



Network News

July 2008

Disabilities Network of New York City • www.dnny.net

Comptroller To Audit Access-A-Ride, Support Co-op Bill Thompson Declares at Community Forum

New York City **Comptroller William C. Thompson** fielded questions on using his "bully pulpit" advance the rights of New Yorkers with disabilities at the Network's June 4th Community Forum in Manhattan.

Considered one of NYC's most powerful elected officials, the Comptroller monitors City government performance and spending.

Thompson announced two news items to the audience of 60 people with disabilities, service providers and human and disability rights advocates. In his opening remarks, the Comptroller **announced that he will audit Access-A-Ride**, the City's problem-plagued van service for

residents with disabilities. The audit will take about six months, he said.

Later, under questioning from Craig Gurian of the **Anti-Discrimination Center**, he **declared his support of the Co-op Disclosure Bill**, which would require co-op boards to explain any rejections of potential residents in writing.

In his initial remarks, Thompson pledged to pressure the City to provide better education, transportation and housing to New Yorkers with disabilities. He promised to ensure that the Department of Education complies with his 2007 audit,

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"There's no question that progress has been made, but having a law doesn't necessarily change attitudes or ensure compliance."

Photo courtesy of the Comptroller's Office.

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Better MTA Service for Riders with Disabilities? Bills Would Require Daily Elevator, Bus Lift Inspection, Create Riders

The Network joined officials this May to announce bills to **reform service for transit riders with disabilities**.

The bills would create a Metropolitan Transit Authority (MTA) **Riders Council for People with Disabilities** and require **daily inspection of station elevators, bus lifts, and other access features** and better oversight and repair.

Director of Advocacy Lawrence Carter-Long spoke at a press conference with Assembly Member Micah Kellner, Senator Thomas Duane, Manhattan Borough President Scott Stringer, Chair of the Assembly Taskforce on People with Disabilities Michele Titus and Assembly Member Linda Rosenthal. Network Members Marvin Wasserman and Mike Godino of **Brooklyn Center for**

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"If you can't get to your residence, place of business, or health care provider, your quality of life is diminished."

Carter-Long speaks to the crowd as Manhattan Borough President Scott Stringer stands to his left. Photo courtesy of Assembly Member Micah Kellner.

Message from the Director

Bringing National Experience to the Local Scene

By Alberta L. Orr

As the new Executive Director of the **Disabilities Network of New York City**, I am very excited to be in a position to work with and on behalf of New Yorkers with physical, hearing and visual disabilities.

I'm also excited to be working on local issues. I last worked in New York City in 1986, when I left my position as Executive Director of the **East Bronx Council on Aging** to join the **American Foundation for the Blind (AFB)**.

With AFB, I spent 20 years traveling throughout the U.S., helping organizations improve services to older people who had blindness, low vision or multiple disabilities, including hearing loss, and advocating on Capitol Hill.

Gaining a national perspective on the issues confronting individuals with disabilities has been invaluable. Now I'm settling into the local scene and learning more about the specifics of New York, where I've lived for 30 years.

I was born visually impaired but never thought about mak-

"We don't simply want more Members. We want Members who will join our Committees, who will get out there and advocate."

ing disabilities my career. (I guess it was destined!) Early on, I went to a "school for the visually impaired" but was "mainstreamed" in junior high.

My peers never understood when I tried to explain what I could and couldn't see, so I gave up and just tried to do what everyone else did. I didn't deal with my disability directly until I was in the vision field. Over a year ago, I became legally blind and am now a highly adjusted legally blind person.

Experiencing my own disability has deepened my understanding of others with disabilities. So I am indeed fortunate.

As for the Disabilities Network, I have tremendous dreams of continued growth, of increasing our budget so we can launch new, innovative and targeted projects on behalf of those we serve.

I ask all of you to invite others with physical, visual and hearing disabilities to join the Network. We don't simply want more Members, however. We want Members who will join our Committees, who will get out there and advocate. Members like you, who fight for our right to housing, transportation, employment and more every day.

Soon, the Disabilities Network will undergo strategic



Alberta brings 30 years of experience in disability, advocacy and nonprofit management.

planning, examining what we do, what we need to do and who we need to do it with us. It will be exciting for staff, board members and, hopefully, you too.

We always want to hear your ideas about the direction of our Committees or problems that require our attention. **The Disabilities Network is strong because of you, because of your contributions and your tenacity.**

As for our Member Organizations, collaboration is the key. No organization can do it alone. We must partner with those with similar goals.

My thanks to all of you for being an essential part of the Disabilities Network.

To the Future Together!

Better MTA Service for Riders with Disabilities? *Continued from page 1*

Independence of the Disabled, Nancy D. Miller of **VISIONS/Services for the Blind & Visually Impaired**, Terence Moakley of the **United Spinal Association**, Edith Prentiss of the **504 Democratic Club**, Carr Massi of **Disabled in Action**, Joe Rappaport of **Taxis For All** and Robin Einbinder of the **Multiple Sclerosis Society NYC Chapter** participated.

NYI and WCBS covered the conference.



Mike Godino of Network Member Brooklyn Center for Independence of the Disabled speaks on the critical need to make of transit accessible to people with disabilities. Courtesy of Assembly Member Kellner.

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And all Members who've given in recent months!

Comptroller Speaks at Community Forum

Questioned on “Affordable” Housing, Design for Deaf Tenants and Making Hybrids Safe for Visually Impaired New Yorkers *Continued from page 1*

which found that students were not receiving special education services because of poor tracking.

Thompson also vowed to push the City to make all taxis and liveries accessible to people with physical, visual and hearing disabilities, add and maintain subway station elevators and escalators, and penalize contractors who improperly construct curb cuts improperly.

Finally, he said he would work to expand accessible and affordable housing and job training for youth and adults with disabilities.

Audience members questioned Thompson mainly on housing and transportation but raised other topics, such as mandating captioning on cable TV.

Edith Prentiss, President of the **504 Democratic**

“There’s an entire building...of seniors and the disabled who every two or three years are faced with a crisis of their private owners opting out of the federal [subsidy] program.”

- T.K. Small, Chair of the Disabilities Network Housing Committee

“It’s fine to say you’ve got a bully pulpit. It needs to be exercised.”

- Edith Prentiss, President, 504 Democratic Club

Club, asked Thompson to pressure the City to increase the income threshold of the **Disability Rent Increase Exemption (DRIE)**, which protects low income tenants with disabilities from rent hikes. This would put DRIE on par with the Senior Citizen Increase Exemption and allow more people to qualify.

Thompson responded that he thought he could help move a DRIE bill through the state legislature even without Mayor Bloomberg’s support.

“The legislature is not willing to make the Mayor stand up and be the heavy in this, but I do think the city, external of the Mayor, has to take a much more assertive stance,” replied Prentiss. “It’s fine to say you’ve got a bully pulpit. It needs to be exercised.”

Audience members asked Thompson why “affordable” housing is not truly affordable to people living on Supplemental Security Income.

Linda Ostreicher of **Center for Independence of the Disabled New York** asserted that most housing that is truly affordable to people on SSI is supportive housing, rather than “truly independent

housing.”

Network Member Margaret Arnold asked why affordable housing does not include accessible features for deaf and hard-of-hearing people, such as smoke and carbon monoxide detectors with flashing lights.

T.K. Small, Chair of the **Disabilities Network Housing Committee**, spoke about threats to subsidized housing.

“There’s an entire building... of seniors and the disabled who every two or three years are faced with a crisis of their private owners opting out of the federal [subsidy] program,” said Small.

Thompson also agreed to work with local television to create “talking” community calendars that are accessible to people with blindness and low vision and to require that hybrid taxis and buses have an “audible aspect” so people with visual impairments can

hear them approach.

Thompson cited the seminal disability rights group **Disabled in Action**’s battle to force the City to install lifts on buses. “The MTA basically said... ‘Why would we put wheelchair lifts on buses? People with disabilities don’t ride the bus.’

Thompson then noted that the wheelchair lifts 891,000 times in March 2008 alone.

“There’s no question that progress has been made, but having a law doesn’t necessarily change attitudes or ensure compliance,” he continued.

“Every city agency has an obligation to understand the needs of people with all types of disabilities.”

Thank you to **VISIONS at Selis Manor** for providing space and agendas in Braille for this event!

Seeking Network Members to Form Deaf & Hard-of-Hearing Committee

The Committee will develop and carry out an advocacy agenda and work with the Transportation and Housing Committees to make sure that the Deaf and hard-of-hearing community’s needs are included.

If you would like to participate, please contact us at info@dnnyc.net or 212-284-4160.

Committee Drafts Public Housing Priority for People with Health Emergencies

Help for People Whose Housing Affects a Medical Condition

Hundreds of thousands of New Yorkers live in public housing, and there is a long waiting list. People in emergencies, such as families fleeing domestic violence, are given priority.

Soon people whose housing exacerbates a dangerous medical condition may also get priority. The Network's Housing Committee has been working to create a "health priority" survey for people whose current housing, combined with a medical condition, cre-

ates a life-threatening situation to assist the New York City Housing Authority (NYCHA) in placing those with the most urgent need for placement.

Examples might include someone who is unable to climb up and down a building's stairs due to a health condition, or who needs life-sustaining medical equipment but whose building is prone to electrical outages.

The priority identifies specific criteria which is more tar-

geted than previous systems.

The Committee is chaired by new Network Board member, Thomas K. Small and includes Paul Feuerstein of **Barrier Free Living**, Dennis Boyd of **New York Lawyers for the Public Interest**, Linda Ostreicher of the **Center for Independence of the Disabled NY**, Marvin Wasserman of **Brooklyn Center for Independence of the Disabled** and the Disabilities Network's Lawrence Carter-Long.

Educating the Community on Public Housing Options Network, NYCHA Sponsor Free Workshops

For people with disabilities, getting and keeping accessible, affordable housing is a major issue. **The rent for the average NYC one bedroom is TWICE monthly SSI payment!** (Technical Assistance Collaborative, 2007).

To keep disabled New Yorkers informed of their housing options and help them navigate the system, we held our second **FREE HOUSING WORKSHOP with NYC's Housing Authority** (NYCHA) on Wednesday,

June 25th. The event addressed NYCHA priorities and procedures, including how to apply for housing, request an accommodation and file a grievance.

The first Workshop in March served 50 people with disabilities, advocates and social service providers. Future workshops are planned!



The first Housing Workshop was such a success, NYCHA asked us to do it again! Left to right: Fredrika Wilson and Margarita Lopez of NYCHA speak with Housing Committee Chair Thomas K. Small at the March workshop. Photo courtesy of NYCHA.

Housing Equity for NYC

Incorporating Disability into Mayor's "New Housing Marketplace"

No group is harder hit by NYC's housing crisis than people with disabilities. **Three quarters of rent-stabilized units cannot be reached without climbing stairs or a stoop** (Rent Guideline Board, 2005). And the many accessible subsidized units are at risk of leaving those programs.

As a result, many New Yorkers with disabilities barely hold on to their homes. Others are homeless or have been unnecessarily relegated to nursing homes.

Yet the Mayor's **New Housing Marketplace Plan**, which would provide 500,000 New Yorkers with affordable homes by 2013, **doesn't mention "disability" or "access" ONCE.** Disabled people have been left out of housing planning.

To change this, the **Disabilities Network Housing Committee** will develop a **Housing Equity Plan** in 2009. The Plan will list specific actions the City, housing industry and disability community should take with a timeline and estimated cost of implementation.

We will distribute it to advocates, the business sector and public officials and work for its implementation.

To keep up-to-date on housing workshops and other activities, please sign up for our FREE Listserv at dnnyc.net or groups.yahoo.com/group/dnnyc.



Network Members have won increases in the number of wheelchair accessible taxis every year since 2005.

More Accessible Taxis on the Road! New Medallions, Hearing Loops, Call-In Service

In response to the efforts of Network Members & other advocates, the **Taxi & Limousine Commission (TLC)** sold **87 wheelchair/scooter accessible medallions** this May. When the new cabs are ready, there will be **231 wheelchair accessible taxis** on the road.

While that's still less than 2% of NYC's 13,000-plus "street hail" cabs, it's progress towards a 100% accessible fleet!

Also, the TLC has installed **induction loops**, equipment that allows hard-of-hearing riders to hear the driver, in a small number of cabs as a pilot program, thanks to the advocacy of the **Alexander Graham Bell**

Association Hearing Access Program and others.

This summer, in response to consumer demand, the TLC will pilot a **dispatch service** to allow wheelchair users to call for an accessible cab.

In addition, Network Member **Easter Seals** solicited input from wheelchair users to develop a curriculum for training drivers of accessible for-hire vehicles at a forum held in concert with the Disabilities Network.

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Network Meets with DOT, MTA about Curb Cuts, Subways Move Towards Better Relations Between Disability Community and Agencies

Almost **90%** of NYC's subway stations have **NO** elevators, and of the City's **158,738 street corners** are unsafe to navigate using a wheelchair or white cane due to eroded curb cuts.

To work on solving these problems, the Transportation Committee met with executives at the **Department of Transportation (DOT)** this spring about the **state of disrepair of curb-cuts throughout the city**. The DOT executives indicated that they are mandated by a lawsuit to install curb cuts on all

corners of the city before they can repair existing ones.

However, the DOT seemed open to continued dialogue and cooperation with the Committee in the future.

The Committee also met with **Metropolitan Transit Authority (MTA)** staff and will return with **specific requests for action**, such as a set of subway stations that need improvements.

Doris Seligman chairs the Transportation Committee.

If you would like to join any of our Advocacy Committees, please contact us at 212-284-4160 or info@dnnyc.net.

New Committee Members must be dues-paying Network Members.
See page 8 for our affordable, sliding-scale dues levels!

Taxi & Livery Forums Scheduled for Fall

Despite these improvements, the vast majority of taxis are still wheelchair inaccessible, and even fewer have features for riders with other kinds of disabilities. Moreover, livery companies are not required to own an accessible vehicle.

To advance solutions to this issue, the **Disabilities Network** and **Easter Seals** will hold five **Forums on Accessible Taxis & Liveries**, one per borough, this fall. The Forums will:

1. Provide all stakeholders input regarding taxis, liveries and the TLC call-in system..
2. Get the issue in front of policymakers and the public.
3. Establish dialogue between the TLC, taxi industry and disability community.

Each Forum will consist of a panel followed by Q&A and will be held on City University of New York campuses. The **TLC, Metro Taxicabs Board of Trade, all Borough Presidents, City Council Transportation & Disability Services Committees, independent living centers** and the **Mayor's Office for People with Disabilities** will take part.

Blindness & Low Vision Committee Sets Goal: Strengthen Signage, Building Codes BEYOND the ADA

Committee to Act as Coordinating Body for Visual Disability Advocacy

The 300,000+ New Yorkers with visual disabilities face a travel and pedestrian environment that can literally leave them trapped in their homes.

Numerous subway stations are poorly lit and lack basic safety features such as detectable warning strips on platforms. Potholes and eroded curb cuts make it extremely difficult to walk using a white cane.

And while other cities are installing Accessible Pedestrian Signals and "talking signs" with audio and tactile cues, New York City has few.

In 2008, the Network formed a **Committee on Blindness & Low Vision** to coordinate citywide advocacy on visual disability issues. It voted to work for **more accessible travel environment** in 2008-2009.

The Committee will publish a set of recommendations to strengthen signage and codes beyond the requirement of the American with Disabilities Act.

One of the Committee's goals is to ensure that all Network campaigns are truly "cross-disability." Its work

informs our other standing committees such as Transportation and Housing.

The Committee includes Gregory Bell of **Insights for New Housing**, Nancy D. Miller of **VISIONS/Services**

One of the Committee's goals is to ensure that all Network campaigns are truly "cross-disability."

Its work informs our other standing committees such as Transportation and Housing.

for the **Blind & Visually Impaired**, Mike Godino of the **Brooklyn Center for Independence of the Disabled** and the **American Council of the Blind**, Karen Gourgey of **Baruch Computer Center for Visually Impaired People**, Ken Stewart of the **Citizens Council of Low-Vision Individuals** and the Network's Executive Director, Alberta L. Orr.

We are currently seeking Members to organize a similar **Deaf & Hard-of-Hearing Committee**. For more information, please see page 3.

Message to Treasury: Stop Discriminating Against the Visually Impaired

Decision is "an Equalizer," "Sensible," "Forward-Thinking"

The U.S. Department of Treasury must redesign U.S. currency with tactile or visual cues for people who are blind or have low vision, said New York City Comptroller William C. Thompson and the Disabilities Network at a June press conference.

Several Network Members joined Thompson to call on the Treasury to accept the recent federal Court of Appeals decision that the currency discriminates against Americans with limited vision and must be changed.

The decision is "an equalizer for people who are blind or visually impaired," said

Alberta L. Orr, Disabilities Network Executive Director, enabling them "to manage currency independently without human assistance or the assistance of costly technology such as specialized high cost paper currency identifiers.

"Human assistance means depending on other people, including merchants to identify the correct denominations without taking advantage of a blind customer."

"It's time for the United States to get in line with the rest of the world. Hopefully the Treasury will conform and decide to move forward

for the good of all who are blind," said Mike Godino, representing Network Member Organizations **American Council of the Blind** and **Brooklyn Center of the Disabled**.

"More than 100 countries vary the size of their paper currency, or add other features that can be distinguished by touch," said Thompson.

He called the court's decision "sensible, forward-thinking and long overdue."

Tara A. Cortes of Network Member Organization **Lighthouse International**

testified that "as baby boomers get older and diseases like diabetes and macular degeneration increase dramatically, millions more will be affected by vision loss."

She added that the change is "the right step to take."

Want copies of this newsletter in large print or another alternate format? Let us know at info@dnnyc.net or 212-284-4160.

“Mixed Ability” Punk Band Heavy Load Stays Up Late with disTHIS! Film Goes to the Heart of Issues of Independence and Self-Determination

Punk band **Heavy Load** and the **Independent Film Channel** joined the Disabilities Network’s **disTHIS! Film Series** for a packed June 18th screening of *Heavy Load: A Film About Happiness* prior to its June 23rd premiere on the cable channel.

Hailed as the UK’s only “mixed ability” punk band, Heavy Load includes people with and without developmental disabilities. The film chronicles a year in the life of the band as they record their first album.

It also captures the genesis of their “Stay Up Late Campaign.” Sparked by the experiences of disabled fans who were forced to leave shows early because their personal care attendants had to change shifts or wanted to go to bed, the campaign goes to the heart of key issues of independence and self-determination.

disTHIS! Celebrates 2nd Birthday with Mat Fraser & Liz Carr of BBC OUCH! Podcast

In May, the **disTHIS! Film Series** celebrated its 2nd Anniversary with special guests **Mat Fraser** and **Liz Carr**, hosts of the acclaimed **BBC OUCH! Podcast**.

We featured *The Art of Negative Thinking* (2006), about a cantankerous, newly disabled man that manages to skewer both negative and positive stereotypes about disability with fearless hilarity.

Prior to the feature, we screened several shorts, including Fraser’s directorial debut,

Following the screening, the band played to an enthusiastic crowd at Arlene’s Grocery with local hip-hop group **Four-Wheel City**, whose music incorporates the experiences of their two wheelchair-using members.

Heavy Load director, Jerry Rothwell, filmed the audience Q&A and interviewed attendees for their reactions to the film. The footage will be included when the DVD is released this fall!

disTHIS! is NYC’s **first and only** monthly series of festival-quality, cutting-edge films about disability that go beyond stereotypes found in mainstream media. Screenings are followed by discussions with filmmakers, actors or artists.

It’s disability through a whole new lens!

Celebrity Shotgun.

Post-film, Fraser and Carr discussed the politics of being a performer with a disability and how the UK and US disability cultural scenes vary.

While stateside, Mat & Liz did an OUCH! Podcast with **Director of Advocacy/disTHIS! Curator Lawrence Carter-Long.**

Listen or get a transcript at bbc.co.uk/radio/podcasts/ouch.



Heavy Load answers questions after the screening. Left to right: Drummer Michael White, Guitarist/Vocalist Jimmy Nichols, Vocalist Simon Barker and Lawrence Carter-Long of the Disabilities Network. Photo by Alejandra Ospina.

disTHIS! Film Series:
Disability Through a Whole New Lens
Downtown Community Television
87 Lafayette Street
Resumes in September.
Check www.disthis.org for details!

“....More and more diverse bodies entered the room: traditional college-age students, elderly people, Black, Brown, and White folks, people wheeling in and walking in, a few guide dogs.... I look at all these other bodies – bodies that are not supposed to exist, bodies that are viewed as freakish, unnatural, unsexy (or nonsexual), and [thought] look at all these beautiful people, they look a lot like me’.”

From Mik Danger’s *Coffee & Gender* Blog, describing the May disTHIS! Check it out: coffeandgender.blogspot.com



Working toward the full participation of New Yorkers with physical, visual and hearing disabilities in all part of life.

**Building Community.
Shaping Policy.
Expanding Opportunity.**

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