

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

-Alan V. Lowenstein, Institute Founder



TESTIMONY OF YANNICK WOOD
NEW JERSEY INSTITUTE FOR SOCIAL JUSTICE
IN SUPPORT OF A5326
NEW JERSEY ASSEMBLY APPROPRIATIONS COMMITTEE
JUNE 22, 2023

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do social justice.

Thank you for the opportunity to present this testimony. My name is Yannick Wood, Director of the Criminal Justice Reform Program at the New Jersey Institute for Social Justice (the “Institute”). I would like to thank my colleague, Emily Schwartz, for her assistance in preparing this testimony.

The Institute’s advocacy empowers 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 supports A5326,¹ a bill that creates increased funding opportunities for both current and future service providers thereby recognizing the crucial work community-based public safety programs provide.

Introduction

An unfortunate reality is that traditional policing, even when well-intended, results in significantly disparate treatment for New Jersey’s diverse communities and individuals in need of mental health treatment. In New Jersey, Black residents are three times more likely to face police violence than white residents.² Since 2015, fatal police encounters in New Jersey have resulted in the deaths of 86 people; 48% of those who lost their lives were Black,³ while Black people comprise 15% of the population.⁴ People experiencing mental health crises are killed at alarming rates during police interactions⁵ even though many calls to police are health-related, not criminal.⁶ In recent years, a military veteran⁷ and a community activist⁸ have both been killed by police while experiencing mental health incidents. Given these staggering statistics, it is not surprising some people do not feel comfortable calling the police for help.⁹ Black, Latina/Latino, LGBTQIA and other marginalized communities too often fear that calling the police will escalate conflicts or otherwise put themselves in danger¹⁰ – and thus respond to community conflicts or other public safety challenges without calling the police.¹¹

Public safety is more than just policing. It involves providing communities with the tools to keep themselves safe. The Institute is pleased to join Salvation and Social Justice and partner organizations in supporting A5326, a bill that will make deep investments in community-based resources that promote public safety.

The Institute supports A5326 for the following reasons: (1) it recognizes the crucial role community-based public safety models provide in creating real public safety; (2)

A5326 expands funding opportunities by allowing communities to craft their own models based on their community's distinct needs; and (3) by creating an advisory council, community-based public safety programs will have longevity in New Jersey, moving from pilots to established programs through the expertise and insight of this council.

1. A5326 recognizes the crucial role community-based public safety models provide in creating real public safety.

A5326 will provide \$10 million in state funds to community-based public safety models.¹² These programs have proven to be highly effective at preventing violence.¹³ This contrasts with national data showing no clear correlation between law enforcement spending and crime rates.¹⁴ Community-based models work, in large part because of their reliance on highly trained professionals. Nationally, community-led first programs such as CAHOOTS¹⁵ in Eugene Oregon, STAR¹⁶ in Denver, Colorado and CRESS¹⁷ in Amherst, Massachusetts have documented success in disrupting violence and in limiting unnecessary and harmful interactions between police and communities of color.¹⁸ This trend also includes programs here in New Jersey including Atlantic City Community Street Team,¹⁹ Newark Community Street Team,²⁰ Paterson Healing Collective,²¹ Life Worth Living²² in Cumberland County and the Trenton Restorative Justice Hub. A5326 not only recognizes the racial disparities in New Jersey's current police model framework, but the need to look beyond policing when mental health crises arise. This bill can be used to support the creation of mental and behavioral health first responder programs which can serve individuals in crisis without the need for police. The earlier mentioned CAHOOTS program has been able to handle 24,000 cases in one year while only requesting police backup in less than 1% of those cases.²³ A5326 authorizes the Department of Health to administer the grants ensuring that community-based organizations will center public health as well as safety in their work.

2. A5326 expands funding opportunities by allowing communities to craft their own models based on their community's distinct needs.

New Jersey must prioritize well-funded community-based responses to address public safety concerns. A5326 is the catalyst for New Jersey to do so. A5326 will allow communities to create models to address where policing falls short. While it does prescribe the necessary components for eligibility for the grant, it does not dictate any particular model—recognizing that different communities have different needs. For example, one community may have a history of law enforcement responding to mental health crises and their priority may be to use funds from A5326 to create a community-based mental health response as an alternative. In another community, the most pressing concern may involve youth and therefore the model sought may prioritize finding ways to reach vulnerable young people engaging in high-risk behaviors. A5326 will improve its public safety and may even save municipalities in law enforcement spending as select cases are reassigned away from traditional police to community-based programs.

A5326 also recognizes that here in New Jersey, community-based models already exist and serve in New Jersey's cities. This bill will allow New Jersey to expand its existing community-led violence prevention programs such as Newark Community Street Team, Trenton Hub and the Paterson Healing Collective with stable funding, allowing them to continue doing this crucial, lifesaving work. These types of programs already provide credible messengers from communities trained in resolving conflicts and preventing violence without law enforcement intervention.

3. *By creating an advisory council, community-based safety models will have longevity in New Jersey, moving from a pilot program to established programs through the expertise and insight of this council.*

Furthermore, by creating an advisory council with members who have direct knowledge of harm reduction services, crisis response, the criminal legal system and public health officials, A5326 can create a template for future successful models based on the insight and real-life experience of these experts shepherding the pilot programs into long-lasting robust models which make our communities safer. A5326 requires the council to publish annual reports and, in doing so, the council will be able to make recommendations and highlight the successful practices of the community-based models. These reports will be accessible to the public and will provide much-needed transparency. The oversight created by these councils will allow us to establish programs throughout New Jersey. As these programs expand, we urge the state to expand funding to support them.

Conclusion

For these reasons, the Institute supports A5326, a bill that will create new community-based public safety models and provide necessary financial support to current community-based service providers. The Institute thanks this committee for their thoughtful consideration of this bill and urges them to release it.

¹ Asm. B. No. 5326, 220th Leg. (N.J. 2023), https://pub.njleg.state.nj.us/Bills/2022/A5500/5326_R1.PDF.

² Erin Petenko, *See how often cops use force on black people in your town*, NJ.COM, <https://www.nj.com/news/2018/12/see-how-often-cops-use-force-onblack-people-in-your-town-map.html> (Jan. 8, 2019, 4:47 PM).

³ N.J. Leg. *supra* note 1.

⁴ *Quick Facts*, U.S. CENSUS BUREAU, <https://www.census.gov/quickfacts/NJ> (last visited June 21, 2023).

⁵ DORIS A. FULLER ET AL., TREATMENT ADVOC. CTR., *OVERLOOKED IN THE UNDERCOUNTED: THE ROLE OF MENTAL ILLNESS IN FATAL LAW ENFORCEMENT ENCOUNTERS 1* (2015), <https://www.treatmentadvocacycenter.org/storage/documents/overlooked-in-the-undercounted.pdf>.

⁶ Amos Irwin & Betsy Pearl, *The Community Responder Model*, CTR. AM. PROGRESS (Oct. 28, 2020, 9:06 AM), <https://www.americanprogress.org/issues/criminal-justice/reports/2020/10/28/492492/community-responder-model/>.

⁷ Mark Morales, *A Black veteran is killed by police after 911 call says he has a gun. But his sister says a crisis team should have been sent*, CNN (Aug. 25, 2021, 9:46 PM), <https://www.cnn.com/2021/08/25/us/gulia-dale-shooting-investigation/index.html>.

⁸ Maria Cramer and Tracey Tully, *Police Pleaded for Hours With a Man in Crisis. Then They Shot Him*, N.Y. TIMES (Mar. 17, 2023), <https://www.nytimes.com/2023/03/17/nyregion/najee-seabrooks-patterson-police-nj.html>.

⁹ Anna North, *What to do instead of calling the police*, VOX (Apr. 14, 2021, 11:10 AM), <https://www.vox.com/2021/4/14/22374196/calling-the-police-violence-alternatives>.

¹⁰ Rick Jervis, *Who are police protecting and serving? Law enforcement has a history of violence against many minority groups*, USA TODAY <https://www.usatoday.com/story/news/nation/2020/06/13/mistrust-police-minority-communities-hesitant-call-police-george-floyd/5347878002/> (June 15, 2020, 3:20 PM).

¹¹ North, *supra* note 9.

¹² N.J. Leg *supra* note 1.

¹³ A 2017 CURE violence program shows a 37% decrease in gun injuries and a 63% decline in shooting victimizations compared to two comparable neighborhoods. *Community-led Public Safety*, EVERYTOWN FOR GUN SAFETY (Oct. 15, 2020), <https://everytownresearch.org/report/community-led-public-safety-strategies/>; In Newark the crime rates after the implementation of NCST, crime rates began rapidly falling reaching 30-year lows for homicides and a 50 year low for overall crime in 2019. Tom Weidman, *Evaluation Reports Newark Community Street Team's Efforts are*

Effective in Crime Reduction, TAPINTONEWARK (Feb. 23, 2021, 4:36 PM), <https://www.tapinto.net/towns/newark/sections/south-ward/articles/evaluation-reports-newark-community-street-team-s-efforts-are-effective-in-crime-reduction>; Linda Nubani, Harmony Fierke-Gmazel, Holly Madill, and Alaina De Biasi, *Community Engagement in Crime Reduction Strategies: A Tale of Three Cities*, 4 J. Participatory Rsch. Methods 1,1 (2023) (“But crime data tracked over the years shows that ‘overpolicing’ isn’t an effective tool at lessening crime rates, can be a strain on budgets, and can heighten tense relationships between police and community members...findings showed that bringing residents and stakeholders together with decision-makers and experts can be an effective tool to address environmental design and crime prevention policies especially in the postpolice defunding era. Additionally, successful crime prevention should be based on social programs and physical improvements to the built environment that are unique to the city. In summary, this participatory approach offers non-police driven crime prevention strategies and allows community members an opportunity to drive these strategies”).

¹⁴ Philip Bump, *Over the past 60 years, more spending on police hasn’t necessarily meant less crime*, WASH. POST (June 7, 2020), <https://www.washingtonpost.com/politics/2020/06/07/over-past-60-years-more-spending-police-hasnt-necessarily-meant-less-crime/> (“A review of spending on state and local police over the past 60 years shows no correlation nationally between spending and crime rates.”); JUST. POLICY INST., *RETHINKING THE BLUES: HOW WE POLICE IN THE U.S. AND AT WHAT COST* 3 (2012),

https://www.justicepolicy.org/uploads/justicepolicy/documents/rethinkingtheblues_executive_summary.pdf (“[T]here is no clear correlation between spending more on police and lower violent crime rates[.]”).

¹⁵ See *What is CAHOOTS?*, WHITE BIRD CLINIC (Oct. 29, 2020), <https://whitebirdclinic.org/what-is-cahoots/>.

¹⁶ *Support Team Assisted Response (STAR) Program*, WELLPPOWER, <https://www.wellpower.org/star-program/> (last visited May 17, 2023, 2:45 PM).

¹⁷ Community Responders for Equity, Safety & Service, AMHERST MA, <https://www.amherstma.gov/3655/Community-Responders-for-Equity-Safety-S>.

¹⁸ 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. See White Bird, *supra* note 15.

¹⁹ *Who We Are*, ATLANTIC CITY CMTY. ST. TEAM, <https://accsteam.org/who-we-are/> (last visited May 17, 2023, 2:38 PM).

²⁰ *About Us*, NEWARK CMTY. ST. TEAM, <https://www.newarkcommunitystreetteam.org/about-us/> (last visited May 17, 2023, 2:25 PM).

²¹ *What is an HVIP?*, PATERSON HEALING COLLECTIVE, <https://patersonhealingcollective.org/what-is-an-hvip/> (last visited May 17, 2023, 2:29 PM).

²² *Who We Are*, LIFE WORTH LIVING INC., <https://lifeworthlivingnj.org/>.

²³ White Bird, *supra* note 15.