

“Social justice should be the underlying goal of all humanity.”
-Alan V. Lowenstein, Institute Founder



FY2024 Budget Testimony of Henal Patel
New Jersey Institute for Social Justice
Senate Budget and Appropriations Committee

Tuesday, March 21, 2023

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do social justice.

Dear Chairman Sarlo and Members of the Senate Budget and Appropriations Committee:

Thank you for the opportunity to submit this testimony. My name is Henal Patel, and I am the Law & Policy Director at the New Jersey Institute for Social Justice (the “Institute”).

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 the following budget appropriations:

- \$30 million in first-generation homeownership down payment assistance;
- Increased funding for fair housing enforcement and testing to root out discrimination in housing, including in appraisals;
- Increased funding for higher education in the state to make college affordable and reduce the burden of student loans in our state;
- Continued funding of hospital-based violence intervention (HVIP) programs;
- \$20 million to create and fund a pilot program for non-police community-based behavioral health first responder teams in New Jersey; and
- Passage and funding of the John R. Lewis Voting Rights Act of New Jersey.

First-Generation Homeownership

The Institute urges the Legislature to support homeownership among first-generation homebuyers through the expansion of Down Payment Assistance for buyers who are the first in their families to buy homes.

Establishing a First-Generation Down Payment Assistance program would target funds to families who do not have generational wealth and do a better job of closing racial disparities in homeownership than existing down payment assistance programs.¹ Black families and other families of color have faced barriers to homeownership in New Jersey for generations and continue to face ongoing inequities in the housing market.² The Institute encourages the Legislature to double

the Governor’s proposal and invest \$30 million in First-Generation Homebuyer Down Payment Assistance to help expand homeownership for families of color.

Fair Housing Investments

The Institute recommends increasing investments in fair housing to better combat housing discrimination in the state.

Discrimination in housing remains a persistent problem in New Jersey.³ Increased funding, provided to the Division on Civil Rights, for fair housing enforcement and testing would help to protect New Jerseyans against discrimination in housing, including in home appraisals, ensuring that all residents in the state have equal access to fair housing.

Higher Education

The Institute supports increased funding for higher education in the state to make college affordable and reduce the burden of student loans in our state.

In order to ensure that all students have access to college without a decades-long debt burden, the Institute supports expanding funds for Tuition Assistance Grants (TAG), the Community College Opportunity Grant (CCOG) and the Garden State Guarantee. In addition, overall funding for higher education must be increased to ensure that our public institutions of higher education are able to provide the quality education that help students succeed in the classroom and beyond. The state has still not adequately reinvested in higher education since the Great Recession with per-student funding down \$1,301 per student from 2008-2020, adjusting for inflation.⁴

Investments in Behavioral Health Crisis Response

The Institute supports the continued funding of hospital-based violence intervention (HVIP) programs.

HVIPs, like the Paterson Healing Collective,⁵ pair professionals – who are credible messengers within their communities and who are trained in providing crisis response, trauma-informed mediation and culturally appropriate services – with individuals who have been targeted by violence. By disrupting the cycle of retaliation, these programs work to proactively prevent violence.

The Institute stands with our partners Salvation and Social Justice in calling for New Jersey to provide funding to create a pilot program for non-police community-based behavioral health first responder teams in New Jersey by creating a separate line item in the budget allocating \$20 million.

New Jersey must develop a pilot program, similar to the program in A5326, for non-police community-based behavioral health first responder teams that is separate and apart from the Attorney General ARRIVE Together program. Unfortunately, with the tragic police killing of Najee Seabrooks, we see that any mental health response that involves police can result in unnecessary death.⁶

This pilot program should be modeled on the nation’s longest standing non-police first responder system, the Crisis Assistance Helping Out On The Streets (CAHOOTS) program in Eugene, Oregon, which has operated for over 30 years.⁷ CAHOOTS provides an unarmed, community-based crisis response team that handles calls for service related to “mental illness, homelessness, and addiction.”⁸ In about 24,000 calls for service over the course of a year, the CAHOOTS crisis response team requested police assistance in only 150 cases, less than one percent of the time.⁹ Notably, the CAHOOTS program is cost-effective, saving the

city of Eugene about \$8.5 million in public safety each year,¹⁰ while costing only approximately \$2.1 million,¹¹ about \$12 per capita.¹²

Similar to CAHOOTS is the Denver Support Team Assisted Response (STAR) Program.¹³ During the six-month pilot from June through November 2020, the STAR program responded to 748 calls, with none requiring police assistance.¹⁴ The STAR program now costs approximately \$3.37 per capita¹⁵ and early data shows 25% less personnel time is required when STAR responds.¹⁶

\$20 million will ensure that municipalities that wish to follow in the steps of Eugene and Denver can do so, saving the lives of their residents by pairing them with actual members of their communities without the concern of law enforcement escalating or mishandling the situation with devastating consequences. A call for help during a mental health crisis should not be responded to with a militarized response. This pilot program not only makes fiscal sense, but it will also save lives.

Fund the John R. Lewis Voting Rights Act of New Jersey

The Institute urges passage and funding of the John R. Lewis Voting Rights Act of New Jersey.

Voting rights are under attack across America and at risk with a radical U.S. Supreme Court, especially for voters of color. As one of the most diverse states in the country¹⁷, New Jersey must be a leader in standing up for democracy, and that includes passing a state Voting Rights Act that not only codifies but expands and strengthens the already weakened federal VRA. Legislators must pass a strong version of the John R. Lewis Voting Rights Act of New Jersey (A4554/S2997). The legislation will address barriers voters, disproportionately Black and other voters of color, continue to face in New Jersey in places like Newark¹⁸ while also expanding language access, in a state where over 31% of the population speaks a language other than English at home.¹⁹ We must prioritize and invest in ensuring that our democracy is available to all people in New Jersey.

Thank you for your consideration.

¹ JUNG HYUN CHOI & JANNEKE RATCLIFFE, DOWN PAYMENT ASSISTANCE FOCUSED ON FIRST-GENERATION BUYERS COULD HELP MILLIONS ACCESS THE BENEFITS OF HOMEOWNERSHIP, URBAN INSTITUTE (Apr. 7, 2021), <https://www.urban.org/urban-wire/down-payment-assistance-focused-first-generation-buyers-could-help-millions-access-benefits-homeownership>.

² RYAN P. HAYGOOD ET AL., N.J. INST. FOR SOC. JUSTICE, BLACK HOMEOWNERSHIP MATTERS (2022), https://assets.nationbuilder.com/njisj/pages/689/attachments/original/1651592853/Black_Homeownership_Matters_Report_5.3.22_web.pdf?1651592853.

³ Ashley Balcerzak, *NJ landlords under investigation for housing discrimination in five counties*, NORTHJERSEY.COM (Feb. 19, 2023, 4:25 AM), <https://www.northjersey.com/story/news/state/2023/02/19/nj-landlords-housing-discrimination-investigation-five-counties-bergen-sussex-union-hunterdon/69918691007/>.

⁴ NEA RESEARCH, THE HIGHER ED FUNDING ROLLERCOASTER: STATE FUNDING OF HIGHER EDUCATION DURING FINANCIAL CRISES (2022), https://www.nea.org/he_funding_report.

⁵ *About Us*, PATERSON HEALING COLLECTIVE, <https://patersonhealingcollective.org/about-us/> (last visited Mar. 20, 2023).

⁶ Marquis Francis, *Bodycam footage shows Najee Seabrooks's standoff with police. Advocates say it proves he didn't have to die*, YAHOO!NEWS (Mar. 17, 2023, 4:09 PM), <https://news.yahoo.com/body-cam-najee-seabrooks-police-advocates-doj-justice-paterson-200929067.html>.

⁷ JACKSON BECK ET AL., VERA INST. OF JUST., CASE STUDY: CAHOOTS (2020), <https://www.vera.org/behavioral-health-crisis-alternatives/cahoots>.

⁸ *What is CAHOOTS?*, WHITE BIRD CLINIC (Oct. 29, 2020), <https://whitebirdclinic.org/what-is-cahoots/>.

⁹ *Id.*

¹⁰ *Id.*

¹¹ *Id.*

¹² Eugene, Oregon had 175,096 in 2021 and \$2.1 million divided by 175,096 is approximately \$12. Bureau of the Census, U.S. Dep't of Commerce, QuickFacts: Eugene City, Or. (2021), <https://www.census.gov/quickfacts/eugencityoregon>.

¹³ *Support Team Assisted Response (STAR) Program*, DENVER: THE MILE HIGH CITY, <https://www.denvergov.org/Government/Agencies-Departments-Offices/Public-Health-Environment/Community-Behavioral-Health/Behavioral-Health-Strategies/Support-Team-Assisted-Response-STAR-Program> (last visited Mar. 20, 2023).

¹⁴ Grace Hauck, *Denver successfully sent mental health professionals, not police, to hundreds of calls*, USA TODAY (Feb. 8, 2021, 1:36 PM), <https://www.usatoday.com/story/news/nation/2021/02/06/denver-sent-mental-health-help-not-police-hundreds-calls/4421364001/>.

¹⁵ Denver population was 711,463 in 2021 and \$2.5 million divided by this population equals approximately \$3.51. Bureau of the Census, U.S. Dep't of Commerce, QuickFacts: Denver city, Colo.; Denver County, Colo. (2021), <https://www.census.gov/quickfacts/fact/table/denvercitycolorado,denvercountycolorado/PST045221>.

¹⁶ *2021 Budget*, DENVER DEP'T OF SAFETY, https://www.denvergov.org/content/dam/denvergov/Portals/344/documents/Budget/2021/EDOS_CityCouncil_2021BudgetPresentation.pdf.

¹⁷ Bureau of the Census, U.S. Dep't of Commerce, 2020 Census: Racial and Ethnic Diversity Index by State (Aug. 12, 2021), <https://www.census.gov/library/visualizations/2021/dec/racial-and-ethnic-diversity-index.html>.

¹⁸ Steve Strunsky, *Judge refuses to order that Newark polling places be made handicapped accessible*, NJ.COM (May 31, 2022) <https://www.nj.com/essex/2022/05/judge-refuses-to-order-that-newark-polling-places-be-made-handicapped-accessible.html>.

¹⁹ Bureau of the Census, U.S. Dep't of Commerce, QuickFacts: N.J. (2021), <https://www.census.gov/quickfacts/NJ>.