**To: \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_**   **Date: \_\_\_\_/\_\_\_\_/**17

**From: \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_**

**Subject:** Co-sign A6262

I am writing to you as a resident in your district to seek your assistance to provide consumer protection in the unregulated self-help industry. Self-help (also called the human potential/personal growth/professional development movements) populates our everyday landscape with retreats, workshops, and motivational speakers, all offering solutions to the challenges of everyday life. While there are many qualified, responsible practitioners, this is a diffuse, unregulated industry without any credentialing or professional oversight. Physical, emotional and/or financial abuse often goes unreported. Victims are ashamed, often convinced they were at fault or are paid off if legal action is threatened.

Assemblyman James Skoufis (district 99) is introducing Bill 6262, (see attached) an amendment to the general business law, to increase accountability for non-licensed self-help practitioners.

**Goals of Legislation:**

* Self-help events must be registered
* Any potential risk must be clearly stated (physical or emotional) to participants
* A risk management plan to minimize risk and deal with accidents is required and shown to participants
* Medical and psychological professionals must be on site to manage risk or possible accidents at events
* Failure to register with the state or have any plan in place to deal with the risk would result in penalties

This bill was developed in conjunction with SEEK Safely, Inc., a non-profit organization that was created to educate and empower consumers and promote ethics and safety in the self-help industry. This organization was founded by the family of Kirby Brown. In October 2009, James Ray, internationally known motivational speaker and frequent guest of Oprah Winfrey, conducted a 5-day “Spiritual Warrior” retreat which culminated in a sweat lodge ceremony. Kirby Brown, James Shore and Liz Neuman died as a result of that event and many others were injured.

After 5 years of working to ask practitioners to sign a Promise to act ethically and safely, it became clear to SEEK that government must also play a role to provide consumer protection.

I hope I can count on your support to co-sponsor this bill to move our common goal of consumer protection forward. Please read the background information below to help you consider this issue carefully. If you have any questions, please feel free to respond or give me a call at \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_.

You can also reach out to the founder of SEEK Safely, Ginny Brown, for further information. gbrown@seeksafely.org.

As my elected Official, please co-sign this bill. Your constituents deserve protection!

Thank you for your time and I look forward to your support on this important effort.

Sincerely,

**Background:**

In October of 2009 James Ray conducted a retreat event known as “Spiritual Warrior” in Sedona, Arizona. This week-long experience was packaged as a self-help seminar to help those searching for answers related to their lives and careers. The event was described as a way to provide participants with financial and spiritual direction towards a happy and fulfilled life. Their $9,500 investment would provide them with the guidance they needed to start on a path of achieving these goals.

On October 8th, after a week of physically and emotionally taxing challenges, the retreat culminated in a reenactment of a Native American ritual called a sweat lodge, described as a way for participants to push themselves mentally, physically and spiritually to find strength and focus toward making their dreams become reality. High levels of both heat and humidity from heated rocks in the center of the makeshift sweat lodge would create a spiritual type of environment to bring participants to an “altered state,” breaking through mental and physical barriers.

Mr. Ray’s sweat lodge, however, took the ritual to an extreme. He told participants they would feel like they were dying. The signs of reaching an “altered state” that he described were actually signs of heat stroke. Furthermore, the sweat lodge was improperly constructed, with plastic tarps over the top of the structure that prevented heat from escaping the enclosed and overcrowded area. The heat was too intense, to the point where participants began experiencing physical distress and had trouble staying awake, breathing, walking etc. People were passing out.

Mr. Ray was not responsive to the folks who were struggling. Many participants were experiencing terrific physical problems. Some were dragged out of the lodge and 20 went to the hospital while Mr. Ray sat quietly and unaffected by what was going on around him. Three people (Kirby Brown, James Shore & Lizabeth Neuman) died as a result of this ill-conceived and reckless sweat lodge ceremony.

His behavior during the retreat and following the events of October 8, 2009, revealed an arrogant, callous, and self-absorbed person – a dangerous fraud who did not live what he taught. Mr. Ray was tried in 2011 and convicted of negligent homicide for the deaths of these three participants.

While there is value in the self-help industry, there is also great potential for so-called leaders to abuse the platform they have assumed for their own gains. In seeking their own ends, they exploit their customers and even put these customers in danger, using psychological techniques and therapeutic treatments without proper training or certification.

**Seek Safely Inc.:**

In 2011, Kirby Brown’s family created SEEK Safely Inc. a non-profit charity to

* Educate the public about the unregulated nature of the self-help industry
* Empower consumers with guidelines to evaluate their experience
* Promote ethics and safety in this industry in order to prevent similar events from happening in the future.

Kirby’s parents, George and Ginny Brown, who are certified social workers, realized that in this unregulated industry anyone can take on this profession, as James Ray did, with no credentials, no real training and no standards of service. Their goal is not to stop self-help professionals from doing business, but rather to help them provide services which are safe, ethical, responsible and helpful in moving seekers towards their goals.

To date, SEEK has reached out to the industry, asking that providers sign “The Promise,” which focuses on customer safety, being protective and respectful to participants while conducting business truthfully, accurately and with integrity. Some practitioners have signed.

Toward the goal of educating consumers, SEEK Safely has created the Red Flag guides to help self-help customers better evaluate warning signs of scams or potential danger at events and before purchasing on-line seminars or printed materials. SEEK also directs consumers to credible, scientifically researched information.

SEEK Safely continues to work with practitioners and customers, but believes that our elected officials at the state and federal levels of government have a responsibility to its citizenry. Safety has always been one of the most important roles government has played in this great country.

**[More Information can be found on SEEK’s website: www.seeksafely.org]**