May 7, 2020

Dear Speaker Coughlin,

We the undersigned strongly urge you to post and support A3905, which would make major improvements in Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF) and help break the cycle of poverty for children.

The changes proposed by this bill are needed now more than ever during the COVID-19 crisis, which has been particularly brutal for low income families. As unemployment escalates, many families with children in New Jersey will desperately need temporary financial assistance, emergency housing, and other supports until they can get on their feet again. Rather than continue with the current TANF policy — which often punishes families for being poor and traps them in poverty — A3905 would eliminate deep poverty for families in TANF, provide additional support for children, and prioritize education and training for parents so they can secure good-paying jobs to lift their families out of poverty entirely. The Senate has demonstrated the urgency of this issue by passing the companion bill, S2329, shortly after it was introduced earlier this month.

There is no question that TANF needs major reform. Since the federal government replaced Aid to Families with Dependent Children with TANF in 1997, enrollment of families has plummeted in New Jersey by a stunning 91 percent even though the number of families in poverty has remained about the same. Before TANF, the state assisted approximately 102,000 families living below the federal poverty level; by 2018, that number fell to only 13,000 families, which represented only 15 percent of all families living in poverty. One reason for this decline is that, save for the last two years, TANF benefits were never adjusted to account for increases in the cost of living. As it stands, TANF benefits are only about a third of the federal poverty level, and when housing costs are considered, New Jersey ranks only 32nd in benefits nationally.

It is also very concerning that far too many parents are not provided with the education and training they need in TANF to lift their families out of poverty entirely. Since 2007, the number of parents on TANF receiving education and training has decreased 82 percent. Instead, most parents are required to work for 35 hours a week, usually without pay in non-profit agencies that do not teach the professional skills they need to obtain a good-paying job. As a result, these families remain in poverty even when the parent is working, or the family returns to TANF at greater public cost.

Reducing childhood poverty has major benefits for our communities and state’s broader economy. Programs like TANF that help stabilize the incomes of low-income families have long-lasting effects on a child’s ability to succeed in school, get a high school or college degree, and find work as an adult. The program could be a key tool in helping to address poor health outcomes for Black women and children and reduce major income disparities. Due to historic
discrimination, Black and Brown children represent about 68 percent of all children in poverty even though they represent only about 40 percent of all children in New Jersey.

A3905 would provide equal opportunities that children need to help break the cycle of poverty, which will promote racial equity and shared prosperity. We urge that the Assembly pass this bill soon so that all children in New Jersey can reach their full potential.

Sincerely,

Anti-Poverty Network of New Jersey

New Jersey Policy Perspective

Advocates for Children of New Jersey
Banking on New Jersey
Camden Coalition of Healthcare Providers
Catholic Charities – Diocese of Trenton
Christ Episcopal Church
Community Health Law Project
Episcopal Diocese of New Jersey
Fair Share Housing Center
If Not for GRACE NJ
Jewish Family Service of Atlantic & Cape May Counties
Housing and Community Development Network of New Jersey

Ironbound Community Corporation
La Casa de Don Pedro
Lutheran Episcopal Advocacy Ministry of New Jersey
Latino Action Network
Mercer Alliance to End Homelessness
New Jersey Association of Black Educators
New Jersey Catholic Conference
New Jersey Coalition to End Homelessness
New Jersey Institute for Social Justice
New Jersey Working Families
Paterson Education Fund
Pringle’s Pit Stop
Statewide Parent Advocacy Network (SPAN)
Trenton Area Soup Kitchen