

Mar. 17, 2019

Dear Gov. Cuomo and New York State Legislators,

We, a community of faith leaders in New York State, write in support of Bill A.3975/S.790, which would repeal the ban on access to the New York State Tuition Assistance Program (TAP) for incarcerated New Yorkers.

Since the 1960s,¹ our great state has ensured that all New Yorkers seeking affordable higher education have access to public funding. This promise of assistance has helped thousands of New Yorkers experience the transformative effects of higher education. In 1995, the New York State Legislature voted to deny this promise to some, while maintaining it for others. This injustice belies the proud history of New York, the historic home of millions of people from around the world who settled here seeking the promise of America.

We know something about that promise, for it is rooted in biblical texts. In the book of Deuteronomy, Moses gives the Israelites the story about who they have been and a vision for who they should try to become as they build a new society. Moses' radical ethic of social responsibility, based in collective memory, instructs his people on legal, social, theological, and ritual questions that will arise once they begin building their new society. In Deuteronomy, Moses instructs the Israelites that it is not their duty simply to remember their own history of slavery and oppression, but also to transform that memory into the foundation for the construction of a just and caring society.

Achieving freedom is only half the equation. This new people, Moses teaches, must take on an ethic of shared responsibility to preserve and maintain their promised future. The unfolding of that blessing occurs under communal leadership and a collective responsibility toward the common good. In his vision for achieving the promise of America, Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. shared the metaphor of the "single garment of destiny." In his famous 1968 address at the National Cathedral, Dr. King said: "We are tied together in the single garment of destiny, caught in an inescapable network of mutuality. And whatever affects one directly affects all indirectly. This is the way God's universe is made; this is the way it is structured."² From Moses to Dr. King, our faith traditions teach us an ethic of collective responsibility and shared destiny.

Higher education helps all of us build a thriving state. It is a means of ensuring a future of promise and hope for all New Yorkers. It is also a means of combating mass incarceration in New York State, breaking cycles of poverty in communities,³ reducing rates of recidivism,⁴ increasing public safety in prisons,⁵ and saving costs for taxpayers.⁶ For these reasons, we ask that you "Turn on the TAP" for all New York residents so that justice and equality can overflow into all New York communities. We ask that you turn the promise of higher education for some into the reality of higher education for all.

¹ New York’s Tuition Assistance Program: A History (Higher Education Services Corporation)
<https://www.hesc.ny.gov/partner-access/financial-aid-professionals/programs-policies-and-procedures-guide-to-grants-and-scholarship-programs/appendix-e-new-york-s-tuition-assistance-program-a-history.html>

² Delivered at the National Cathedral, Washington, D.C., on March 31, 1968 (Congressional Record, April 9, 1968).

³ *Turning on the TAP: How Returning Access to Tuition Assistance for Incarcerated People Improves the Health of New Yorkers* (Human Impact Partners, May 2015), at 32-35.
<https://humanimpact.org/hiprojects/turnonthetapny/>

⁴ *Mapping the Landscape of Higher Education in New York State Prisons* (Prison Reentry Institute, John Jay College of Criminal Justice, 2019), at viii. <http://johnjaypri.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/06/Mapping-the-Landscape-of-Higher-Ed-in-NYS-Prisons-6.10.19.pdf>. New York programs report very low rates of return to prison: Bard Prison Initiative (under two percent), College & Community Fellowship (less than one percent over its 17-year history), and Hudson Link (under four percent). *Id.*, at 7.

⁵ “Prisons with college programs have fewer violent incidents, creating safer working conditions for staff and safer living environments for incarcerated people.” *Fact Sheet for Corrections Leaders: Expanding Access to Postsecondary Education in Prison* (Vera Institute of Justice, Jan. 2017).
<https://www.vera.org/downloads/publications/postsecondary-education-in-prisonfactsheet-for-corrections-leaders.pdf>

⁶ “According to RAND’s research, inmates who participate in correctional education programs have a 13-percentage-point reduction in their risk of returning to prison and every \$1 invested in prison education can reduce future incarceration costs by \$4 to \$5 in the near term.” *Creating Prison-Based College Program That Continues After Release Presents Challenges, but Can Have Success* (Rand Corporation, May 22, 2019)
<https://www.rand.org/news/press/2019/05/22.html>; see also “[P]roviding correctional education is cost-effective compared with the cost of reincarceration” and “correctional education programs appear to far exceed the break-even point in reducing the risk of reincarceration.” Davis, Lois et al., *Evaluating the Effectiveness of Correctional Education: A Meta-Analysis of Programs That Provide Education to Incarcerated Adults* (Rand Corporation, 2013), at 59.
https://bja.ojp.gov/sites/g/files/xyckuh186/files/Publications/RAND_Correctional-Education-Meta-Analysis.pdf