



**Governor Paterson's Remarks on the Enactment of Rockefeller Drug Law Reform  
Queens, New York  
April 24, 2009**

Good morning, everybody.

I would like to thank the Speaker of the New York State Assembly, Sheldon Silver, and all his colleagues who are here with him today. Had it been up to them, this bill signing would have taken place about ten years ago. [Laughter]

They were right in the forefront. And we can't go any further without extending our deepest satisfaction, and our praise, for our Assemblyman, Jeffrion Aubry. [Applause]

He fought for this law. Even when sometimes he physically wasn't well he was in there fighting for this law. He got kicked out of the Governor's office once, and he still fought for this law. [Laughter] Never happened again. [Laughter]

He was a total champion. He was so much a champion that the Rockefeller Drug Coalition made a film about him. He is a star right here in our own neighborhood. Sometimes they say you don't recognize heroes in our own neighborhood. Right here in East Elmhurst and Corona, we recognize Jeffrion Aubry. [Applause]

Representing the Majority Leader of the State Senate, Malcolm Smith, today is someone who has fought for these issues for over twenty years, State Senator Eric Schneiderman. [Applause]

We were in the Senate together, where you couldn't even get this discussed at a committee meeting. You couldn't get it discussed in the cafeteria. You had to get Senators to go outside the building to discuss this issue, and now it's the law. He is joined today by State Senator Ruth Hassell-Thompson, State Senator John Sampson and State Senator Hiram Monserrate.

We have a number of Assembly members here. The Assembly turned out in such force today that we can't even name them all, but they all voted for the bill, so we will perhaps be able to recognize them as well.

To our colleagues in local government and law enforcement—it was very important to be able to discuss this with our district attorneys, who try to keep the streets safe. And Leroy Frazier is representing District Attorney Robert Morgenthau, who wanted to be here today, and will speak out about this issue at a later time. So, thank you for coming, Leroy.

To the advocates, all of you, who tirelessly went back and forth between Albany, trying to get people to see something that was obvious to those who observed the criminal justice system—even those who worked there realized these laws weren't working—thank you all, Russell Simmons among you. [Applause] And Robert Gangi as well.

And to all the people here at ElmcOR for welcoming us, and your great Director, Victoria Williams, thank you for letting us use your facility for such an historic bill signing here today. Give them a hand, please. [Applause]

And finally, to the Dean of our Congressional delegation, to the man who led the House Subcommittee on Narcotics and Abuse for so many years, who now is the Chair of the Ways and Means Committee, who has not just represented Harlem, but all places—Corona, East Elmhurst, Jackson Heights—the man who speaks for those who didn't have a voice but now do: America's Congressman, Charlie Rangel.

As all of you here at ElmcOR know, drugs are a vile and vicious malady. They turn family members against each other. They destroy whole communities. They create problems for generations beyond those who abuse substances.

And yet, with all the anger and the hatred that we feel about drug trafficking in our communities and what it has done to our neighborhoods time and time again—the burned-out and abandoned houses, infested by drug dealers and drug traffickers—with all of that, we recognize that, for those who are addicted, it is an illness. It is a disease. And it has to be treated like other diseases.

In New York, we didn't do that—for nearly forty years. We locked people up for being addicted to substances and for low-level drug dealing just to support their habits. We locked them up at a rate higher than anyone else in the country. We had the highest incarceration rate and the longest sentences than any other state in the country.

A generation ago, people figured that out, and they tried to come to government and say, "There's a better way to do this." But the status quo was too strong. Fighting the system was very difficult. And it was unpopular. Any time people tried to question it, people would say, "You're trying to aid criminals," when in fact, we were trying to get treatment for those who were sick.

But we all continued to struggle, continued to fight, continued to raise these issues. And then, Republicans—people who even voted for the bill, like State Senator John Dunn from Long Island—came out and said, "This isn't working." People from Upstate came out and started to pronounce that this was not the way to treat people who were so injured. The criminal justice system started to notice that the number of prisoners in this state increased by five times—most of them non-violent drug offenders.

And we kept fighting, and kept fighting. Many of us engaged in civil disobedience just to draw attention to this issue. And finally today—on this sunny day in April of 2009—with the stroke of a pen—we will end the regime of the Rockefeller Drug Laws. [Applause]

We are going to reform the system so we bring treatment to those who need it and harsher punishment to those who deserve it. We will get rid of the mandatory minimums that were 70 percent higher than any other place in the country and replace them with treatment facilities. [Applause]

We will create drug courts where judges have the discretion to divert those who need help away from those who need to be jailed. In order to expand that, we will expand, with resources, our drug courts and, also, all of our treatment facilities. [Applause]

For those who have profited from the misery of others, we are going to increase the penalties for them, and put in a new law today that further enhances the penalties for selling drugs to children. [Applause]

Now, right here at Elmcour, you have treated people who have substance abuse problems, helped people through mental health services, created family uniting centers, and also given people the opportunity to look for jobs. This is the kind of thing we need happening not just in East Elmhurst and Corona and Jackson Heights; we're going to bring it to places across the state that need it just as much. [Applause]

And so, this ceremony today celebrates the work of over two generations and four decades to try to change a concept that maybe at the time seemed reasonable, but just did not work. And yet, I think it's a lesson for all of us, that no matter how big the obstacles may be, and no matter how difficult the circumstances may seem, when people of goodwill cleave together, and work hard on a concept, and don't give up, and keep arguing the fiction with fact, you can win.

And that is what we have done today, by eradicating the Rockefeller Drug Laws—and replacing them with treatment for those who need it and greater incarceration for those who deserve it. [Applause]

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