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NEW JERSEY INSTITUTE FOR SOCIAL JUSTICE

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A SOCIAL JUSTICE VISION FOR NEW JERSEY: THE INSTITUTE'S 2017 PLATFORM AGENDA

Economic Mobility

- Raise the Minimum Wage to \$15 an Hour in New Jersey. As one of the wealthiest states in the nation, with one of the highest costs of living, New Jersey should phase in an increase of the minimum wage to \$15 an hour, starting immediately by raising the minimum wage to \$12 an hour. Research shows that raising the minimum wage to \$12 an hour nationally would not produce any net economic drawbacks, which is especially true in New Jersey given the many competitive economic advantages that our state has. Most importantly, raising the minimum wage will increase the ability of many individuals and families in the state to support themselves, lifting hundreds of thousands of people out of poverty, and reducing the gender and race pay gaps in the state.
- Pass Stackable Credential Legislation. Building on state laws like the New Jersey Pathways Leading Apprentices to a College Education (NJ PLACE) Act, New Jersey should adopt a law requiring that community colleges and workforce training providers receiving government funds exclusively provide stackable credentials—certifications or course credits that can lead to a more advanced certification or a degree—that would be accepted by certificate or associate degree programs in the same field. Stackable credentials are a critical tool for people to advance in their career field over time, particularly while working full-time. They are also usually portable among employers within the same industry, which promotes career mobility for residents. Additional funds should also be appropriated to provide technical assistance and support to colleges and training providers to implement this stackable credential requirement.
- Tax Credits and Funding for Apprenticeship Programs. New Jersey should allocate additional funding for apprenticeship programs in the state, which help directly bridge the middle skills gap between unemployed or under-employed people and employers. The U.S. Department of Labor estimates that every federal dollar of investment in apprenticeship programs yields more than \$50 in federal revenue. Realizing a similar return on investment in New Jersey would mean that these programs will more than pay for themselves over time, as well as enable thousands of residents to enter career paths that pay a living wage and provide the opportunity for career advancement.

- Strengthen the Opportunity to Compete Act. While the Opportunity to Compete Act was an important first step in improving access to employment for people with criminal convictions in New Jersey, it should be strengthened. The law should be amended to only permit employers to inquire about an applicant's criminal history and complete a background check after a conditional offer of employment is extended. Then, in order for the employer to rescind the conditional offer of employment, it should be required to provide a written explanation to the applicant of why the criminal history makes them ineligible for the position, and provide the applicant an opportunity to respond. New Jersey should also examine and publicly report on the denial of employment based on criminal convictions across different racial and ethnic groups in the state. In addition to government enforcement of this law, there should be a private right of action to facilitate enforcement.
- Repeal the Parking Offenses Adjudication Act. New Jersey should repeal the Parking Offenses Adjudication Act (POAA), a law that permits suspending a person's driver's license as a result of their inability to pay outstanding parking fines. Research has shown that conditioning one's access to a driver's license upon their ability to pay a fine, even in small installments, effectively denies the right to drive to low-income people and those living month-to-month. By taking away an individual's right to drive, this law hinders the ability of residents to work—license suspensions lead to job loss and diminished income. New Jersey should repeal the POAA in order to help people, particularly those in poverty, have full access to employment opportunities.

Criminal Justice Reform

- Close Hayes and Jamesburg Youth Prisons. New Jersey must end the failed experiment of youth incarceration by closing Hayes and Jamesburg—the state's girls' youth prison and the largest youth prison for boys, respectively. Incredibly, two-thirds of kids incarcerated in New Jersey's youth prisons are Black, even though Black and white youth commit similar offenses at similar rates. New Jersey's system of incarceration is based on racialized policies that treat certain children as children, while forcing others—particularly children of color—into incarceration. Locking up our kids in large youth prisons harms them irreparably at a critical stage in their development and, as 80 percent of youth have a new court filing or are rearrested within a few years after release, perpetuates racial disparities. Though it fails to reduce recidivism or increase public safety, it nevertheless costs New Jersey taxpayers over \$200,000 per year to incarcerate each child.
- Increase State Funding for Community-Based Youth Programs. New Jersey should re-invest funds from closing Hayes and Jamesburg youth prisons into developing and strengthening community-based intervention, prevention, diversion, and alternatives-to-incarceration programming for our youth. Community-based programming has been proven to increase public safety at a fraction of the cost of incarceration. For example, programming provided by organizations such as Youth Advocate Programs, Inc. successfully provides kids with intensive wrap-around services while decreasing recidivism rates—all at a cost of around \$75 a day per child. For those young people who may need to be placed in secure

confinement for public safety reasons, they should be sent to small, treatment-centered facilities that are close to home and familial support.

- Strengthen and Codify the Attorney General’s Stationhouse Adjustments Directive. New Jersey should strengthen and codify Attorney General Directive No. 2008-2, which establishes guidelines for law enforcement agencies’ use of stationhouse adjustments. A stationhouse adjustment occurs when a young person who commits a first-time, low-level offense is diverted from having a formal complaint filed against him or her by fulfilling certain conditions—such as performing community service or attending a program such as Newark’s Youth Court. Although the directive mandates that all law enforcement agencies with patrol jurisdiction must use stationhouse adjustments, the majority of agencies are not using this important process. To strengthen this policy, the Attorney General should issue a new directive including stronger enforcement protections and public access to data, and the legislature should then codify this order.
- Establish a Five-Year Police Residency Requirement. Law enforcement officials must see themselves as an integral part of the community, duty-bound to respect and honor the rights, dignity, and humanity of the people they serve. Police officers must seek to first build trust and community, and then join with the communities they serve to be both peacemakers and peacekeepers. Toward that end, New Jersey should pass legislation requiring that all newly-hired police officers live in the municipality they police for at least the first five years of their employment. Indeed, during a time when Newark—New Jersey’s largest city—is under a consent decree that requires widespread changes in the Newark Police Division’s practices, requiring police officers to be proximate to communities they protect as residents is foundational to those reforms.
- Enforce and Pass Reentry Laws Focused on the Currently-Incarcerated. The legislature should evaluate current reentry laws to assess whether they are providing effective resources for incarcerated individuals. In particular, meaningful opportunities should be provided during incarceration for people to continue their education, receive treatment and services, strengthen technology literacy, and benefit from early notification of information that will impact them upon release—such as voting information and what fines and fees have been assessed against them. The Department of Corrections should also expand its workforce program to provide opportunities for individuals to develop unique skills to increase employment options upon release—for example, several states currently operate successful prison braille programs.

Civic Engagement

- Establish Automatic Voter Registration. New Jersey should pass automatic voter registration (AVR), a reform that would modernize the state’s election system and dramatically increase the number of citizens who participate in our elections. Under AVR, eligible citizens who interact with participating government agencies—like the Motor Vehicle Commission—are automatically registered to vote unless they opt-out. The individual’s information is electronically transmitted from the agency to election officials,

which reduces the need for paper forms and improves record-keeping. In addition to registering new voters, AVR ensures that voters' registration records are kept up-to-date if they move within the state, both protecting the franchise and helping to maintain accurate voter rolls.

- Restore Voting Rights to People with Criminal Convictions. New Jersey should restore the right to vote to the over 94,000 people currently disfranchised because of a criminal conviction. Currently, a person convicted of a felony must complete all terms of their sentence—including parole and probation—before their voting rights are restored. Three-quarters of those disfranchised, over 70,000 people, are living in our communities, raising families, and paying taxes. Laws that disfranchise people with a criminal conviction also disproportionately impact communities of color due to racial discrimination in the criminal justice system. As New Jersey continues its public dialogue around criminal justice reform, it is important that those most deeply impacted by the criminal justice system are able to make their voices heard.
- Designate State Corrections Agencies as Voter Registration Agencies. New Jersey should designate its state corrections agencies, such as the Department of Corrections, State Parole Board, and probation offices, as voter registration agencies under the National Voter Registration Act of 1993 (NVRA). For over 20 years, the NVRA has required state public assistance agencies and departments of motor vehicles to provide voter registration services to their clients and customers. New Jersey's corrections agencies should perform a similar service. As designated voter registration agencies, they would be required to notify each person when their rights have been restored, provide the person with a voter registration application, and provide assistance in completing the form and transmitting it to election officials. Designation will not only ensure that people are aware that their rights have been restored, it will provide them with the tools to exercise their right to vote.
- Set Minimum Early Voting Requirements. New Jersey should expand the opportunities for early voting by establishing in-person polling sites in each county that open at least two weeks prior to Election Day, with multiple locations in each county. These sites should be required to offer some early voting hours during evenings and weekends, including the weekend immediately before Election Day. As early voting is only effective if voters are aware of it, the legislation should also include a public education requirement. Research shows that early voting improves participation and results in shorter lines on Election Day, as well as allowing for early diagnosis and correction of any errors with registration rolls, ballots, or machinery. Beyond these benefits, early voting is particularly helpful to voters of color, who are more likely to take advantage of the flexibility early voting affords. Enacting a robust early voting law is an essential step toward making New Jersey's elections accessible to all citizens.