conversation prior to Gregory's appointment as chair of the Legislature's Human Services Committee. In past years, the Legislature exercised oversight over DSS through its Health and Human Services Committee.

Gregory's Human Services Committee will convene Monday mornings during legislative committee cycles. Freshman Legislator Kara Hahn (D-East Setauket) will serve as vice-chair and legislators Kate Browning (WF-Shirley), Lou D'Amato (D-Huntington Station) and Ed Romaine (R-Center Moriches) will round out the new committee's membership. The first meeting is scheduled for Monday, January 30th at 10 am. Commissioner Blass has promised Gregory that at this meeting, his office will deliver a power point presentation detailing the efficacy of all of DSS's fraud prevention and detection activities.

Gregory is in a unique position to balance the need to provide essential human services in the face of the County's looming and massive budget deficit. Before being named to chair this new and Committee, Gregory was past chair of the Legislature's Budget & Finance Committee and is currently a member of County Executive Steve Bellone's Bipartisan Task Force to Review Government Operations. As

The County's ability to provide the multitude of programs offered through DSS has suffered a devastating one-two punch recent years because the Great Recession has pushed more County residents to seek public assistance. This has been coupled with a corresponding cut back in state funding for these very same services that Albany mandates the County provide.

It's against this perfect storm backdrop that Gregory will take the helm of this all-important committee. It's also the reason Gregory asked for the cost/benefit analysis as his first order of business.

"Especially now, when the County is extremely hard pressed to deliver the services so many families rely upon, we must adopt a policy of compassionate efficiency," explains Gregory. "That means doing everything we can to reduce waste and maximize productivity in our program management and delivery procedures. If we can effectively accomplish that goal across all departments then we can make sure that every dollar the county dedicates to any program is actually reaching the people who need it the most."

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