



2023-2024 Legislative Platform

VOCAL-NY is dedicated to ending the AIDS epidemic, drug war, mass incarceration and homelessness in New York State. We do this by building the power of low-income people directly impacted by these issues. We have chapters in New York City, Westchester, Albany, Syracuse, Rochester and Buffalo.

The disruption to the social fabric caused by COVID-19, exacerbated by a failed government response that left over 1 million people dead and a social service safety net in even worse shape than before, has only intensified the intersecting crises faced by VOCAL-NY members. This social dislocation has also impacted the political environment, turning back the clock so narratives of criminalization, punishment and stigma that contradict our demands for compassion and care.

While we welcomed Governor Cuomo's fall from power, his successor Kathy Hochul has taken up many of Cuomo's policies of criminalization, incarceration and austerity. Governor Hochul has also done little to stem the tide of the historic numbers of New Yorkers dying from preventable overdoses and record-high rates of homelessness. We are calling on our elected officials to take the only moral and practical approach: double down on a politics of compassion and care, which will both meet the material needs of their most vulnerable constituents, and support the growth of the progressive political power necessary for a better future for all New Yorkers.

Ending Homelessness:

- **Housing Access Voucher Program (HAVP) [S2804B](#)/[A3701B](#) (Kavanagh/Cymbrowitz):** Establishes a state-funded rental assistance program for New Yorkers who are currently homeless or are at risk of homelessness, including undocumented New Yorkers as well as those who have certain felony convictions.
- **#Wifi4Homeless [S4561](#)/[A5649](#) (Gonzalez/Reyes):** Across the state Homeless New Yorkers residing in temporary housing lack basic internet access, barring individuals and families from searching and applying for permanent housing and jobs, participate in remote schooling, apply for government benefits, obtain necessary medical care and more. The bill ensures reliable internet access for all individuals residing in temporary housing and calls on the state to cover one hundred percent of the cost for the expense incurred by the local social services district to provide such internet access.

Ending the Drug War by Building an Infrastructure of Harm Reduction to Address the Overdose Crisis:

- **Safer Consumption Services Act [S399](#)/[A338](#) (Rivera/Rosenthal):** Allows the New York State Department of Health to authorize community-based organizations to operate Overdose Prevention Centers which are controlled, sterile settings for people to use pre-obtained drugs under the supervision of trained professionals who can intervene in the event of an overdose, link people to counseling and health and social services, including drug treatment.

- **Decriminalize Life-saving Buprenorphine [S699/A4013](#) (Rivera/Rosenthal):** Research continually demonstrates that the use of non-prescribed buprenorphine is directly correlated with lower risk of overdose. Because of stringent federal regulations and barriers to access, many people obtain non-prescribed buprenorphine to prevent withdrawal symptoms, self-detox, maintain abstinence, bridge gaps in treatment, or attempt to enter treatment that may otherwise be inaccessible.
- **Decriminalize All Low-Level Drug Possession [S2340/A3434](#) (Rivera/Meeks):** Reclassifies low-level possession of a controlled substance from a misdemeanor to a non-criminal violation, with a maximum fine of \$50 which can be waived by participating in a needs assessment for services; expunges prior misdemeanor convictions; and establishes the Drug Decriminalization Task Force to develop recommendations for amending existing laws to match the intent of treating substance use as a public health issue, rather than a criminal-legal one.

Ending AIDS:

- **Equitable Access to Housing and Services for People Living with HIV/AIDS Statewide [S183/A2418](#) (Hoylman/Bronson):** This bill would provide equitable access to housing, transportation, and nutrition assistance for income eligible people living with HIV/AIDS (PLWHA) experiencing homelessness or housing instability in social service districts across the State, including HIV Enhanced Shelter Allowance (ESA) assistance. It would also expand access to the 30% rent cap affordable housing protection to PLWHA with disability or other extremely low income who live outside NYC; and recognize the fiscal reality of communities outside NYC by providing NYS funding to support 100% of the costs of HIV ESA payments in excess of those promulgated by Office of Temporary and Disability Assistance.

Ending Mass Incarceration:

- **Fair and Timely Parole [S307/A162](#) (Salazar/Weprin) & Elder Parole [S2423/A2035](#) (Hoylman/Davila):** Provides a more fair process for parole hearings and would ensure that the growing elderly population in New York State prisons has access to the parole board.
- **Challenging Wrongful Convictions [S215/A2878](#) (Myrie/Aubry):** New York State has had more wrongful convictions exposed than all but two other states and the cases we know about represent just the tip of the iceberg. Compounding the problem, New York has a unique ban on vacating convictions following a guilty plea, even in cases of actual innocence. Our state must reform CPL 440.10 to provide people with legitimate ways to challenge wrongful convictions in court, specifically with evidence that was withheld, or was otherwise unavailable, at trial.
- **Daniel's Law [S2398/A2210](#) (Brouk/ Bronson):** Named after a Black man in Rochester who was experiencing a mental health crisis when killed by police officers who responded, Daniel's law would remove police officers as first responders to people experiencing a mental health or substance use crisis, and allow social workers, mental health counselors, peers and other health workers to become first responders to people experiencing behavioral health crises.
- **Ending Qualified Immunity [S182/A710](#) (Jackson/Hunter):** Qualified immunity (QI) is a near total legal shield from civil liability for public officials – and especially police and corrections officers. Law enforcement officers continue to show a brazen disregard for individuals' basic constitutional rights; QI leaves the culture of police brutality unchecked. Ending QI will allow victims of police brutality and their families to access direct avenues for justice in civil court. We believe that there is no safety with trust, no trust without accountability, and no accountability without ending qualified immunity.