

“Social justice should be the underlying goal of all humanity.”

-Alan V. Lowenstein, Institute Founder



NEW JERSEY INSTITUTE
FOR SOCIAL JUSTICE

Written Testimony of
New Jersey Institute for Social Justice
Governor’s American Rescue Plan Funds Hearing
August 2021

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do social justice.

Dear Zakiya Smith Ellis, Dennis Zeveloff, Deborah Cornavaca, Daniel Kelly and other members of Governor Murphy’s administration:

Thank you for the opportunity to submit this written testimony.

The New Jersey Institute for Social Justice (“the Institute”) uses cutting-edge racial and social justice advocacy to empower people of color by building reparative systems that create wealth, transform justice and harness democratic power – from the ground up – in New Jersey.

The Institute submits this testimony requesting that the American Rescue Plan (ARP) funds we have received from the federal government be used for the following:

- Increasing poll worker pay for the 2021 General Election
- Elections infrastructure
- Youth mental health services
- A guaranteed basic income program
- Affordable housing and homeownership
- Youth apprenticeships

Poll Worker Pay

The Institute requests an increase of poll worker pay for the November 2021 General Election, in light of the difficulty in recruiting poll workers due to the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic.

In June the Legislature – with overwhelming bipartisan support – passed a bill just days before the primary election to increase poll worker pay to \$400.¹ The Governor signed that bill into law within hours.² The Legislature stated explicitly in the bill statement that the bill was needed because the continued concerns over COVID-19 have led to a “significant decrease” in people willing to serve as poll workers.³ That law was only in effect for the primary election.⁴ The pandemic, however, continues – with a new surge upon us.⁵

It is a critical function of government to ensure a successful election. With a major election ahead of us, it is necessary for the state to address the COVID-19 caused problem of poll worker shortage.

We urge the state to use ARP funds to increase poll worker pay to \$400 for the November 2021 election. As the Office of Legislative Services calculated for a recent fiscal note, this increases the hourly rate for poll workers from \$14.29 to \$19.64.⁶ For the November election, this should cost approximately \$13.6 million for early voting and Election Day.⁷

Elections Infrastructure

The Institute recommends spending ARP funds on necessary COVID-19 related elections infrastructure costs.

First, the state should provide reimbursements or grants to counties to upgrade Election Day voting machines. The state correctly passed early in-person voting this year, a measure that was not only long overdue, but was recommended by voting experts as a way to increase voter access and encourage social distancing during the pandemic.⁸ In order to implement this new law, counties will need upgraded voting machines that require a paper trail.⁹ However, the current Election Day voting machine fleet in most counties is outdated and not auditable.¹⁰ For elections security and to reduce any voter confusion, Election Day machines must also be upgraded so they are the same machines used during early voting. The state should provide funding to assist in this process. The costs for these machines vary, depending on which of the eligible machines are selected by the counties, but can cost between \$5,000 and \$10,000 per machine.¹¹

Next, the state should provide increased funding for polling place rentals to avoid any consolidation in light of COVID-19 related challenges in securing polling place locations. We have already seen such examples during this year's elections.¹² While the state apparently reimburses \$100 to use toward renting locations for polling places, additional funds may be necessary to pay a "COVID-19" premium.

Third, as we collectively recognized last year, vote by mail is an important tool during the pandemic for voters to maintain social distance. The state should encourage voting by mail by making our system more accessible. To do so, the state should also use ARP funds to upgrade the state's online voter registration system, which became law last year¹³ and was highly successful when implemented,¹⁴ to allow voters to apply for a vote-by-mail ballot online. The state's online ballot tracker and app should also be upgraded so voters can track their ballots. The state should also use ARP funds to provide prepaid postage for vote by mail applications and ballots for this November's election.

Finally, the pandemic has led to an increased level of misinformation and disinformation about our elections.¹⁵ This was prevalent in 2020,¹⁶ but continues today.¹⁷ Due to the gravity of this issue, the Institute conducted social media monitoring during the 2020 general election¹⁸ and the 2021 June primary. As recommended by the Council of State Governments,¹⁹ the state should use ARP

funds to set up a website and other tools to actively monitor and combat misinformation and disinformation ahead of the November 2021 election.

Youth Mental Health Services

We are respectfully requesting that ARP funding dedicated to community mental health services be equitably distributed across the state with particular attention to youth in Black and Brown communities. Recently New Jersey passed the Restorative and Transformative Justice for Youths and Communities Pilot Program Bill which appropriates \$8.4 million to create restorative justice hubs throughout the state. These hubs will be areas where those who have been harmed and those who have committed harm can explore solutions to provide healing and restoration for both parties and their community. These hubs will also be a safe space where youth can feel heard and discuss their mental health in individual and group settings. To support this pilot program, the Institute worked with communities across the state to identify critical gaps in mental health needs that could be addressed through the hubs. Using these findings, the Institute recently released a mental health toolkit which provides a roadmap for how critical mental health services – such as mental telehealth hotlines – can be included both within the hubs and in the community more generally.²⁰ One major finding of our assessment was the unfortunate reality that lack of medical insurance and long wait times for counseling appointments are barriers to care for youth in these communities.²¹ Lack of technology access²² and lack of telehealth lines for mental health issues short of suicidality²³ also represent additional barriers. Further, across the United States mental health concerns in youth have become more acute over the past year, with a 2020 nationwide survey saying that 25% of high school-aged youth reported increased negative emotional and cognitive health symptoms during the pandemic.²⁴

We need to act now to save our youth. Accordingly, we are calling for the over \$39 million in ARP funds which have already been set aside for community mental health services to be used to provide access to youth in communities of color.²⁵ Also, we encourage you to prioritize funding “grassroots organizations” that are service providers working in these communities because these providers are the “credible messengers” that have the unique expertise to engage and transform our youth.

Guaranteed Income

The Institute requests that the state invest ARP funds in a guaranteed basic income program that helps families weather the economic impacts of the pandemic²⁶ and creates a foundation for ensuring secure incomes for the most economically vulnerable in our state.

Despite having one of the highest median household incomes in the nation at \$85,751, New Jersey is one of the most unequal states,²⁷ with over one in five families with incomes less than \$35,000.²⁸ While the official poverty rate in the state was 9.2% in 2019, recent calculations suggest that about a third of the state’s population or almost 3 million people were experiencing economic deprivation given our true cost of living in New Jersey.²⁹ The COVID-19 pandemic exacerbated the

preexisting economic vulnerabilities of many families, increasing food insecurity³⁰ and unemployment.³¹ Families of color across the state have faced particularly dire straits during the pandemic, with Black and Latina/Latino employees particularly hard hit by wage and job losses³² and less likely to be able to work from home.³³ Even before the pandemic there were stark racial disparities in household wealth in the state: The median wealth for white families is approximately \$352,000 compared to just \$6,100 for Black families and \$7,300 for Latina/Latino families.³⁴ These racial disparities – which were built over generations by policy – result in enormous disparities in families’ abilities to manage financial setbacks such as those experienced across the state during the pandemic.

Utilizing ARP funds to create a state-funded guaranteed income program could provide the security and protection families need in these challenging times, while setting up an infrastructure to do more to tackle the rampant income and wealth inequality in the state in the future. Guaranteed income – sometimes also known as universal basic income (UBI) when all community members are eligible³⁵ – addresses the primary root of poverty – not having enough income – by putting money directly into the hands of economically vulnerable recipients. Guaranteed income programs help stabilize families striving to make ends meet; research from a major guaranteed income pilot shows that basic income benefits are largely used to cover basic living expenses, like food and utilities.³⁶ Newark³⁷ and Paterson,³⁸ which are among the most populous cities in the state, have recently launched guaranteed income programs with support from the philanthropic community. Utilizing ARP funds to support basic guaranteed income statewide could provide an important source of security for vulnerable families in the Garden State as we emerge from the pandemic and help us to establish a new avenue to combat our state’s staggering economic inequality.

Affordable Housing & Homeownership

The Institute respectfully requests that you prioritize ARP funding to increase affordable housing in the state for both rental and homeownership opportunities in order to ensure that all families have a safe affordable place to call home and that more families of color can access the wealth-building opportunities available through homeownership.

The COVID-19 pandemic has exacerbated a long-standing shortage of affordable housing in the Garden State. Ensuring families have safe, stable and affordable housing was imperative before the pandemic. It is even more critical during the pandemic to limit the spread of COVID-19. We appreciate the state’s commitment to preserving the Affordable Housing Trust Fund (AHTF) and the other crucial housing investments in New Jersey’s budget for the 2022 fiscal year.³⁹ The ARP funds provide an additional opportunity to further invest in affordable housing to address New Jersey’s affordable housing shortage — an effort which must be sustained over time to truly address the ongoing needs for both affordable rental and homeownership options. Almost 90 percent of New Jerseyans in a recent survey indicated that housing costs are a very serious or somewhat serious problem.⁴⁰ Additionally, almost half of low income renters (46%) are cost-burdened, paying more than 30% of their income on housing,⁴¹ while over 80 percent of

renter households with extremely low and very low incomes are cost burdened.⁴² The state has a shortage of over 200,000 rental homes for extremely low income renters.⁴³ Thus, we request ARP funds be used for affordable housing development to build on the crucial housing investments in this year's budget to address the needs of economically vulnerable renters.

In addition to the crucial need for affordable rental housing, the Institute's report *Erasing New Jersey's Red Lines* highlights the enormous racial disparities in homeownership in the state, with a homeownership rate of 77% for white residents compared to 41% for Black New Jerseyans.⁴⁴ Given the state's gaping racial wealth gap, increased affordable housing development is imperative for Black and Brown families to access affordable homeownership opportunities. With housing prices of homes for purchase rapidly rising in the past year,⁴⁵ the need for expanded affordable homeownership opportunities in the state is crucial for closing racial homeownership disparities. Thus, we respectfully request that ARP funds also be made available for the development of affordable homes that will increase home ownership opportunities for families of color.

Youth Apprenticeships

The Institute recommends spending ARP funds on youth apprenticeship programs that will help link young people to apprenticeship programs.

Before the COVID-19 pandemic, New Jersey, like the rest of the nation, saw an increasing skills gap between employers and jobseekers, particularly for middle skills jobs, which require some post-secondary education or training. With a 7.3% unemployment rate,⁴⁶ New Jersey is still struggling to recover its pre-pandemic employment levels. While joblessness has affected Garden State residents across all demographics, communities of color, and the Black community in particular, have suffered disproportionately. In order to advance racial equity in our ravaged economy, we must ensure new entrants in our workforce have the training and skills necessary to meet the demand for skilled labor.⁴⁷ To that end, we must support the creation of youth apprenticeship programs or school-to-apprenticeship linkage programs, for high school students and youth across the state – especially in communities hardest hit by the COVID-19 pandemic. With higher education enrollment down as a number of students postpone college⁴⁸ and others withdraw instead of participating in remote learning,⁴⁹ the state has an obligation to prepare young adults for a future that provides them economic security and affords them the opportunity to remain in New Jersey. Pre-apprenticeships support students as they work to meet the entry requirements for apprenticeship programs, enabling them to enter and succeed in federally-registered apprenticeships.⁵⁰ The Youth Transitions to Work (YTTW) program provides incentives for high school students to effectively transition to apprenticeable occupations.⁵¹ With \$1.5 million recently allocated for FY2021,⁵² additional funding for youth apprenticeships to account for the COVID-19 pandemic would enable more young adult learners to participate in training programs during this crucial moment in their work lives as we emerge from the pandemic.

¹ Assemb. Bill 5842, 2021 Leg., 218th Sess. (N.J. 2021).

² *Id.*

³ *Id.* (“Due to continued concerns surrounding the coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19) pandemic, local elections officials have reported a significant decrease in the number of individuals willing to serve as members of a district board of election, otherwise referred to as poll workers, resulting in an inability to meet the statutory requirements concerning the number of poll workers necessary in each election district.”)

⁴ *Id.*

⁵ Scott Fallon, *COVID cases, hospitalizations rise in NJ as daily vaccination rate dips, variant spreads*, NORTHJERSEY.COM (Jul. 26, 2021, 4:00 AM), <https://www.northjersey.com/story/news/coronavirus/2021/07/26/nj-covid-cases-hospitalizations-rising-delta-variant-spreads/8081574002/>.

⁶ S. Bill 598, Fiscal Note, 2021 Leg., 218th Sess. (N.J. 2021), https://www.njleg.state.nj.us/2020/Bills/S1000/598_E1.PDF.

⁷ *Id.*

⁸ Danielle Root et al., *In Expanding Vote by Mail, States Must Maintain In-Person Voting Options During the Coronavirus Pandemic*, CTR. FOR AM. PROGRESS (Apr. 20, 2021, 12:01 AM), <https://www.americanprogress.org/issues/democracy/news/2020/04/20/483438/expanding-vote-mail-states-must-maintain-person-voting-options-coronavirus-pandemic/>.

⁹ S. Bill 3203, 2021 Leg., 218th Sess. (N.J. 2021) (requiring “optical-scan voting machines that read hand-marked paper ballots or other voting machines that produce a voter-verifiable paper ballot” for early voting).

¹⁰ Jeff Pillets, *Routine Ballot Audit This Year Becomes Historic*, NJ SPOTLIGHT NEWS (Dec. 2, 2020), <https://www.njspotlight.com/2020/12/nj-vote-ballot-audit-election-security-2020/> (“New Jersey remains one of only a handful of states that still primarily use vintage voting machines that do not print a paper trail backup.”).

¹¹ S. Bill 3203, Fiscal Note, 2021 Leg., 218th Sess. (N.J. 2021), https://www.njleg.state.nj.us/2020/Bills/S1000/598_E1.PDF.

¹² Chuck O'Donnell, *New Brunswick City Clerk Seeks to Limit Polling Centers Due to Pandemic*, TAPINTO NEW BRUNSWICK (March 31, 2021, 12:25 PM), <https://www.tapinto.net/towns/new-brunswick/sections/government/articles/new-brunswick-city-clerk-seeks-to-limit-polling-centers-due-to-pandemic>.

¹³ Brent Johnson & Matt Arco, *N.J. Will Soon Allow You to Register to Vote Online*, NJ.COM (Jan. 21, 2020, 1:28 PM), <https://www.nj.com/politics/2020/01/nj-will-soon-allow-you-to-register-to-vote-online.html>.

¹⁴ Terrence T. McDonald, *More Than 400k People Have Used NJ's New Online Voter Registration Site Since its Launch*, NORTHJERSEY.COM (Oct. 14, 2020, 10:55 AM), <https://www.northjersey.com/story/news/politics/elections/2020/10/14/nj-election-2020-new-jersey-voter-registration-site-400-k-users/3650236001/>.

¹⁵ Gopal Ratnam, *Experts: Disinformation Poses Greatest Threat to the Election*, ROLL CALL (Oct. 13, 2020, 6:00 AM), <https://www.rollcall.com/2020/10/13/experts-disinformation-poses-greatest-threat-to-the-election/>.

¹⁶ *Id.*

¹⁷ ELECTION SECURITY RUMOR VS. REALITY, CYBERSECURITY & INFRASTRUCTURE SEC. AGENCY, <https://www.cisa.gov/rumorcontrol> (last updated May 25, 2021).

¹⁸ ELECTION PROTECTION REPORT: ISSUES NEW JERSEY VOTERS ENCOUNTERED FROM OCT. 15 THROUGH NOV. 3, 2020 (2021), https://d3n8a8pro7vhm.cloudfront.net/njisj/pages/698/attachments/original/1619548821/Election_Protection_Report_-_FINAL.pdf?1619548821 (“[T]he New Jersey Institute for Social Justice (“NJSJ”) partnered with Common Cause to run a social media program that monitored Twitter and Facebook for misinformation about the 2020 General Election.”)

¹⁹ HOW STATES CAN UTILIZE AMERICAN RESCUE PLAN FUNDS: ELECTIONS AND CIVICS, THE COUNCIL OF STATE GOV'TS, <https://web.csg.org/recovery/wp-content/uploads/sites/24/2021/06/Analysis-of-the-American-Rescue-Plan-Elections-and-Civics.pdf>.

²⁰ N.J. INST. FOR SOC. JUST. INVESTING IN YOUTH NOT INCARCERATION (2021) https://d3n8a8pro7vhm.cloudfront.net/njisj/pages/1427/attachments/original/1626807806/Investing_in_Youth_Toolkit_Final_7.20.pdf?1626807806.

²¹ *Id.* at 3.

²² *Id.* at 7.

²³ *Id.* at 8.

²⁴ CTR. FOR PROMISE, AM.'S PROMISE ALL., THE STATE OF YOUNG PEOPLE DURING COVID-19 4 (2020), <https://www.americaspromise.org/resource/state-young-people-during-covid-19>.

²⁵ FY 2021 SAMHSA AMERICAN RESCUE PLAN (ARP) FUNDED GRANTS, SUBSTANCE ABUSE AND MENTAL HEALTH SERVS. ADMIN. 4 (July 27, 2021), <https://www.samhsa.gov/sites/default/files/fy21-american-rescue-plan.pdf>.

²⁶ THE COUNCIL OF STATE GOV'T., ANALYSIS OF THE AMERICAN RESCUE PLAN: BASIC INCOME PROGRAMS AS A WAY TO ADDRESS THE IMPACTS OF COVID-19 (2021), <https://web.csg.org/recovery/wp-content/uploads/sites/24/2021/06/Analysis-of-the-American-Rescue-Plan-Basic-Incomes.pdf>.

²⁷ ECON. POLICY INST. INCOME INEQUALITY IN THE U.S. BY STATE, METROPOLITAN AREA, AND COUNTY (2016), <https://www.epi.org/publication/income-inequality-in-the-us/> see Table 2.

²⁸ U.S. CENSUS BUREAU, 2019 MEDIAN HOUSEHOLD INCOME IN THE U.S. <https://www.census.gov/library/visualizations/interactive/2019-median-household-income.html>.

²⁹ LEGAL SERVICES OF NEW JERSEY. TRUE POVERTY: WHAT IT TAKES TO AVOID POVERTY AND DEPRIVATIO IN THE GARDEN STATE 11 (2021), <https://poverty.lsnj.org/Pages/TruePoverty2021.pdf>.

³⁰ CMTY. FOOD BANK OF N.J. SPECIAL REPORT: COVID-19'S IMPACT ON HUNGER IN N.J. 1 (2020), <https://cfbnj.org/covidimpact>. (last visited July 26, 2021).

³¹ U.S. BUREAU OF LAB. STATISTICS, N.J. LOCAL AREA UNEMPLOYMENT STATISTICS 2011-2021, https://data.bls.gov/timeseries/LASST340000000000006?amp%253bdata_tool=XGtable&output_view=data&include_graphs=true. (last visited July 26, 2021).

³² Mark Lopez et. al., *Financial and health impacts of COVID-19 vary widely by race and ethnicity*, PEW RSCH. CTR. (May 5, 2020), <https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2020/05/05/financial-and-health-impacts-of-covid-19-vary-widely-by-race-and-ethnicity/>.

³³ Elise Gould et. al., *Not everybody can work from home: Black and Hispanic workers are much less likely to be able to telework*, ECON. POLICY INST. (Mar. 15, 2021, 1:15 PM), <https://www.epi.org/blog/black-and-hispanic-workers-are-much-less-likely-to-be-able-to-work-from-home>.

³⁴ N.J. INST. FOR SOC. JUSTICE, ERASING NEW JERSEY'S RED LINES: REDUCING RACIAL WEALTH GAP THROUGH HOMEOWNERSHIP AND INVESTMENT IN COMMUNITIES OF COLOR 2 (2020), https://d3n8a8pro7vhmx.cloudfront.net/njisi/pages/689/attachments/original/1588358478/Erasing_New_Jersey's_Red_Lines_Final.pdf?1588358478.

³⁵ DREXEL UNIV. CTR. FOR HUNGER-FREE CMTY. POLICY BRIEF: UNIVERSAL BASIC INCOME 1 (2021), <https://drexel.edu/~media/Files/hunger-free-center/research-briefs/universalbasicincome.ashx>.

³⁶ STOCKTON ECON. EMPOWERMENT DEMONSTRATION, KEY FINDINGS (2021), <https://seed.sworps.tennessee.edu/docs/Key-Findings.pdf>.

³⁷ THE NEWARK MOVEMENT FOR ECONOMIC EQUITY, <https://newarkequity.org> (last visited July 26, 2021).

³⁸ Joe Malinconico, *Paterson Guaranteed Income Program Begins Giving \$400 Payments to Residents*, PATERSON PRESS (Jul. 30, 2021, 4:00 AM), <https://www.northjersey.com/story/news/paterson-press/2021/07/30/guaranteed-income-program-paterson-nj-400-month/5417282001/>.

³⁹ N.J. OFF. OF BUDGET AND MGMT: THE GOVERNOR'S FY2022 BUDGET C-16 (2021), <https://www.nj.gov/treasury/omb/publications/22budget/pdf/FY22GBM.pdf>.

⁴⁰ *Most New Jerseyans say Housing Costs are a Serious Problem; Racial and Ethnic Disparities in Housing Access*, RUTGERS TODAY (June 16, 2021), <https://www.rutgers.edu/news/most-new-jerseyans-say-housing-costs-are-serious-problem-racial-and-ethnic-disparities-housing>.

⁴¹ DEP'T OF HOUS. AND URBAN DEV., EDGE RENTAL BURDENS: RETHINKING AFFORDABILITY MEASURES, https://www.huduser.gov/portal/pdredge/pdr_edge_featd_article_092214.html#:~:text=HUD%20defines%20cost%2Dburdened%20families,of%20one's%20income%20on%20rent (last visited July 26, 2021).

⁴² NAT'L LOW INCOME HOUSING COALITION, HOUSING NEEDS BY STATE N.J., <https://www.nlihc.org/housing-needs-by-state/new-jersey> (last visited July 26, 2021).

⁴³ *Id.*

⁴⁴ N.J. INST. FOR SOC. JUSTICE, *supra* note 34, at 2.

⁴⁵ U.S. DEP'T. OF TREASURY FACT SHEET: THE CORONAVIRUS STATE AND LOCAL FISCAL RECOVERY FUNDS WILL DELIVER \$350 BILLION FOR STATE, LOCAL, TERRITORIAL, AND TRIBAL GOVERNMENTS TO RESPOND TO THE COVID-19 EMERGENCY AND BRING BACK JOBS 5 (2021) <https://home.treasury.gov/system/files/136/SLFRP-Fact-Sheet-FINAL1-508A.pdf>.

⁴⁶ U.S. BUREAU OF LAB. STATISTICS, ECONOMY AT A GLANCE: N.J., <https://www.bls.gov/eag/eag.nj.htm> (last visited Jul 26, 2021).

⁴⁷ See generally N.J. INST. FOR SOC. JUST., BECOMING THE UNITED STATES OF OPPORTUNITY: THE ECONOMIC EQUITY AND GROWTH CASES FOR APPRENTICESHIP (2018) https://d3n8a8pro7vhmx.cloudfront.net/njsj/pages/211/attachments/original/1543957612/Apprenticeship_Report_2018_rev_3.pdf?1543957612.

⁴⁸ Elizabeth Redden, *Quantifying COVID Impacts*, INSIDE HIGHER ED (Jun. 17, 2021) <https://www.insidehighered.com/news/2021/06/17/nces-report-examines-impacts-pandemic-undergraduate-enrollment-finances-and-housing>.

⁴⁹ Christian Roderiguez, *College interrupted: Many students chose to take time off instead of remote learning during the coronavirus pandemic*, CNBC (Jun. 9, 2021, 12:04 PM) <https://www.cnbc.com/2021/06/09/many-college-students-chose-time-off-over-remote-learning-during-covid.html>.

⁵⁰ U.S. DEP'T OF LAB., WHAT IS APPRENTICESHIP?, <https://www.apprenticeship.gov/help/what-pre-apprenticeship> (last visited Jul. 26, 2021).

⁵¹ N.J. DEP'T OF LAB. AND WORKFORCE DEV., YOUTH TRANSITION TO WORK, <https://www.nj.gov/labor/career-services/special-services/youth/youthtransitiontowork.shtml> (last visited Jul. 26, 2021).

⁵² N.J. DEP'T OF LAB. AND WORKFORCE DEV. OFF. OF APPRENTICESHIP YOUTH TRANSITIONS TO WORK PROGRAM 4 (2021), https://www.nj.gov/labor/forms_pdfs/NGO/FY21_001_YTTWNGO.pdf.