By electronic mail

April 26, 2021

Honorable Carl E. Heastie  
Speaker, New York State Assembly  
Legislative Office Building, Room 932  
Albany, NY 12248

Honorable Andrea Stewart-Cousins  
Temporary President and Majority Leader, New York State Senate  
Legislative Office Building, Room 310  
Albany, NY 12247

RE: S1991/A4331

Dear Speaker Heastie and Temporary President and Majority Leader Stewart-Cousins:

Attached please find a letter in support of S1991/A4331, signed by more than 150 law professors teaching across all disciplines at New York State’s fifteen law schools. I very much appreciate your time and attention to this extremely important legislation.

Very truly yours,

Alexander A. Reinert  
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(institutional affiliation provided for purposes of identification only)

Enc.

c:  Assembly Member Pamela J. Hunter  
Senator Robert Jackson
By electronic mail

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Honorable Andrea Stewart-Cousins
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Dear Speaker Heastie and Temporary President and Majority Leader Stewart-Cousins:

This is an unprecedented moment in the history of our country, and decisive action must be taken to restore faith in government and public officials. To this end, the undersigned, more than 150 law professors teaching across all disciplines at New York State’s fifteen law schools, write in support of New York Senate Bill S1991/A4331, introduced by Senator Robert Jackson and Assembly Member Pamela J. Hunter. Among its many important provisions, S1991/A4331 creates a state law cause of action for violations of the federal and state constitutions, abolishes qualified immunity, and creates vicarious liability for government entities whose officers violate constitutional rights. These reforms are one critical step towards improving accountability for civil rights violations in New York State.

State law reforms are necessary because the federal law used to enforce civil rights, 42 U.S.C. § 1983, has been watered down over time by the United States Supreme Court. Section 1983, enacted originally in 1871 as the Ku Klux Klan Act, was intended to provide a civil remedy under federal law for persons whose constitutional rights have been violated by state and local actors. In theory, the law provides a vehicle for such persons to seek redress from both public officials as well as the local governments that employ them. But the operative words are “in theory,” because the Supreme Court has drained the life from this statute in two significant ways.

First, the Court has created a defense of “qualified immunity.” This defense makes recovery against state and local officials very difficult, even when the officer has violated a person’s constitutional rights. The Court requires a showing that the right violated is one that was “clearly established,” such that every reasonable officer would understand that the conduct amounted to a constitutional violation. Many courts require a plaintiff to produce a case in which the Supreme Court or Court of Appeals has held unconstitutional conduct involving virtually identical facts. The requirement places a significant burden on plaintiffs. Furthermore, the Court has compounded the injury by allowing courts to grant qualified immunity without ruling on the merits of plaintiffs’ claims, thus ensuring that no law becomes clearly established.

Second, the Supreme Court has created similarly high barriers to plaintiffs who want to sue a local government employer for an officer's unconstitutional conduct. Although the entity is not
able to raise qualified immunity, the Supreme Court held in a 1978 case, Monell v. Department of Social Services, that to recover from a local government under Section 1983, the plaintiff must show that the wrongdoing was caused by an official policy or custom. In most cases, a plaintiff would have to demonstrate a pattern of very similar constitutional violations and show that policymakers had knowledge of such incidents and failed to address the problem.

The defense of qualified immunity for the individual officers, combined with the heavy burden of proving an official policy or custom in order to recover from the government employer, often results in no redress for persons whose constitutional rights have been violated. While we believe that the United States Congress should amend Section 1983 to address these challenges (and many of us have urged Congress to take this step), state lawmakers have the power and responsibility to enhance accountability by enacting legislation like S1991/A4331. The legislation will create a state law analogue to Section 1983, but without the barriers to recovery under federal law created by the United States Supreme Court. While there are many other measures state lawmakers can adopt to enhance accountability and prevent constitutional violations, S1991/A4331 is a concrete first step that deserves immediate attention and support. Legislators in Colorado, New Mexico, and Connecticut already have recognized the importance of action by enacting similar legislation, as have New York City’s lawmakers.

Those who support qualified immunity argue that eliminating the defense will threaten to bankrupt state and local officials for making reasonable mistakes while doing their jobs. But substantive constitutional doctrine already imposes significant hurdles for civil rights plaintiffs to overcome. For example, the Supreme Court’s Fourth Amendment doctrine already recognizes that officers often must take decisive action under quickly changing circumstances, and already protects officers from liability when they make reasonable mistakes. And the Court’s Eighth Amendment doctrine imposes even more significant barriers for incarcerated people to prove that their rights have been violated. Moreover, even when officers are found liable, they are almost certain not to have to pay any damages out of their own pockets. New York State and local government employers almost always agree to pay settlements and judgments against their officers through indemnification agreements. The proposed legislation would require that state and local entities indemnify individual defendants unless they are criminally convicted for the same conduct.

The current state of civil rights enforcement fails to provide adequate remedies for significant constitutional violations. The proposed legislation is an important step towards improving accountability and ensuring respect for the rule of law. For all of these reasons, we strongly support immediate passage of S1991/A4331.

Very truly yours,

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