

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

-Alan V. Lowenstein, Institute Founder



Testimony of Micauri Vargas
New Jersey Institute for Social Justice
In Support of A4948

New Jersey State Assembly State and Local Government Committee
Thursday, January 19, 2023

Chairman Verrelli, Vice-Chair Swain and members of the State and Local Government Committee:

Thank you for the opportunity to submit this testimony.

My name is Micauri Vargas, and I am an Associate Counsel of the Democracy and Justice Program at the New Jersey Institute for Social Justice (the “Institute”). The Institute uses cutting-edge racial and social justice legal 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 in support of A4948, which will require the State to prepay for the postage of mail-in ballot application forms. Under current law, a voter would have to pay for postage if they chose to complete and return their mail-in ballot application by regular mail to the county clerk. An issue with leaving it to the voter to pay for the cost of postage is that while vote-by-mail is convenient and accessible to many, it is also an economic burden to others.

While the cost of a postage stamp may seem inconsequential to some, the cost of postage can deter low-income individuals from participating in an election. In New Jersey, because we have one of the highest racial wealth gaps in the country, this population is disproportionately Black and Latino/a. White New Jerseyans have a median household wealth of over \$322,000, while Black New Jerseyans have a median household wealth of less than \$18,000 and Latino/a families have a median household wealth of about \$26,000.¹ Given the racial wealth gap in the state, the burden of postage would fall heaviest on Black and brown people.

In addition, nearly 83,000² people on parole and probation have had their right to vote restored as of March 17, 2020. Many of these people are economically insecure.³ Under your leadership, we restored their right to vote. They join thousands of voters around New Jersey, including those in jail pre-trial or incarcerated for disorderly or juvenile offenses, who have the right to vote but may not be able to afford the price of postage. We must

Board of Trustees

Paulette Brown, Esq.

Chair

Robin A. Lenhardt, Esq.

Vice Chair

Kenneth Y. Tanji

Treasurer

B. John Pendleton, Jr., Esq.

Secretary

Ryan P. Haygood, Esq.

President & CEO

Douglas S. Eakeley, Esq.

(Immediate Past Chair)

John J. Farmer, Jr., Esq.

(Past Chair)

Paul J. Fishman, Esq.

Michael D. Francis, Esq.

Jerome C. Harris, Jr.

Rev. Timothy Adkins-Jones

Sandra King

John H. Lowenstein, Ph.D.

Diana DeJesus-Medina

James McQueeney

Patricia Nachtigal, Esq.

Darrell K. Terry, Sr.

Martin Vergara II

Nina Mitchell Wells, Esq.

Antoinette Ellis-Williams, Ph.D.

Gary M. Wingens, Esq.

Zulima V. Farber, Esq. *(Emerita)*

Roger A. Lowenstein, Esq. *(Emeritus)*

Theodore V. Wells, Jr., Esq. *(Emeritus)*

Founders

Alan V. and Amy Lowenstein*

Founding Board President

Nicholas deB. Katzenbach, Esq.*

Founding Board Vice President

Hon. Dickinson R. Debevoise*

*deceased

60 Park Place, Suite 511

Newark, NJ 07102-5504

ph. (973) 624-9400

fax (973) 624-0704

email: justice@njisj.org

www.njisj.org

do social justice.

not create an additional barrier for them. One simple solution to these issues is for election officials to pre-pay postage for the mail-in ballot application form.

A4948 is necessary legislation. As we are seeing all around the country, voters want to vote early by mail. In the last few years, this Legislature has taken great strides to expand access to the ballot in New Jersey, from passing early voting and automatic voter registration and online voter registration, to restoring the vote to people on parole and probation, to expanding vote-by-mail and passing the Ballot Cure Act. A4948 is the next step to ensure our democracy thrives. We urge you to pass this bill out of committee.

Thank you.

¹ RYAN P. HAYGOOD ET AL., N.J. INST. FOR SOC. JUSTICE, MAKING THE TWO NEW JERSEYS ONE (2022), https://assets.nationbuilder.com/njisj/pages/689/attachments/original/1645217098/Making_the_Two_New_Jerseys_One_2.15.22-compressed.pdf?1645217098.

² RYAN P. HAYGOOD ET AL., N.J. INST. FOR SOC. JUSTICE, VALUE TO THE SOUL: PEOPLE WITH CRIMINAL CONVICTIONS ON THE POWER OF THE VOTE 3 n.24 (2019), https://d3n8a8pro7vhmx.cloudfront.net/njisj/pages/1360/attachments/original/1570569487/Value_to_the_Soul_10-08-19_FIN_WEB.pdf?1570569487.

³ ALEXI JONES, PRISON POLICY INITIATIVE, CORRECTION CONTROL 2018: INCARCERATION AND SUPERVISION BY STATE (2018), <https://www.prisonpolicy.org/reports/correctionalcontrol2018.html> (“People under community supervision have significantly higher rates of poverty[.]”).