

Public Strategies Secures Historic Funding for Pro Bono Client: CUNY BMI

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NEW YORK, May 31, 2023 – In the recently passed New York State Budget, Cozen O'Connor Public Strategies secured \$500,000 for their pro bono client, the City University of New York Black Male Initiative (CUNY BMI). This allocation represents the first time the state of New York has allocated funds to the program since its inception in 2004.

“As one of the founders of the Black Male Initiative during my tenure in the New York City Council, I am proud to continue my support of the program as a member of the New York State Senate,” said State Senator Leroy Comrie. “Increasing enrollment, retention, and graduation rates of underrepresented students, particularly young Black men, is critical to rightsizing inequities in many parts of our education system. I am grateful for the pro bono advocacy of Cozen O'Connor in helping my colleagues and me secure CUNY BMI's first-ever allocation from the state. I look forward to seeing more young men of color at institutions like York College and on CUNY campuses across the city, reaching higher heights because of the opportunities BMI will provide them.”

“This funding is an investment in our state's future,” said Katrell Lewis, principal at Cozen O'Connor Public Strategies. “The graduates from CUNY BMI will one day be our senators and assemblymembers. Cozen O'Connor is committed to that diverse future in our state, and we are honored to work with our partners in the state legislature and at CUNY.”

As of 2023, there are 30 CUNY BMI campus-based programs across the CUNY system, with more than 5,000 program participants. Each BMI program's mission is to increase matriculation, retention, and graduation rates of underrepresented students, especially male students of color. The BMI program has created collaborations and pipeline programming with the My Brother's Keeper program, the Eagle Academy Foundation, the Young Men's Initiative, and the NYC Men's Teach program. CUNY BMI campus programs are open to all academically eligible students, faculty, and staff, regardless of race, gender, or national origin.

“This is truly a great accomplishment for the BMI program, as we have tried for so long to receive state support,” shared the interim University Director for the CUNY BMI, Dr. Jonathan Quash, “Now more than ever, programs like BMI are facing increased challenges in attempting to address the myriad needs of under-served populations, as we recover from an educational slump brought on by the COVID-19 pandemic. This is a first step in building a much more meaningful and purposeful relationship with our state officials.”

“I am extremely pleased to have secured an allocation of \$500,000 in state funding for the BMI program within the New York state budget,” said Assemblyman Khaleel M. Anderson. “As we celebrate its 18th year of existence with an impressive participant count exceeding 5,000, the CUNY BMI program continues to thrive and advance, building upon the accomplishments of its illustrious journey. Young Black men deserve quality mentorship and commitment from their educational institutions. It is my hope that both public and private institutions recognize the value of this program as I do, so we can contribute additional resources to empower and uplift our young men.”

Assemblymember Al Taylor added, “As a member of the New York state assembly and proud graduate of Lehman College, I am proud to support the CUNY BMI program because investing in our youth is investing in our future. This funding is critical to righting inequities in education and will allow more young men of color to reach their full potential on CUNY campuses across the city. I am excited to see the impact this program will have on increasing enrollment, retention, and graduation rates of

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underrepresented students.”

While the CUNY BMI program continues to grow and build on its successes, funding has remained at \$2.2 million annually for the past 17 years. Since 2004, inflation, contractual obligations, and minimum wages have all increased, limiting the number of students who can benefit from the program. With the state’s support, the BMI leadership is committed to the following:

- Increasing program participation to ten thousand by the end of 2024,
- Increasing the number of campus-based programs,
- Increasing support for current campus-based programs,
- Improving pipeline programs for underrepresented students,
- Introducing workforce development as a necessary component of BMI, and
- Beginning the process of the creation of the CUNY Men of Color Institute.

About Pro Bono at Cozen O’Connor

Access to legal counsel is a fundamental right of every citizen in a democratic society. Cozen O’Connor is committed to helping ensure that universal access is a reality. Since our founding in 1970, we have dedicated thousands of attorney hours to pro bono representation of indigent individuals and charitable institutions. The firm is also a signatory to the Law Firm Pro Bono Challenge of the Pro Bono Institute and strives to provide 3% of billable hours to pro bono clients every year. Over the last five years, Cozen O’Connor has climbed 48 places on *The American Lawyer’s* annual pro bono ranking of the nation’s largest law firms, most recently ranking 67th on the list of 200 firms. For more information about our pro bono work, please contact the director of Pro Bono Engagement, Melinda Levine de Lisle.