Laws

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Women's Equality Act

Seven measures meant to bolster women's rights in New York are due to take effect Jan. 19.

The new laws were part of the Women's Equality Act, which was legislation that was the subject of two years of legislative infighting that spilled onto the campaign trail in 2014 before it was finally resolved earlier this year.

One provision is meant to strengthen the state's law preventing different pay levels based on the sex of the worker.

Current law allowed for differing pay for equal work if there was a difference in seniority, merit or "any other factor other than sex." The soon-to-take effect law requires a "bona fide factor other than sex," laying out specific, job-related factors that are eligible.

Other provisions include rules preventing various forms of discrimination, including landlords and housing discrimination against victims of domestic violence, and employers discriminating against employees based on their family status.

The new laws also include the elimination of an exemption for employers with fewer than four employees from being hit with sexual harassment complaints, as well as a series of bolstered penalties for human traffickers.

The Women's Equality Act was first put forward by Cuomo at the beginning of 2013.

But while most lawmakers agreed on the majority of the bill, a provision that would have formally installed federal abortion rights into state law split Democrats and Republicans.

That standoff led to a stalemate that stretched on for two years before Assembly Democrats ultimately agreed to split the bill into separate votes, removing the abortion provision, which was never put to a vote in the Senate.

Andrea Miller, president of NARAL Pro-Choice New York, said her group and other similar organizations will continue to push for the abortion provision in 2016, but said she's glad to see the other measures taking effect.

"It's really a tremendous start to the year," Miller said.

Business tax cut

While a series of minimum-wage hikes opposed by many in the business world took effect Dec. 31, a cut to the state's corporate tax takes effect Jan. 1. The cut in the corporate income tax rate for nonmanufacturers will drop to 6.5 percent from 7.1 percent, which Senate Republicans say will save businesses $125 million.

The change is part of a series of reforms and tax cuts passed as part of the state's 2014-15 budget and one of the last to take effect.

"It's a useful thing to do," said Kenneth Pokalsky, director of government relations for the state Business Council. "Remember, this was one piece of a broader package. Overall, we thought the package was pretty useful."

Not all business groups agree.

Most small business owners file personal income tax returns rather than corporate ones, said Mike Durant, executive director of the state chapter of the National Federation of Independent Business. So many won't reap the benefits, he said.

"The corporate rate going down has minimal effect on small business, generally," Durant said.

Breastfeeding mothers

Also taking effect Friday: an addition to the state's Breastfeeding Mothers Bill of Rights.

Under the soon-to-take-effect law, mothers will have a right to "reasonable," unpaid breaks at work to pump breast milk for three years after giving birth.

The bill of rights is required to be posted in maternity wards, nurseries and other places where new mothers frequent.

"To be able to have women come back into the workforce and have the ability to be able to express their breast milk without feeling they have to do it under the cloak of darkness, it makes a real difference," Miller said. "It takes that burden away and makes it a part of the basic structure of the workplace."

Missing children

Starting Jan. 19, law-enforcement agencies will have an easier time accessing child-abuse records when a child goes missing.

The new law sets up parameters for when Child Protective Services can release records to police, including when a child goes missing.

If CPS rejects law enforcement's request for records, it can be appealed to the state Office of Children and Family Services, which will then review whether the records should be released.

The law was inspired by the case of Kenneth White, a 5-year-old Albany County boy who was reported missing by his older cousin who had been babysitting. The cousin said White was abducted by two masked men, which ultimately wasn't true; the cousin was later charged with murder.

Police were initially rejected access to White's CPS records over privacy concerns.

"We need to do everything possible to help law enforcement officials do their jobs and keep our communities safe, while at the same time being mindful of privacy issues surrounding CPS records," said Sen. George Amedore, R-Rotterdam, Schenectady County, in a recent statement.

Ulysses seeks interim highway superintendent

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The Town of Ulysses is seeking applications for an interim highway superintendent position.

This administrative position is responsible for supervising the activities and operation of the highway department.

Letters of interest along with a résumé must be submitted to the town clerk by Jan. 22.

Visit ulysses.ny.us/pdf/Highway-Superintendent-Interim-des-2015-12-30.pdf, or contact the Ulysses town clerk's office at (607) 387-5767, ext. 221, or email clerk@ulysses.ny.us.

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Birds

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populations of birds in the woods. Yellow tufted titmouses, turkey vultures, geese and blue jays are all common sights in the woods and in a little yellow journal, Enck writes down each one he finds, from in the woods to those he stumbles upon in his neighbor's backyards.

The birds move around of course, and Enck said it was very possible for a dozen Chickadees to be misinterpreted as 50. That doesn't matter, Enck said, because those Chickadees will move around next year and the year after that.

"As long as I keep counting the same way, over time, you'll start to see the big trends over a decade or even longer," Enck said.

The value of the data lies in its empirical accumulation; the legwork for the survey itself has been undertaken by countless volunteers not just across the United States, but the entire world. Using this data, the National Audubon Society, which founded the tradition in 1900, has been able to compile and track migratory patterns of birds, species by species, over a long period of time. Using a program called eBird, which was developed in conjunction with the Cornell Lab of Ornithology, this information can then be used in analysis on the habits of species and in some cases, in critical environmental action.

NICK REYNOLDS / STAFF PHOTO

A turkey vulture flies overhead on Hanshaw Road, where Enck entered the woods in search of the area's bird species.

Trends, it turns out, matter in nature, especially in anomaly years like 2015; where Stewart Park is typically the home of upstate water fowl during the winter, warm weather kept the lakes warm and unfrozen. This meant flocks of ducks typically migrating from the Montezuma National Wildlife Refuge outside Seneca Falls were delaying their trips to the south shores of Cayuga Lake.

Enck named the droughts in the Southwestern United States as a prime example where the dataset came in handy, particularly in the decision to water the region's fields, which would attract birds who provide a natural predator to pests among the crops, providing economic benefit to farmers. Other migratory habits, like geese migration in the Arctic, would affect shorebird populations, the geese consuming all the vegetation in the areas along the shore.

"When other species disappear, its only then we realize they provided a service we never understood," Enck said. "Shorebirds are a good example; they aerate the soils, especially in flooded rice fields and without those birds seeking food in the soil, they wouldn't be as effective for rice growing."

Locally, the data has been used to track the arrival of now-common cardinals and red bellied woodpeckers in the south in the past few decades.

"You get to see big changes in distribution over time and trends in other species that eventually become sedentary," Enck said.

At day's end, Enck and the dozens volunteering in the day's count, met at the lab to present their findings and, for the 53rd year in a row, add to a wealth of knowledge compiled longer than any of them had ever been alive.

NICK REYNOLDS / STAFF PHOTO

Jody Enck, of the Cornell Lab of Ornithology, writes down a species of bird spotted while participating in the Christmas Bird Count, a yearly tradition.