

BRONX BORO NEWS

EDITORIAL

'A' for eateries' grades

The city has come up with a better way to keep after its 20,000 restaurants to maintain decent sanitary standards, and we can all eat a little easier.

The Health Department inspected regularly in the past, but the inspections and results were mostly kept between the restaurants and the city.

If the place was clean, that was the end of it until the next inspection, probably a year or more later. If it wasn't too clean, the owner might get a warning and a reinspection. The process only became public if the restaurant was filthy, and the operator didn't clean it up when warned.

Even then, customers might miss the publication of the violations and only find out there was a problem if the eatery was such a mess that the city had to shut it down.

The new approach aims at more efficient use of inspectors' time, and also at providing more useful and accessible information to restaurant clients.

Over the next two years, the city will phase in a system under which restaurants will get letter grades — A, B, C, etc. — that they will have to post prominently. Even casual customers will be able to find out at a glance how a restaurant did on its last sanitary inspection.

Places that aren't too clean will be reinspected sooner rather than later. Places that are nice and tidy will go longer between inspections.

The big change for the average eater will be the instant information provided by the letter grades. That is a most welcome change.

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ERIC SCHNEIDERMAN, RUTH HASSELL-THOMPSON

It's time to reform our public defense

Elections have consequences, and the Democratic advances from the White House to Albany carry the obligation to finally tackle changes that have too long been neglected.

As the new chairs of the Senate Committees on Codes and Corrections, we are committed at long last to reform our system of public defense for those who cannot afford a private attorney.

Forty-six years after the U.S. Supreme Court enshrined the right to counsel for all defendants in *Gideon vs. Wainwright*, our state's system of public defense is in shambles.

A commission named by former Chief Judge Judith Kaye studied New York's county-based system of public defense and declared it "an ongoing crisis," where overworked and undertrained lawyers lack access to basic resources critical for an effective defense.

The New York Civil Liberties Union has filed a class action suit mirroring the Kaye Commission findings, asking a judge to order the state to fix the system unless elected officials do it ourselves.

Public defense is a massive unfunded mandate in which the state orders the city and counties to provide the services, but does not pay for them.

It costs counties collectively more than a quarter-billion dollars annually — more than \$150 million in New York City — for public defense services that the Kaye Commission report found to be fragmented, ineffective and far too costly.

The cost is measured in far more than dollars, borne every day by countless inmates who sit in prison because of their inability to mount an effective defense.

'Cost is measured in far more than dollars.'

From rural upstate counties to New York City, where Legal Aid and others struggle heroically to provide a fair defense, unmanageable caseloads subject clients to an assembly line system that directs them into plea bargains before they can argue their innocence.

The Kaye Commission report called for creating an Independent Public Defense Commission to carry out a state takeover of the operation and funding of the public defense system, setting standards for caseloads and investigatory resources, to begin bringing New York into compliance with the legal and constitutional obligations.

In these fiscally troubling times, there is understandable concern whether the state can afford to pick up the cost, though any pickup would offset local costs, which is in line with Gov. Paterson's call for local tax relief.

We can begin at a minimal cost of \$3 million to create the Independent Public Defense Commission to start planning and assess what the real cost is.

That money could come from a special state Indigent Legal Services Fund, set up several years ago to augment county spending when the hourly rate for court-appointed lawyers jumped. This would have no impact on the general fund budget gap we are now struggling to close.

Albanys three partners in government — the governor and two houses of the Legislature — are all led by people who have embraced the Kaye Commission's findings. We must move to create a system that will pass constitutional muster.

It is far better for elected officials to respond to this "ongoing crisis" than have a judge do it, should the state lose a New York Civil Liberties Union lawsuit. Three former Court of Appeals Judges said as much in *Op-Ed* pieces last year.

Justice delayed is justice denied. It is time for those of us in office to fix our public defense system so our commitment to equal justice is a reality, instead of a slogan.

State Sen. Eric Schneiderman (D-West Bronx, northern Manhattan) is deputy majority leader for policy and chairman of the Senate codes committee. State Sen. Ruth Hassell-Thompson (D-North Bronx, southern Westchester) is chairwoman of the crime victims, crime and correction committee.

VOICE of the PEOPLE

Zoo's top dog could use a clipping

No wonder Wildlife Conservation Society President Steven Sanderson is still smiling when talking about potential funding cuts to cultural institutions.

If we made his salary of \$901,000 in 2008, which includes housing and car allowances, we would smile too. The Bronx Zoo and New York Aquarium also received \$16.1 million in taxpayers' subsidies.

There are too many leaders of so-called nonprofit cultural institutions that are heavily subsidized by taxpayers and living high on the hog. Shouldn't they lead by example and take a salary cut along with giving up the perks to keep their institutions going? *Larry Penner*

Bloomberg cutting in wrong direction

In these tough economic times, Mayor Bloomberg's priorities seem wrong. Hundreds of millions of dollars in tax breaks and subsidies, while proposing massive cuts in education, health care, homeless services and other vital programs low- and middle-income New Yorkers need. We all know cuts need to be made, but favoring the greedy over the needy is not the way to go. *Laurence G. Hirsch*

Rudy misses boat on exec bonuses

So, former Mayor Rudy Giuliani thinks those Wall Street bonuses are just fine during this financial downturn? Companies like Citigroup, Merrill Lynch and Bank of America are losing tens of billions of dollars, and the taxpayers are pouring in billions of dollars to prop them up.

People are losing their homes, and these guys have somehow earned bonuses?

Just since President Obama was elected to office, these three organizations alone have shed more than 100,000 jobs; two have merged to try and survive, and we still don't know if they will be around in 2010. Organizations like Bear Stearns and Lehman Brothers have disappeared.

AIG was on the verge of collapse. With all this, a select few geniuses have somehow earned bonuses? To put it as kindly as possible, I'm afraid Mr. Giuliani has lost all touch with reality. *Richard A. Naumann*

Slobs deserve recognition — ticket 'em

Everywhere I turn, I see people littering. The sanitation and police should be giving out tickets to these people who like to throw garbage on the ground.

Maybe the city can make some money and keep the streets clean at this same time. That means all five boroughs. *Lucy Huston*

Hey Yanks, Mets, time to give back

I wonder if Mayor "Gloomberg" Bloomberg has contacted the New York Mets and the New York Yankees to see if they can chip in some of the millions they finagled out of New York for their new state-of-the-art ballparks? *Virgilio Carballo*



Finest take on world in 2011

Twin sisters Michelle (l.) and Teresa Frizziola, both NYPD officers, will take part in the 2011 World Police and Fire Games. The event, billed as "the largest sporting event ever to be held in New York City," will involve more than 18,000 athletes from police and fire departments from 70 nations. The games will commemorate the 10th anniversary of the 9/11 terrorist attacks. Michelle is assigned to the 70th Precinct while Teresa is posted at Midtown South. Photo by Steven Sunshine

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