

NEW JERSEY - BUILDING A STATE OF OPPORTUNITY

A Report of the Wealth Disparity Task Force to Close Opportunity Gaps and Repair Structural Disparities



EXECUTIVE SUMMARY



February 2025

NEW JERSEY - BUILDING A STATE OF OPPORTUNITY: A Report of the Wealth Disparity Task Force to Close Opportunity Gaps and Repair Structural Disparities

Report Cover: Illustrated by Maggie Loesch

Description: On the front left is the silhouette of a young girl with her hand on an opened ornate wooden door on a brown brick wall to reveal the sun - which represents the sunlight of opportunity - shining on a landscape that features iconic New Jersey landmarks including the New Jersey State Capitol Building in Trenton, the Pinelands National Reserve, the Absecon Lighthouse in Atlantic City, the National Newark Building, 99 Hudson and the Goldman Sachs Tower in Jersey City, Old Queens at Rutgers University, Nassau Hall at Princeton University, and the Lower Trenton Bridge that features the phrase "Trenton Makes the World Takes" in homage to the city's manufacturing history. On the cover, part of this phrase, "Trenton Makes the World," is visible on the bridge in red. The bridge is at the center and the front right of the image followed by the water and banks of the Delaware River. Behind the river bank is a row of townhouses and a playground with paths leading to the landmarks.

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Report Roadmap

This executive summary highlights sections from the full text of the Wealth Disparity Task Force Report. The report begins with an overview of New Jersey's history to highlight the contributions, resilience, and perseverance of generations of people who call New Jersey home. The report also identifies the laws and policies throughout the state's history that challenged the ability of many groups to exercise their rights as guaranteed by the state and federal constitutions. Through the lens of history, each of us can better identify past discrimination and understand the origins of the structural barriers that persist today. With this context, we are better equipped to meet the moment and repair these long-standing harms to ensure that our state's children can experience the opportunities made possible by their parents and grandparents.

Recognizing the reality described by Fannie Lou Hamer that “nobody's free, until everybody's free,” this report is for all of the people who live in New Jersey.⁷ Inspired and guided by a true “Jersey girl,” the late Lieutenant Governor Sheila Y. Oliver, Task Force Co-Chair, the Wealth Disparity Task Force hopes that this report will make clear the contributions and sacrifices that were made to bring our state closer to its promise of “liberty and prosperity” for all.

When traveling, children often ask, “are we there yet?” New Jersey is still on the road to fulfilling its promise, yet the Garden State is making significant strides and creating opportunities for children that their parents and grandparents did not experience.

On long journeys, it is encouraging to remember the path already traveled. Through this report, the Wealth Disparity Task Force—in examining the causes of long-standing challenges and proposing remedies to address them—is acknowledging the full history of the state's past and recommending a path forward that builds on the efforts of our forebearers to ensure that all of the people in New Jersey can realize their full potential.

The report includes the following sections:

- **Overview of New Jersey History – Becoming the Garden State**
Non-exhaustive review of state history that aims to illustrate some of the people and events that helped to shape New Jersey (see the full report)
- **Working Group Discussions – Seeds of Progress**
Background information about each Task Force working group highlighting the content examined and the progress that has been made toward closing opportunity gaps and responding to cost-burdened families (see the full report)
- **Task Force Recommendations – Building a State of Opportunity**
Proposals that the Wealth Disparity Task Force recommends to close opportunity gaps and repair structural injustices (included in the executive summary)

Milestones from the Work of the Wealth Disparity Task Force

2021

June 18, 2021: Governor Murphy signs [Executive Order 262](#) establishing the work of the Wealth Disparity Task Force (Task Force)

Summer to Fall 2021: The Task Force prepares to convene and works with liaisons from the Murphy Administration

December 6, 2021: Inaugural Task Force meeting

2022

January 2022: Working groups formed and began meeting monthly

February 2022: Video released on the Administration's social media explaining the work of the Task Force; launch of the Task Force logo and webpage

March 24, 2022: First 2022 Quarterly Meeting

April to May 2022: Monthly working group meetings continue

June 20, 2022: Governor Murphy's Juneteenth Address at Mount Zion AME in Trenton, NJ, followed by the Task Force's second quarterly meeting at Mount Zion AME - in-person listening session with faith leaders

June 28, 2022: Wealth Disparity Task Force Stakeholder Webinar prepared and distributed a public engagement toolkit to align the public messaging of each working group

August to September 2022

Series of Virtual Listening Sessions - More than 400 people registered throughout the series and joined the Task Force list serv. Written and verbal input received from over 100 participants

- **August 16, 2022:** Economy Working Group
- **August 18, 2022:** Criminal Justice Working Group
- **August 23, 2022:** Education Working Group
- **August 30, 2022:** Health Working Group
- **September 7, 2022:** Housing Working Group

October to December 2022

Community Roundtables - The working groups began a series of in-person community roundtables with focus groups to inform and direct their proposals

- Groups included formerly incarcerated individuals and their family members, seniors, faith leaders, school nurses, parents with young children, and individuals receiving public assistance
- Working groups drafted proposals
- Report research and writing

2023

January to February 2023

- Working groups submit proposals
- Report research and writing continued

March to June 2023

- Consideration of proposals
- Report research and writing continued

FY2024 State Initiatives that the Wealth Disparity Task Force Advanced

(see the full report for the working group discussions):

- **Invest in First-Generation Homeownership:** Allocate additional funding for the Down Payment Assistance Program to directly support first-generation homeowners and launch a Resilient Homes Construction Pilot program to fund the rehabilitation and construction of affordable homes
- **Create Initiatives to Support Supply Chain Diversity and Employee Ownership:** Invest in initiatives that increase supply chain diversity and employee ownership initiatives and support urban economic and community revitalization
- **Eliminate Public Defender Fees:** Eliminate fees, liens, and warrants for those who require public defender representation, while increasing the public defender compensation rate to attract more attorneys
- **Provide the Child Tax Credit and Family Support:** Support families with young children to receive up to \$1,000 per child by doubling the Child Tax Credit
- **Support Freedom Schools:** Increase investments in Freedom Schools in New Jersey, which provide summer and after-school enrichment programs to empower school-aged children

Lt. Gov. Sheila Y. Oliver, Task Force Co-chair passes away in August 2023

Summer 2023: Task Force recalibrates

Fall to Winter 2023: Report research and writing continues

2024

January to February 2024

- Working groups submit proposals
- Report research and writing continues

FY2025 State Initiatives that the Wealth Disparity Task Force Advanced

(see the full report for the working group discussions):

- **Reduce Medical Debt:** Support legislation that prevents the reporting of medical debt to credit agencies and reforms the medical billing process
- **Extend First-Generation Homeownership:** Propose continued funding for the First-Time Homebuyer Down Payment Assistance Program and additional support for first-generation homeowners while extending the Resilient Homes Construction Pilot program to fund the rehabilitation and construction of affordable homes

- **Increase Opportunities to Public Contracting and Employee Ownership:** Invest in initiatives that increase opportunities in public contracting and technical assistance for businesses considering employee ownership business conversions
- **Continue Family Support and the Child Tax Credit:** Support families with young children by proposing to continue the expanded Earned Income Tax Credit, Child and Dependent Care Tax Credit, and the Child Tax Credit up to \$1,000 per child
- **Promote Justice System Reforms:** Support adoption of expedited clemency and technical parole violation reform
- **Expand Freedom Schools:** Increase investments to expand the reach of Freedom Schools in New Jersey, which provide summer and after-school enrichment programs to empower school-aged children

Spring to Fall 2024: Report writing continues

Winter 2024-2025: Prepare and release the final Wealth Disparity Task Force Report

2025

Calendar Year 2025: Expand public outreach and stakeholder engagement; advance responsive legislation; continue agency collaboratives that support implementation

Executive Order 262 – Charge

There is hereby established the Wealth Disparity Task Force (the “Task Force”) to examine the causes of, and remedies for, the long-standing wealth disparities that affect Black, Latino, and Hispanic New Jerseyans. The Task Force will be divided into five working groups, which collectively are charged with reviewing research, data, and analysis in order to provide a report and evidence-based recommendations to the Governor for remedying these long-standing wealth disparities.

Background

The Task Force included both government leaders and stakeholders. The Task Force held four in-person meetings. The five working groups held separate, virtual monthly meetings from December 2021 through Spring 2023. Each working group conducted a virtual listening session in the summer of 2022 with over 400 registrants and engaged in person across the state, including in Newark, Trenton, and Asbury Park. The Task Force drafted recommendations, several of which were considered in the state budget in FY2024 and FY2025. The report identifies the historical drivers of wealth disparities, outlines current Administration efforts, and recommends additional actions to address the findings.

Task Force Members

Co-Chairs of the Task Force – Summer 2021 to Summer 2023

***Sheila Y. Oliver**, Lt. Governor, State of New Jersey and Commissioner,
New Jersey Department of Community Affairs

****Marlene Caride**, Commissioner, New Jersey Department of Banking and Insurance

Dr. Jonathan Holloway, Rutgers, The State University of New Jersey

Maria Vizcarrondo, Retired President & CEO, Council of New Jersey Grantmakers

*Served until August 2023

**Served until her appointment in June 2024 as a Superior Court Judge

MEMBERS OF THE TASK FORCE WORKING GROUPS

Criminal Justice Working Group

(Lead) Matthew J. Platkin, Attorney General,
New Jersey Office of the Attorney General

***Andrew Bruck**, Acting Attorney General (July 2021 – Feb. 2022),
New Jersey Office of the Attorney General

Dr. Alexis Karteron, Associate Professor of Law
& Director of the Constitutional Rights Clinic,
Rutgers Law School – Newark
(until joining the New York University Law Faculty in 2023)

Cuqui Rivera, Program Coordinator,
Hispanic Action Network Foundation

Reverend Bolivar Flores, Chief of Staff,
New Jersey Reentry Corporation

*Served until the end of his tenure with the
Murphy Administration in February 2022

Economy Working Group

(Lead) Brandon McKoy, President,
The Fund for New Jersey

Cid Wilson, President & CEO,
Hispanic Association on Corporate Responsibility

Elizabeth Maher Muoio, Treasurer,
New Jersey Department of the Treasury

Raymond L. Lamboy, President & CEO,
Latin American Economic Development Association, Inc.

Robert Asaro-Angelo, Commissioner,
New Jersey Department of Labor and Workforce Development

Tim Sullivan, CEO,
New Jersey Economic Development Authority

Education Working Group

(Lead) Hon. Jeannine Frisby LaRue,
Partner, Moxie Strategies

***Dr. Zakiya Smith Ellis**, Chief Policy Advisor,
Office of the Governor of New Jersey (2020 – 2022)

****Dr. Angelica Allen-McMillan**, Acting Commissioner,
New Jersey Department of Education

Dr. Brian Bridges, Secretary,
Office of the Secretary of Higher Education

Carlos Valentin Jr., Executive Director,
ASPIRA Inc. of New Jersey

Gary Melton, Manager,
Office of Human and Civil Rights, Equity, and Governance, NJEA Executive Office

*Served until the end of her tenure with the Murphy Administration in June 2023

**Served until her retirement in February 2024

Health Working Group

(Lead) Michellene Davis, Esq., President & CEO,
National Medical Fellowships

Dr. Diane Hill, Assistant Chancellor for University-Community Partnerships,
Rutgers University-Newark

Dr. Jubril Oyeyemi, Medical Director of Care Management Initiatives,
Camden Coalition

***Judith M. Persichilli**, Commissioner (2019-2023),
New Jersey Department of Health

Dr. Kaitlan Baston, Commissioner,
New Jersey Department of Health

*Served until the end of her tenure with the Murphy Administration in July 2023

Housing Working Group

(Co-Lead) Reverend Eric Dobson, Deputy Director,
Fair Share Housing Center

***(Co-Lead) Rachel Wainer Apter**, Director 2018-2022,
New Jersey Division on Civil Rights, New Jersey Office of the Attorney General

Aarin Michele Williams, Chief Advisor to the Director,
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****Kimberly Holmes, Esq.**, Chief of Staff,
New Jersey Department of Community Affairs

Kia King, Esq., Chief of Staff,
New Jersey Department of Community Affairs

*Served until her appointment to the New Jersey Supreme Court in October 2022

**Served until her appointment in August 2024 as an Administrative Law Judge

Tribute Page to Lieutenant Governor Oliver



The bright, morning rays of summer sunlight awoken a young New Jersey girl. Whether she's looking out at a farm in a southern town, the shoreline of the Jersey coast, a backyard swing set in a suburban subdivision, or high rises in a bustling city neighborhood, this young girl can dream big and aim high. As she learns the history of her community and her state, she, along with the children of New Jersey, should know of a self-described "Jersey Girl," born in Newark who lived for a time on Bock Avenue, and was a graduate of Weequahic High School, Sheila Y. Oliver.

Empowered by the courage of Fannie Lou Hamer, Sheila Oliver set out on a personal quest to make a difference. She began pursuing higher education, graduating from Lincoln University, a historically Black university, with a Bachelor of Arts in Sociology, and Columbia University with a Master of Science degree in Community Organization, Planning, and Administration.

Inspired by Congresswoman Shirley Chisholm, who admonished, that "you do not make progress

by standing on the sidelines, whimpering and complaining; you make progress by implementing ideas," Sheila Oliver—a long-time East Orange resident—became the first Black woman to serve as Speaker of the State Assembly, and joined Karen Bass as the only Black women in US history to lead a state legislative body. Once elected as Lieutenant Governor, Sheila Oliver became the highest-ranking Black woman to hold statewide office, while also serving as Commissioner of the Department of Community Affairs.

Lieutenant Governor Oliver courageously sacrificed to serve the people of New Jersey, making each day count, and selflessly giving to make a difference. A true trailblazer, Lieutenant Governor Oliver helped ensure that the future of all "Jersey Girls" is limitless and free from many of the obstacles that girls faced when she was born in 1952. Now, children across the state enjoy opportunities made possible by her work.

To honor Lieutenant Governor Oliver's story, her service, and her sacrifice, we—all those who call New Jersey home—should strive to move our state forward. This moment is a heightened call to action—especially for those of us who were not envisioned in the liberty and prosperity promised in 1787—to serve and sacrifice, not only to preserve, but to extend the opportunities that Lieutenant Governor Oliver fought for.

Lieutenant Governor, thank you for your service. Thank you for taking the time to meet with, listen to, and work on behalf of the voiceless. LG, thank you for leaving us better than you found us—well done. We press on to ensure that your legacy lives on.

This report is written in honor and memory of Lieutenant Governor Shelia Y. Oliver, a self-described "Jersey Girl," who worked to ensure that all New Jersey children are equipped and positioned to realize their full promise and to ensure that their future is full of opportunities that were not accessible to her and her forebearers.

A version of this tribute was previously published in 2023.

Foreword from Lieutenant Governor Tahesha Way



From the Desk of New Jersey Lieutenant Governor and Secretary of State



On behalf of this Administration and the people of New Jersey, I commend the members of the Wealth Disparity Task Force for their diligent and thoughtful work on a topic affecting all New Jerseyans. The completion of this report represents a significant milestone for the legacy of my dear friend, our late Lieutenant Governor Sheila Oliver, whose passion for fairness and desire to uplift vulnerable people and communities inspired this task force from the outset. The work you share here examines the impacts of the economy, housing, health, education, and criminal justice on our residents.

We recognize that we cannot chart a way towards a brighter, better future for all people without examining our past. I'm proud that my Department of State is home to the New Jersey Historical Commission which strives to expand our understanding of our state's history and the people whose stories shaped

the places we all share. I'm especially grateful to highlight their work on the Black Heritage Trail, established by Governor Murphy in 2021 "to promote awareness and appreciation of Black history, heritage, and culture" that will "highlight Black heritage sites through historical markers and a trail-like path that connects the stories of Black life and resiliency."

Under this program, the Historical Commission works in cooperation with other state agencies, such as the Historic Preservation Office, the Division of Travel and Tourism, as well as local governments, owners or operators of Black heritage sites, and others to identify a series of sites. This year, historical markers will begin being placed at the 58 locations selected thus far for the Trail.

This report, like those markers, will help us tell the story of New Jersey and our residents. More importantly, it will help us provide greater context to the present day, and guide decisions that will create better outcomes and a stronger, fairer future for all. Again, congratulations and thank you to all those who played a role in the work of the Task Force and production of this report. The information shared here will definitely help shape brighter tomorrows for the great people of New Jersey.



A handwritten signature in blue ink, consisting of stylized initials and a long horizontal flourish.

Lt. Governor Tahesha Way, Esq.

Co-Chair Letter



To the people and friends of New Jersey:

We begin this letter by offering our thanks to Governor Phil Murphy and the members of the Murphy Administration, both past and present, who created and participated in the Wealth Disparity Task Force. The Task Force was established “to examine the causes of and remedies for the long-standing wealth disparities that affect Black and Hispanic or Latino New Jerseyans.” Executive Order 262.

The Task Force set in motion a concrete process of learning and understanding, in an effort to begin healing the injury caused by discriminatory laws, policies, and practices, many of which remain woven into the fabric of our society today and continue to perpetuate barriers for many people living in our state.

The work of this Task Force is twofold. First, it shines a light on many of the harms caused by early Americans and those perpetuated by federal, state, and local leaders. Second, it provides our state government leaders with a grounding framework as they continue to enact reparative measures to correct and disentangle these harms, and their effects, from our system.

This Task Force represents an inflection point; it marks the end of an era when state leadership would not acknowledge the impact of unjust—but legal—practices. To signify this new beginning, this report, authorized by Governor Murphy in Executive Order 262 (“the Order”), calls attention to many of these practices and offers several recommendations to address them.

Before we delve deeper, we want to note that the content of this work is not exhaustive; in fact, it was never meant to be. The Order asks that the Task Force submit this report to the Governor after analyzing the research and data to present evidence-based recommendations. Once the Task Force members were appointed in 2021, we approached the first meeting with the intent to determine how to best use the appointed time and what we hoped to pass on to future researchers and state leaders. We always knew that the task at hand would require discussion and collaboration with individuals and organizations outside the Task Force membership, as systemic harm requires structural solutions, which in turn requires the involvement and buy-in of system actors.

Thus, as we share the work accomplished to date and the process by which the Task Force arrived at this report, we encourage the reader to reflect critically upon what they see here—the personal stories, historical markers, government initiatives, community-driven work—and hold it in its totality while remembering that it is not complete. We recognize the irony here—that at its core this work began because of the implicit and explicit harm done by the government and its inability, or refusal to, meaningfully address it. And now, as the work has evolved, it is the government we must trust to deliver on this reparative process.

The Task Force was created with this irony in mind, and each of its members has had to come to terms with their own organizational limitations. Over the course of more than a year, each of the Task Force’s five working groups met more than a dozen times. The represented members of government and public sector organizations challenged each other to carefully dissect the historical origins of the current inequity that

hinders the ability of Black and Hispanic families and communities to build wealth. Each member brought their own expertise to these meetings, united around the goal of learning and changing the status quo to better serve all residents of New Jersey. Between meetings, members continued their research and met in smaller groups to discuss particular aspects of the work such as certain legal nuances or harmful unwritten practices that stemmed from tradition, ranging from current redlining practices to the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on Black and Hispanic communities. Academics, grassroots leaders, and members of the public provided insights and input that informed the work of the Task Force.

In the summer of 2022, the Task Force held five virtual listening sessions (one for each of the working groups) and continued engaging with the public as members visited, and virtually attended community meetings in different parts of the state, while also receiving comments and input through a form that was circulated in person and online.

In response to this feedback, Task Force members worked with the Governor's Office and the Legislature to ensure that policy changes would continue apace alongside their work. As a result of this collaboration, several recommendations developed by members were signed into law and funded when Governor Murphy signed the Appropriations Act of Fiscal Years 2024 and 2025. Progress has also been made on many process-oriented recommendations for state agencies, and congruently, members continued their research and engagement with the public to further understand systemic barriers in New Jersey.

This parallel and fluid structure was intentional, and we hope it sets a precedent for the future of this work. The open-ended nature of this structure allows you, the reader, to engage with the state beyond the publishing of this report. By invoking the spirit of this Task Force, any reader at any point in time can both challenge the state government to act and work with government leaders to push for much-needed change.

This grounding framework is the beginning of the systemic change we set out to accomplish. But for this to become the status quo, we need you to join us in this effort and bring a few friends with you.

Let the work continue!

Wealth Disparity Task Force Co-Chairs

Acknowledgements

The Wealth Disparity Task Force would like to thank the following people for their assistance and contributions to this report:

Thank you to the staff of the Murphy Administration who liaised with the Task Force, including the policy advisors, analysts, coordinators, fellows, and interns who supported each working group and provided considerable research and writing support. Special thanks to Jayné Johnson who served as the lead liaison and convenor of the Task Force, Kermina Hanna whose research and writing advanced the drafting of the findings and proposals, the late Louisa Carman for her instrumental research and writing support, Madina Ouedraogo, the first staffer to support the Task Force, Maggie Loesch for illustrating the report cover, the interns and fellows who supported the Task Force including Julian Rosenblum, Isaac Velez, Jacob Irving, Christofer Robles, Elizabeth Brown, Helen Cashman, and Maia Hill for their considerable contributions. Many thanks to Julie Veffer, Lara Richey for the exceptional graphic design work, and Margaret Gryczon for the tremendous IT contributions. Thank you to Melissa Walker and Awn Rizvi who helped to bring the report drafting across the finish line and to Sarah Brafman, Kari D’Ottavio, Matthew Berns, Edward Doherty, and Ashlee Reynolds for their writing support and review.

Murphy Administration

- Dana Adelman
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- Jacob Irving
- Angela Johnson
- Maggie Loesch
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Cabinet Agency Participants

- Department of Agriculture
- Office of the Attorney General
- Division of Civil Rights
- Division of Law
- Department of Banking and Insurance
- Department of Children and Families
- Civil Service Commission
- Department of Community Affairs
- Department of Corrections
- Department of Education
- Department of Environmental Protection
- Department of Health
- Office of the Secretary of Higher Education
- Department of Human Services
- Office of Information Technology
- Department of Labor and Workforce Development
- NJ Maternal and Infant Health Innovation Authority
- Department of Military and Veteran Affairs
- Department of State
- Department of the Treasury
- Department of Transportation

External Participants

- Peggy Anastos
- Walter Greason, PhD
- Derrick Green
- John J. Heldrich Center for Workforce Development
- Lost Souls Public Memorial Project
- New Jersey State Archives
- New Jersey Policy Lab
- Rutgers University Faculty and Staff, special thanks to Ronald Quincy, PhD and Erin Johnson

Executive Summary

Fulfilling a key commitment from his 2020 State of the State address, Governor Murphy established the Wealth Disparity Task Force to examine the causes of, and remedies for, the long-standing wealth disparities that affect Black,² Latino, and Hispanic³ New Jerseyans ([Executive Order 262](#)). Since December 2021, the five Task Force working groups—assigned to the areas of criminal justice, economy, education, health, and housing—engaged in research, analysis, and community outreach to identify the reasons for, and potential ways to, address wealth disparities in the state. The Task Force’s work is informed by research, data, historical documents, personal stories, and information gathered from public engagement, including community roundtables and virtual listening sessions.

The Task Force’s findings, gathered over more than a year, are consistent with the existing scholarship on wealth disparities. Drivers of these disparities include poverty within the kinship network, the entanglement of medical and student debt, disparities in healthcare practices and outcomes, the lack of access to capital, and the inability to generate home equity from homeownership, largely due to systemic barriers that include discriminatory housing appraisal practices, redlining, and predatory lending.

Based on these findings, the Task Force proposes a wide range of recommendations that would begin to address these drivers of wealth disparity. The Task Force found that far too many households in New Jersey, including Black and Hispanic families, continue to live without emergency savings, rendering them just one health emergency, car repair, or employment loss away from financial ruin. These households lack the financial safety net that is so often generated by appreciating assets.

Examining the root causes of racial and ethnic-based wealth disparities requires a historical review of the barriers that have limited wealth-building over generations. This analysis is key to identifying the pattern of harm and the reparative measures needed to address the injuries that accumulated over time.

A review of our nation’s early history demonstrates that American wealth was generated for several centuries with uncompensated labor. Simultaneously, Black people experienced past discrimination—they were systematically excluded from asset-building vehicles, encountered wealth deprivation including land loss, lack of access to banking and credit, denial of land and property ownership, and exclusion from government programs that offer wealth-building opportunities.

Since wealth is cumulative, the barriers preventing wealth building in previous generations directly impact the ability of families to build wealth today. Due to these systemic barriers and injustices, cycles of deficit are passed on instead of assets. A measure of wealth gives financial agency and a safety net that protects against the risk of loss. Wealth generates the capital needed to acquire appreciating assets that can produce more wealth.

A review of our nation’s early history demonstrates that American wealth was generated for several centuries with uncompensated labor. Simultaneously, while wealth was generated at their expense, Black people were systematically excluded from asset-building vehicles, experienced wealth deprivation including land loss, lack of access to banking and credit, denial of land and property ownership, and exclusion from government programs that offered wealth-building opportunities.

Many of the drivers that limited the ability of Black and Hispanic households from generating wealth persist today, even after long-standing discriminatory practices were prohibited.

The following proposed initiatives, derived from the research and recommendations of the Task Force in tandem with existing and pending efforts, can begin to address the drivers of these inter-generational wealth disparities in New Jersey. The recommendations seek to 1) increase access to appreciating assets; 2) alleviate the entanglement of debt generated by systemic design; 3) reduce the burden of educational attainment; and 4) address disparities in healthcare practices and out-comes.

The Task Force sought to identify reparative measures to begin remediating many of these long-standing harms. To generate immediate impact, several prescriptive remedies are recommended.

This report and these recommendations to the Governor and Legislature acknowledge the causes of the staggering wealth disparities in our state, and the Task Force recognizes that this work is only just beginning. To truly disrupt the long-standing wealth disparities in New Jersey, the Task Force's work and mission must be sustained into the future. Therefore, the Task Force recommends that the interagency collaborations generated from its five working groups continue, under the direction of the Governor's Office, in order to ensure the robust, timely implementation of these proposals. Public engagement should continue to assess the impact of the recommendations and further review state policies and practices to address structural and systemic injustices that may exacerbate wealth disparities in New Jersey.

The following recommendations seek to close opportunity gaps and increase opportunities for asset building:

Repair Structural Disparities

1. *Establish an Opportunity Seed Fund based on the baby bond model*
2. *Reform Medicaid estate recovery*
3. *Adopt reforms responsive to the public contracting disparity study*
4. *Broaden the composition of the State Investment Council and Board of Trustees*
5. *Codify an executive office to support ongoing efforts to close opportunity gaps*
6. *Continue funding housing models that support affordable housing and transit-oriented development*
7. *Implement equitable planning practices to ensure thriving New Jersey communities*
8. *Invest in partnerships between healthcare facilities and schools to support a statewide network of community schools*
9. *Continue the work of Nurture New Jersey*
10. *Calculate an individual's ability to pay when assessing fines and fees in criminal matters*
11. *Support efforts to repurpose state youth facilities*
12. *Acknowledge the citizenship rights of persons who were formerly incarcerated to include jury service*
13. *Accelerate reforms that support just outcomes in law enforcement*
14. *Advance ongoing efforts to ensure food security*
15. *Continue mental health reforms*
16. *Amend debt collection exemption laws*

Increase Opportunities for Asset Building

17. *Support career pipeline initiatives for middle and high school students*
18. *Continue investing in dual enrollment and advanced high school courses*
19. *Invest in efforts that support academic recovery and enrichment*
20. *Continue support for the College Promise and the Some College No Degree initiatives*
21. *Remove certain nondriving factors from auto insurance underwriting*
22. *Continue the Employee Ownership pilot initiative*
23. *Adopt programs under the Social Impact Investment Fund*
24. *Continue supporting initiatives that close the digital divide*
25. *Consider the use of wage boards to promote fair pay*
26. *Examine wealth disparities through state-based research and data collection*
27. *Continue the loan redemption programs to reduce student debt*
28. *Pilot a positive-only rent credit reporting system and expand the grace period for residential rent payment to five business days before rent is considered late*
29. *Remove the residential real estate practice that requires a potential buyer to disclose the down payment amount when making an offer*
30. *Eliminate fees on phone communications between incarcerated individuals and family members*

Listening Session Overview

“We want to make New Jersey a stronger and fairer economy for all families, not just families at the top, not just families in the middle, but families who often are the least of us, that is our commitment.” – Lieutenant Governor Sheila Y. Oliver.⁴

Public Engagement

Beginning in 2022, the Task Force received public feedback through virtual listening sessions, in-person forums, and written testimonies. Task Force members heard firsthand accounts from families, caregivers, healthcare providers, first responders, educators, students, returning citizens, youth, community organizers, advocates, faith leaders, business owners, and elected officials. These individuals shared their personal accounts and lived experiences, readily identifying many of the barriers and challenges facing Black and Hispanic New Jerseyans.

These narratives, testimonies, and ideas guided the Task Force as they worked to identify the causes of, and potential remedies for, the long-standing wealth disparities in New Jersey. The following sections capture some of the most pressing issues and calls to action they heard.

I. HOUSING AND ECONOMIC MOBILITY

As a former Newark resident, when moving to Asbury Park, I realized that the housing concerns there were even more pronounced than in Newark. In a 10-year period, the Black population dropped 10% in 10 years from about 50% to around 40% due to the escalating housing prices. By building a coalition, several community members joined together to advocate for inclusionary zon-ing to keep housing affordable and maintain rent control policies to support housing security .⁵

Housing came up as a central theme in each listening session. Residents wanted to see quality, affordable, and safe housing guaranteed as a basic right. They also recognized housing as a driver of educational access and homeownership as a vehicle to asset building.

One housing policy advocate emphasized the critical role of housing in a thriving community. The advocate noted that when gains from the criminal justice or education system are made without improving access to quality, safe, and affordable housing, progress is undermined. Even when improvements are made to childcare or education, the child still needs a home to return to even after leaving a safe childcare facility or a high-performing school.⁶

Caregivers, students, and new neighbors from other countries described the sacrifices and financial burdens that they have endured in efforts to gain economic mobility, particularly through housing.⁷

More programs – like the Community Wealth Preservation Program, which provides opportunities for households facing foreclosure, their next of kin, tenants, and other prospective owner-occupant a chance to stay in their home, are needed. ⁸

The testimonies underscored the burden resulting from the financial strain following incarceration—including mental and physical challenges, loss of employment, and encounters with the criminal justice system. The impact was experienced by both the individual and their family members as they generally lived without a safety net or emergency savings.⁹ Participants shared that initiatives like a seed fund, down payment assistance, and student loan and medical debt forgiveness could help to address the structural challenges they face.¹⁰ They also asked to preserve existing affordable housing and increase the supply of quality, affordable housing in the state.¹¹

Studies show that first generation home buying programs are an effective tool in reaching home buyers of color and closing the racial wealth gap.¹²

The public feedback emphasized the importance of encouraging economic mobility through other measures as well, such as ensuring a living wage for all workers, providing child tax credits, and implementing positive rent reporting.¹³ Many advocated for families that are experiencing significant hardships—namely renters facing eviction, families facing foreclosure, and households experiencing the burden of debt collection, including recovery and liens from medical debt.¹⁴

Attention must be given to the burden of caregiving and the toll it takes on immediate and extended family. Loved ones carry the emotional weight, mental health strain, and financial burden of supporting a person when government programs fail to cover long-term care or offer such limited coverage that the person is subjected to poor conditions or unmet needs.¹⁵

Finally, the testimonies also highlighted the impact of structural inequities, particularly within our taxation and lending systems, and called for more resources to guard against discriminatory and predatory lending practices.¹⁶ Residents raised concerns about displacement due to gentrification and tax credits that lure large corporations and developers into underserved communities, even as many of those same tax incentives remain unavailable to locally-owned, small, and micro businesses.¹⁷ Participants explained that this development often leads to the displacement and removal of long-term residents.

II. HEALTH AND WELL-BEING

One educator, while wanting to continue working with children, is looking to leave teaching after being subjected to unhealthy air quality in the school building, lamenting that the parents also notice the conditions and share that after returning home from school, their child's breathing is different.¹⁸

Safeguards to enjoy a long, healthy, and productive life were discussed by listening session participants. Many testimonies emphasized the need to better guard and nurture the physical and mental health of New Jerseyans at each stage of life.¹⁹ The input touched on a wide range of issues, including environmental concerns that often intersect with housing, education, and economic issues such as poor air and water quality, lack of access to green spaces and waterways, and proximity to brownfields and waste sites.²⁰ The feedback also addressed environmental hazards including flood mitigation, extreme heat, exposure to pollutants, and vector-borne diseases.²¹

Many raised the need for better access to quality and affordable healthcare. Studies show that systemic issues involving prenatal, maternal, and reproductive healthcare are costing Black and Hispanic lives at every economic level.²² The plight of seniors and children, who are often the most vulnerable, was particularly concerning. Participants emphasized the need for affordable life-saving prescription drugs, preventative screenings, and treatment of the underlying causes of chronic diseases, as well as access to mental and behavioral healthcare.²³ The feedback underscored that the social determinants of health must be addressed to improve health outcomes for Black and Hispanic New Jerseyans.²⁴ Individuals shared their personal accounts of navigating life while being cost-burdened (paying more than 30% of their income on housing) or severely cost-burdened (paying more than 50% of their housing on rent, mortgage, utilities, and other housing-related expenses).²⁵ Workers shared the many stressors that result from taking on multiple jobs to make ends meet. Hourly, shift-based work takes a toll on the workers and their families, particularly those with young or school-age children, as that type of work often provides limited opportunities to take time off and often lacks full-time benefits, insurance coverage, and retirement planning options.²⁶

*By supporting children through initiatives that help parents, including fully funding schools in low-income areas, we help position the next generation for success and break the cycle of poverty. Childcare, with early intervention, supports parents and positions children for success. Safe schools and quality education support parents, particularly Black and Brown parents, giving them the assurance that allows them to focus on and excel in their work. Supporting parents helps break the cycle of poverty.*²⁷

III. EDUCATION

Testimony from students and educators raised the domino effect of housing and economic instability on health and education, emphasizing the broader intersectionality of wealth disparity. These participants underscored how the economic issues that families face directly impact children's health, beginning with prenatal health. Education professionals shared that the developmental and mental health of children influences their readiness for school. For children facing instability—whether economic or health-related—early interventions, attendance in pre-K, extracurricular supports, mentorship, and wrap-around services are effective ways to address these concerns.

*Wealth disparities for students begin outside of the classroom—they enter hungry, tired, lacking warm clothes in winter, afraid, and even traumatized. The distress is often caused by trusted authority figures, what they observe and experience in their surroundings, and in their own homes.*²⁸

Drawing from their lived experiences, participants proposed targeted programs and services that strengthen K-12 educational outcomes to better prepare students for life after high school graduation. The proposals included strengthening literacy programs, encouraging educators of color to enter the classroom, and increasing access to behavioral and mental health professionals. Expanding opportunities for vocational training in high school, increased dual-enrollment options, and improved access to community college while in high school were also recommended.

*There was a time when the needs of the community were considered by the school system, it's time to renew the ties between the community and the schools. Community schools should be established as local hubs.*²⁹

Several college students shared stories of their financial challenges, including food insecurity and mental health issues, that they and their peers experienced. First-generation students shared their stories about the difficulties associated with financing and navigating college life. Some shared personal stories about peers who dropped out of college due to financial and physical strain and acknowledged that they had come close to joining them.

IV. LAW ENFORCEMENT AND THE JUDICIAL SYSTEM

Participants recounted personal experiences, sharing how over-policing and overexposure to the judicial system—whether through family, criminal, or civil court—undermine children's ability to realize their full potential. Law enforcement responses to behavioral and mental health challenges were also a concern, as well as criminalizing addiction and substance use, which can stifle opportunities for recovery.

Watching people come out of prison, drug court, rehab programs, halfway houses without a job, what are they going to do? Homeless, living in shelters, without a job, this is the most glaring wealth disparity resulting from the criminal justice system.

☞ The deficits generated by poverty can lure people to make money or meet needs through criminal activity and when individuals are released after serving time for that activity, they are even more destitute than when they started because they are saddled with debt from fines and fees).³⁰

Far too many Black and Hispanic families living in New Jersey have a relative or close friend who is incarcerated, a burden that is partially borne by family members and their communities. During the listening sessions, many individuals shared stories about the mounting fines and fees and the onerous costs associated with communicating with an incarcerated loved one. Those who were formerly incarcerated themselves also relayed how fines and fees continue to shadow them post-release. The participants highlighted concerns about monetary sanctions and the associated accruing debt, often citing those as the most crippling challenges faced as these individuals sought to reenter the community. Sometimes these challenges add to the difficulty of securing housing and addressing substance use.

☞ Grateful, at first, for not having to pay fines and fees while incarcerated, one individual took pride in saving money while incarcerated so that it could be used upon release—but only to realize near the end of the sentence that there were tickets on their record that were accruing fines and fees for decades. Instead of using the funds saved for reentry, almost all of the monies went to pay off the debt.³¹

In addition to financial challenges, there are many other barriers that are often overwhelming when reestablishing one's life after incarceration. Some of the hurdles encountered include housing insecurity, limited job opportunities, and difficulty reintegrating into society.

☞ After returning home from a period of incarceration, one individual went to the local Motor Vehicle Commission—unable to reach a representative by phone—and waited for close to 5 hours to get a driver's license restored. The burden was placed on the individual to locate records for tickets that were issued more than thirty years before. After about 7 months without an ID, the individual completed the process and the license was restored.³²

☞ Returning home, there are immediate challenges. Just obtaining identification – the inmate ID which is valid for 30 days is the only identification given upon release. It's not the type of ID that you want to take to the bank, use to get a room or an apartment since it says that you were incarcerated. Getting an ID, finding housing, it all costs money. Without money at release, it's hard to avoid being homeless.³³

The cycle of financial deprivation and debt stemming from system involvement can cripple individuals, households, and communities. The testimonies highlighted that it is critical to implement holistic reforms to address not only legal aspects of the criminal justice system, but also the housing and financial challenges to promote better reentry outcomes.

☞ One individual offered firsthand knowledge of the challenges of returning home after being incarcerated for decades and wants to help change the narrative for returning residents, create safe spaces to deal with trauma, and foster a successful next chapter.³⁴

☞ We need to move the needle in favor of those who have been marginalized and then even the playing field once we achieve equity.³⁵

Wealth

What is wealth?

The Task Force examined wealth as the measure of a household's total assets minus all its debts. It is important to distinguish wealth from income. Income is derived from providing a service or good, whereas wealth is cumulative, building over time. It follows that an individual's current in-come earnings are not the sole measure of their wealth.³⁶ Wealth is often built through inherited property, real estate or business equity, receipt of life insurance benefits, as well as access to seed funding, asset-generating investments, retirement funds, and other assets.³⁷

Studies show that a wealth gap continues in the United States based on race and ethnicity.³⁸ As outlined by Executive Order 262, New Jersey's wealth gap is far worse than the national median. When the Task Force began its work, the median net worth for White families was \$352,000 as compared to \$6,100 and \$7,300 for Black and Hispanic families, respectively, constituting more than a \$300,000 gap.³⁹

Research shows that the wealth gap persists across a range of variables. Among families with similar education levels, White families have higher median wealth than Black and Hispanic families with the same education level.⁴⁰ In fact, a Black family with a bachelor's degree has less median wealth than a White family with a high school diploma.⁴¹ A report studying outcomes of people who were incarcerated found that the median wealth of a White person who had been incarcerated was higher than that of a Black person who had never been incarcerated.⁴² Since wealth generates opportunities, these stark disparities reflect the opportunity gaps that persist for Black and Hispanic families.⁴³

Why Wealth?

The Wealth Disparity Task Force recognized that access to wealth translates into leverage and power. It also generates financial agency that not only protects from loss, emergencies, and hardships, but also provides capacity for other benefits including recreation, leisure, paid leave, vacation, quality healthcare, access to business and professional networks, entrepreneurial ventures, and secure retirement.⁴⁴

These benefits are often overlooked as indicators of wealth. For example, access to paid leave is often not considered. Studies show that access to paid leave can differ based on race, ethnicity, and gender.⁴⁵ Other indicators—such as income and availability of childcare—can affect the time required for other responsibilities including caretaking of children or seniors in the family, housework, work hours to cover family expenses, and time spent on healthcare.⁴⁶ Essentially, those tied to more responsibilities often have less access to paid leave and less time and financial resources to manage responsibilities, which could further diminish wealth generation and decrease the likelihood of wealth transfers to the next of kin.

Far too many Black and Hispanic parents do not have assets to transfer to their children and instead live on fixed incomes with their adult children carrying the burden of supporting them.⁴⁷ The children, while paying student loans or medical debt, are often a financial resource for other loved ones facing an emergency, crisis, or long-term care. Often as the first in their family to reach their earning potential, the children face these financial strains without the safety net of intergenerational wealth transfers to build on.⁴⁸

Furthermore, with an increasingly aging population, more adults in the United States are taking care of their parents, and even grandparents, while simultaneously caring for their own children.⁴⁹ The adults bearing the

responsibility of care for seniors in the family are now finding themselves stretched thin between childcare and senior care for their parents or other family members. These adults are referred to as “The Sandwich Generation.”⁵⁰ For Black and Hispanic households in the Sandwich Generation, they have less capacity to pass saved income, property, and other assets of value down to the next generation in their family.

Instead of receiving seed funds, bonds, or savings from their parents, far too many Black and Hispanic families inherit a cycle of deprivation and poverty and are in turn positioned to pass this on to the next generation. About 37% of Black households and 39% of Hispanic households in New Jersey are, as the United Way describes, “asset limited income constrained yet employed” (ALICE).⁵¹ These workers are trying to survive, living from paycheck to paycheck, and many are cost-burdened (paying more than 30% of their income on housing) or severely cost-burdened (paying more than 50% of their housing on rent, mortgage, utilities, and other housing-related expenses).⁵² Without a rainy-day fund, cost-burdened households are often just one car repair, health emergency, or employment loss away from financial ruin.⁵³

ALICE workers often lack the opportunity and benefits afforded by a financial safety net which can also compromise their health, leading to stress-induced crises and other hardships which often perpetuate the cycle of deprivation and poverty.⁵⁴

Understandably, education and high academic achievement are often recommended as a disruptor to this cycle of poverty. In other words, the expectation is that if you become a physician, lawyer, professor, engineer or other professional that requires an advanced degree, you will build wealth.⁵⁶ However, as previously mentioned, wealth is what remains when debt is subtracted from total assets. While it’s true that physicians, attorneys, and other advanced degree professionals are high-income earners, it’s important to acknowledge the considerable cost of these degree programs.⁵⁷ For instance, medical residents who have already graduated from medical school have a wide range of wealth standings, which can be attributed to the time and financial cost of completing medical school.⁵⁸ Studies show that Black medical residents are significantly more likely to face debt to complete their studies—student loan and other kinds of debt—than that of their White and Asian counterparts.⁵⁹ These residents will have less wealth once they complete their training than their colleagues who earn the same income.⁶⁰ This demonstrates how even Black and Hispanic high-income earners may lack wealth and experience the impact of the longstanding barriers that limit the ability to build wealth over time that can be passed on to their children.

By examining the causes of and remedies for the wealth disparities faced by Black and Hispanic people in New Jersey, the Wealth Disparity Task Force looks to close opportunity gaps and repair the longstanding barriers that cause generational cycles of loss and deprivation.

Task Force Recommendations

Each working group examined the root causes and drivers of wealth disparities in New Jersey. Since wealth is cumulative, the barriers and exclusions that prevented wealth building in previous generations directly impact the ability of families to build wealth today. Due to the structural injustices found throughout the economic system, the working groups found that Black and Hispanic people were disproportionately excluded from a wide range of asset-building opportunities. Given the interconnections and interdisciplinary nature of these outcomes, the working group's findings were considered as part of the full set of Task Force recommendations. The Wealth Disparity Task Force encourages the ongoing work that identifies and addresses the drivers of disparities in state policies and practices. To advance this work, the Wealth Disparity Task Force recommends that initiatives should include the following:

✔ Establish an opportunity seed fund based on the baby bond model

The Wealth Disparity Task Force found that the staggering wealth disparities experienced by Black and Hispanic households in New Jersey are rooted in systemic barriers that leave far too many families living without emergency savings and ill-equipped to support their children's financial future. Instead, these families are struggling to survive, to put a roof over the family's head, food on the table, and to keep them safe. They are not positioned to provide at-home support to care for the most vulnerable—young children or seniors—and have insufficient resources to set-aside funds or savings as their neighbors, who are similarly situated, but have access to wealth through family members, property ownership, savings, trusts, and other resources.

The Task Force recommends adopting a seed fund similar to the federal Baby Bond program proposed by New Jersey's US Senator Cory Booker and the effort proposed by Governor Murphy in September 2020 to help break this cycle. To mitigate the challenges facing children in these households, the Wealth Disparity Task Force proposes the creation of a seed fund—Having Opportunity Promised Early or the (HOPE Fund)—that can begin to unravel this generational cycle of deprivation.

Similar to the approach adopted in Connecticut New Jersey can create a seed fund program where all babies whose births were covered by NJ FamilyCare are eligible for a bond that they can be taken out between the ages of 18-35.⁶¹ Based on children born and enrolled into Medicaid in the last decade as reported through the New Jersey State Health Assessment Data, this would be an investment into an average of about 30,000 children every year.

✔ Reform Medicaid Estate Recovery to preserve intergenerational wealth

Under the federal Medicaid Estate Recovery mandate, states must attempt to recoup the costs of certain Medicaid benefits from the estates of deceased beneficiaries who were 55 and older when they received the funds. States are required to pursue recovery for the nursing home or other long-term institutional services, home and community-based services, and hospital and prescription drug services provided while the recipient was receiving nursing home care or home- and community-based services. States are permitted to recover beyond these federal minimums.

Recovery in New Jersey goes beyond the federal minimums and disproportionately impacts cost-burdened families. The Wealth Disparity Task Force recommends that the State explore limiting the assets subject to recovery—excluding non-probate assets like life insurance, joint accounts, and living trusts and, allowing hardship waivers (potentially including for modest value homes) —to support intergenerational wealth transfers.

☑ Adopt reforms responsive to the public contracting disparity study

In response to the stark disparities found in the 2024 public contracting disparity study, the Murphy Administration met with legislative partners, and stakeholders including business owners, vendors, and chambers of commerce to identify reforms that will begin to address the structural barriers that prevented available Black and Hispanic-owned businesses from being utilized in public contracting. Legislation tailored to the study's findings was introduced to address these disparities. The bills seek to align the utilization of minority- and women-owned businesses (M/WBEs) with available businesses, create sheltered markets for M/WBEs, expand the Treasury Office to better support supplier development and business opportunity, and establish procedural changes that reduce barriers to obtaining public contracts. The Wealth Disparity Task Force recommends that the state enact these legislative reforms without delay.

☑ Broaden the composition of the State Investment Council and Board of Trustees

Through appointments to the State Investment Council and Board of Trustees, the Wealth Disparity Task Force recommends that the State act as a model for establishing boards that reflect the wide range of perspectives and backgrounds found in the people of the Garden State. The Wealth Disparity Task Force also recommends strengthening the aspirations in the guidance and investment policy to ensure that the managers in each asset class reflect the workforce that contributes to the fund.

☑ Codify an executive office to support ongoing efforts to close opportunity gaps

To build on the work of the Murphy Administration to expand access and opportunity, the Wealth Disparity Task Force recommends codifying an executive office focused on closing opportunity gaps and assessing the community impact of policy outcomes. Under this statute, the Governor should appoint and commission a person to advise the Governor regarding the social impact of policy and workforce initiatives and to give strategic direction that supports just policy outcomes. Supported by advisors, the office should be a member of the Governor's Senior Staff, serving at the pleasure of the Governor to guide policies that address the structural barriers that result in opportunity gaps.

☑ Continue funding housing models that support affordable housing and transit-oriented development

Statewide efforts to expand transit-oriented housing development, restoration of property through land banks, and repurposing surface parking lots have produced opportunities for more affordable housing, walkable neighborhoods, and transit-oriented development. The Wealth Disparity Task Force recommends continued support for efforts like those initiated by the New Jersey Economic Development Authority (EDA) to repurpose several NJ Transit properties into mixed-use, transit-centered developments, funded in part by proceeds from the Corporate Transit Fee. As these initiatives continue, the Wealth Disparity Task Force recommends consideration of emerging best practices that include land bank models and state-funded community trust initiatives. Under the land banks model, low and moderate-income deed restricted housing is offered to eligible households where tax assessments are tied to the sale price and not the market value of the property.⁶² These initiatives can provide a pathway to homeownership for low and moderate-income households and expand the supply of quality, affordable housing.⁶³

✔ Implement just planning practices to ensure thriving New Jersey communities

To advance New Jersey's landmark environmental laws, the Wealth Disparity Task Force supports implementation of the provisions in the State Plan that address the environmental issues which pose a threat to the health, well-being, and economic success of the State's most vulnerable families and communities.

✔ Invest in partnerships between healthcare facilities and schools to support a statewide network of community schools

Under the transformative "Cover All Kids" initiative, New Jersey is coming closer to ensuring that all children in New Jersey have healthcare insurance. Far too many cost-burdened families still lack access to quality healthcare.³⁰ Connecting communities to healthcare providers through trusted partners can help to address this concern. Schools throughout the State have developed partnerships with community-based organizations to provide resources for children in cost-burdened families. The Wealth Disparity Task Force recommends creating a sustainable network of these collaboratives across the State, connecting families to additional resources within and outside of their local community. Basic preventative care can be offered through these centers to include annual physical, eye, ear, and dental exams, as well as behavioral and mental health services. The Wealth Disparity Task Force recommends a whole of government approach to support this network and ensure that students eligible for Medicaid and those who are uninsured/underinsured receive quality healthcare.

✔ Continue the work of Nurture NJ

New Jersey's maternal health data serves as a stark example of the disparities embedded within the State's healthcare system. With about 24 deaths per 100,000 live births, New Jersey grapples with the disproportionate number of Black and Hispanic mothers who lose their lives in maternity-related complications.⁶⁴ Studies show that Black mothers in New Jersey are seven times more likely to die from maternity-related complications than their White counterparts, while the risk to Hispanic mothers is 3.5 times greater than that of White mothers.⁶⁵ Through the impactful work of the Administration's Nurture NJ initiative, fewer mothers are losing their lives. The Wealth Disparity Task Force recommends continued support of Nurture NJ and the initiatives advanced through the Maternal and Infant Health Authority like the Maternal Infant Health Innovation Center in Trenton and legislative efforts including those to provide fully paid parental leave to state employees.⁶⁶

✔ Calculate an individual's ability to pay when assessing fines and fees in criminal matters

Based on the recommendations of the 2024 Report of the Criminal Sentencing and Disposition Commission (CSDC), the Wealth Disparity Task Force recommends considering an individual's ability to pay before setting monetary penalties and imposing fines and fees in criminal cases. Recommended considerations include, but not are not limited to: (1) income relative to an identified percentage of the Federal Poverty Guidelines; (2) whether the individual is to be placed on probation or will be incarcerated; (3) level of education; (4) ability to work and employment status; (5) whether the individual receives or has income-based public assistance, financial resources and assets, financial obligations and dependents; (6) cost of living; and (7) other fines and fees owed to courts.⁶⁷ Adopting these recommendations will help to support successful reentry outcomes.

✔ Support efforts to repurpose state youth facilities

Based on the work of the Office of the New Jersey Attorney General and the working group that has formed, the Wealth Disparity Task Force recommends supporting the ongoing efforts regarding the New Jersey Training School and Female Secure Care and Intake Facility.

✔ Acknowledge the citizenship rights of persons who were formerly incarcerated to include jury service

To advance the Murphy Administration's work to strengthen our democracy, the Wealth Disparity Task Force recommends removing the barriers that prevent individuals with previous convictions to serve on juries. This ban disproportionately impacts Black and Hispanic people and diminishes their representation in jury pools. As a result, far too many jury pools across the State do not accurately reflect the demographic makeup of the local community. New Jersey is currently one of just five states, including Texas and South Carolina, with the most restrictive ban on jury service.⁶⁸

The Murphy Administration supports pending legislation that eliminates conviction of an indictable offense as an automatic disqualifier for jury service, and the Wealth Disparity Task Force recommends that the State adopt this legislation.⁶⁹

✔ Accelerate reforms that support just outcomes in law enforcement

Based on recurring findings of troubling conduct within the New Jersey State Police and local law enforcement units throughout the State, the Wealth Disparity Task Force recommends adopting reforms that the Attorney General's Office has outlined to promote just outcomes within the rank and file of the New Jersey State Police.

✔ Advance ongoing efforts to ensure food security

Fifty food deserts were identified in New Jersey, and to build on the whole of government approach in responding to these communities—EDA through their implementation of the Food Desert Tax Credit program, the Office of the Food Security Advocate, the Department of Agriculture, and the work of the late Lieutenant Governor Sheila Oliver—the Wealth Disparity Task Force recommends continued efforts to confront and improve food security in New Jersey.⁷⁰

✔ Continue mental health reforms

The toll of being disproportionately harmed by the criminal justice, education, and healthcare systems impacts not just physical but also mental health. To address these concerns, the Task Force recommends implementing the various youth and adult mental health reforms advanced by the Murphy Administration.

☑ Amend debt collection exemption laws

New Jersey ranks as one of the worst states for debtor protection, earning an “F” rating in a 2023 National Consumer Law Center Report, due to its “extremely weak protection” of households from debt collection practices.⁷¹ The current provisions governing collections date back to the early 1970s. Listed with Georgia, Kentucky, Michigan, and Utah, New Jersey protects only \$1,000 in personal property, \$1,000 in household goods and furniture, and about 90% of weekly wages from debt collection. The Wealth Disparity Task Force recommends reforming the State’s exemption laws to, among other protections, increase the caps on protected assets including homes, and further alleviate debt burdens associated with healthcare and hospitalization.

☑ Support career pipeline initiatives for middle and high school students

To ensure that students are aware of career opportunities that involve both professional and vocational career paths, the Wealth Disparity Task Force recommends implementing strategies to provide early career exposure for middle and high school students that expands the model promoted by the State’s Pre-Apprenticeship in Career Education program. The State should continue to support collaboratives between industry, vocational trades, and trusted community partners. These partnerships can support pipeline initiatives into high-growth occupations, including, optician, EMT, radiology technician, or cybersecurity. These collaboratives should support curriculum development, training, and mentorship programs that introduce students to various fields and help them explore their interests. By integrating practical skills and real-world applications, students gain valuable insights into different fields. The Wealth Disparity Task Force recommends that as early as middle school, Career and Technical Education programs should introduce students to high-growth occupations, create collaboratives with professional associations, and expose students to careers in fields including medicine, law, engineering, and finance.

☑ Continue investing in dual enrollment and advanced high school courses

The Wealth Disparity Task Force recommends continuing support that expands access to more rigorous academic opportunities for students from cost-burdened households, including Advanced Placement/ International Baccalaureate (AP/IB) and dual enrollment. Far too many cost-burdened students face systemic challenges that prevent exposure to rigorous academic curricula. Completing AP/IB courses is generally considered favorably in the college admission process and may help students earn college credit or position them for advanced levels once in college. While it may be possible for high school students to take AP exams in the absence of AP/IB coursework, increasing options for both AP/IB courses and dual enrollment courses allows high school students more exposure to rigorous study with the option for obtaining college credits. The State should continue dual enrollment opportunities that allow students to earn college credits while in high school and support districts to train or hire additional teachers for AP and college-level classes. Moreover, the State, through the work of the New Jersey Higher Education Student Assistance Authority, should ensure that students in grades 9 to 12 are guided through the college selection and admission process and introduced to tools that can help them navigate the process.

✔ Invest in efforts that support academic recovery and enrichment

To further the work to close achievement gaps, the Wealth Disparity Task Force recommends continued funding for literacy work through the Office of Learning Equity and Academic Recovery in the New Jersey Department of Education, and continued support for enrichment programs for K to 12 students through initiatives like the New Jersey-based Children’s Defense Fund Freedom Schools (Freedom Schools).⁷² Under the current Freedom Schools expansion, nine sites are expanding summer enrichment programs offered to support verbal, math, and logic-skill building, particularly at critical educational milestones.

Derived from the Freedom Schools formed through a collaborative of the Congress of Racial Equality (CORE) and Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) during the 1964 Mississippi Freedom Summer, the Children’s Defense Fund Freedom Schools look to ensure that “every child grows up in the sunlight of opportunity” that Dr. Martin L. King, Jr. envisioned. In 1964, volunteers—mostly college students from the north—descended on Mississippi to teach and empower Black and White sharecroppers and their families, with participants ranging from young children to seniors. Later in 1973, Marian Wright Edelman—the first Black woman admitted to the Mississippi Bar—founded the Children’s Defense Fund to ensure that “no child is left behind.” 50 years later, Freedom Schools across the nation continue to offer a six-week summer enrichment program that strengthens core skills and prevents summer learning loss while offering civic engagement, conflict resolution, and social action skill development. The Wealth Disparity Task Force recommends continuing funding that supports literacy and enrichment programs such as Freedom Schools to bridge support for K to 12 students.

✔ Continue support for the College Promise and the Some College, No Degree Initiatives

Approximately 43% of New Jerseyans age 25 or older have a bachelor’s degree or higher.⁷³ Yet, based on estimates from the National Student Clearinghouse, more than 790,000 people in New Jersey left college before completing their degree.⁷⁴ The Wealth Disparity Task Force recommends that the State continue investing in the Some College, No Degree and the College Promise initiatives which benefit many cost-burdened students who never had the opportunity to pursue higher education, or due to financial constraints, caring for a loved one, or other demands were unable to complete their education. Under these initiatives, prospective or former students can increase their earning potential or join a high-growth sector without the crippling burden of student loans, out-of-pocket costs, or other contributors to student debt. The Wealth Disparity Task Force encourages continued support and increased awareness of these initiatives that benefit cost-burdened students who were unable to attain their degree.

✔ Remove certain nondriving factors from auto insurance underwriting

Legislation is needed to eliminate the use of certain nondriving factors, such as educational attainment, vocation, occupation or profession, in auto insurance underwriting. The use of these underwriting criteria may penalize drivers without college degrees or workers in low-wage jobs or industries. The Wealth Disparity Task Force recommends that New Jersey join several other states that prohibit consideration of education level, employment, or profession when assessing a driver’s risk.

✔ Continue support of the Employee Ownership pilot initiative

Studies show that employee ownership models support wealth building and retirement opportunities for workers while offering a powerful mechanism for creating a stable succession plan for companies.⁷⁵ The Wealth Disparity Task Force found that employee ownership models can effectively address long-standing wealth disparities that disproportionately affect Black and Hispanic workers.⁷⁶ Under an employee stock ownership program (ESOP), employees retain interest in shares of a company through holding corporate stock in a trust. Assets from ESOPs can be added to savings, 401k accounts, and other assets. Currently, New Jersey is home to about 90 ESOPs, holding an estimated \$65 billion in plan assets covering about 420,000 current employees and retirees, with an average stock account for eligible current employees of about \$190,000.⁷⁷ Employee ownership models include worker-owned cooperatives, employee ownership trust and employee stock ownership plans. Employee ownership strategies can also support local economies by helping preserve businesses during periods of transition by creating a succession plan for business owners while building wealth for workers.⁷⁸

Emerging best practices demonstrate that employee ownership significantly increases the wealth of workers, where a Black or Hispanic employee-owner has on average, \$100,000 more in retirement savings than their peers. As Baby Boomers reach retirement age, many, particularly in distressed communities, are considering pulling down their shingles. If that happens, the local economy is not only forever deprived of their trademark goods or services, but also the long-standing presence and impact of a community partner.

With the rise of business owners from the Baby Boomer generation nearing retirement age, employee ownership models can help maintain local business strongholds.⁷⁹ To broaden employee ownership opportunities in New Jersey, the Wealth Disparity Task Force recommends the EDA continue the Employee Ownership Pilot Initiative.

✔ Adopt programs under the Social Impact Investment Fund

To increase access to capital in distressed communities, the Wealth Disparity Task Force recommends continued funding for the landmark Social Impact Investment Fund (SIIF) which was established by the Murphy Administration to deploy critical investments that support housing, infrastructure, and early childhood learning projects.⁸⁰ Established through the Public Bank Implementation Board, the fund leverages monies from private and philanthropic sectors to expand streams of investment into distressed communities. Through guarantees, below-the-market-rate loans, and other financial tools, the fund is intended to fill gaps in state financing programs and increase opportunities for project funding in these communities. The fund will partner with state entities like the New Jersey Housing Mortgage Finance Agency in projects that support emerging affordable housing developers, early childhood education centers, or initiatives to modernize local drinking water systems. Through the fund, critical capital will be generated in distressed communities, laying the groundwork for a public banking model in New Jersey. The SIIF was already seeded through previous state budgets, and the Wealth Disparity Task Force recommends robust staffing, to work in tandem with the Treasury Department's procurement fund manager, to increase community participation, and to identify projects that can support the economic mobility of cost-burdened families while strengthening local economies.

✔ Continue supporting initiatives that close the digital divide

Far too many cost-burdened families in New Jersey lack access to high-speed broadband, leaving them to resort to retail spaces or public areas to conduct basic tasks and personal business, like joining virtual interviews or meetings, completing online forms, or schoolwork. While access is widespread throughout the State on a Census tract-level, there are significant broadband “dark spots,” particularly in urban and rural areas throughout New Jersey. As the State continues to lead in innovation and launch into the Administration’s AI moonshot, the Wealth Disparity Task Force recommends continuing to explore opportunities that improve digital literacy and inclusion.

In addition, while access to high-speed broadband within the home is a threshold need, it is important that there are opportunities for urban and rural communities to engage with innovation tools at every stage of development and use. Collaboratives between industry and businesses led by local entrepreneurs should also be supported to encourage economic activity and expand the State’s business ecosystem. The Wealth Disparity Task Force also recommends pipeline initiatives with institutes of higher education and industry to expose and engage students and entrepreneurs from cost-burdened households in emerging technologies

✔ Consider the use of wage boards to promote fair pay

To help close wage gaps within the workforce, the Wealth Disparity Task Force recommends that administrative action is considered to convene a wage board that determines the minimum fair wage for workers in a specific occupation where the wages are oppressive or unreasonable. Under the statute, the board would identify a wage that is commensurate with the value of the service rendered and the minimum cost of living necessary for health.

✔ Examine wealth disparities through state-based research and data collection

To continue examining the nuanced issues involving wealth disparity in the State, the Wealth Disparity Task Force recommends an interagency collaborative led jointly by the Department of Labor and Workforce Development and the Office of Innovation to leverage data sources, engage stakeholders and experts, and develop evidence-based proposals to address wealth disparity in the State.

✔ Continue the loan redemption programs to reduce student debt

The Wealth Disparity Task Force recommends amending the STEM loan redemption program to better reflect the opportunities available to healthcare professionals. Under the healthcare loan redemption program, healthcare professionals—including primary care providers, physicians, dentists, physician assistants, certified nurse practitioners, certified nurse midwives, and mental and behavioral healthcare providers—who work in healthcare deserts can apply for up to \$200,000 in student loan repayments. Practitioners who work with children and adolescents in certain fields, including behavioral health, can receive supplemental grants up to \$50,000.⁸¹

The Wealth Disparity Task Force recommends amending the eligibility requirements for the STEM loan program to better reflect the opportunities available for healthcare professionals. The amendments should also include incentives for students who work in urban and rural areas to encourage but not require an employer match for those entering the field of artificial intelligence, science, technology, engineering, or math.

✔ Pilot a positive rent credit reporting system and expand the grace period for residential rent payment to five business days before rent is considered late

Studies show that credit building helps to increase options for homebuying and other opportunities that expand access to wealth-generating assets.⁸² While on-time mortgage payments can build credit, tenants are often unable to build their credit through on-time rent payments. While making up about 12% of the State's population, Black households make up about 19% of renting households and only 8% of the State's homeowners.⁸³ Likewise, Hispanic households, who are about 28% of the State's population, make up about 20% of the renting population but only about 10% of the State's homeowners.⁸⁴ To increase credit-building opportunities for renters in New Jersey, the Wealth Disparity Task Force recommends pathways for renters to build wealth through a rent reporting pilot program. Under this pilot program, the initiative would be limited to tenants in multi-family developments that are registered with the State. Positive-only rent payments from tenants who choose to participate will be submitted to credit reporting agencies, and eligible tenants who choose not to participate in the program can opt out with notice to the landlord.

In addition, recognizing the startling number of cost-burdened households that are one emergency from financial disaster and to further protect credit-building opportunities for renters, the Wealth Disparity Task Force recommends establishing a five-business-day rental payment grace period before rent is considered late for residential lease agreements. This recommendation, similar to provisions in other states, extends the grace period now reserved only for senior tenants to cost-burdened families who lack a safety net when facing a crippling crisis.⁸⁵ This period can be crucial in providing tenants with a needed buffer, especially in emergencies or when experiencing delays in receiving income.

✔ Remove the residential real estate practice that requires a potential buyer to disclose the down payment amount when making an offer

Studies show that amassing the recommended 20% or more for a down payment is a barrier to homeownership that disproportionately affects prospective first-time and first-generation homebuyers.⁸⁶ To ensure that homebuyers are considered on the strength of their offer, the Wealth Disparity Task Force recommends pending legislation that prohibits sellers from requiring that a buyer disclose the amount of their down payment. Recognizing that the recommended down payment amount is at least 20% of the purchase price, many asset-limited buyers are unable to amass that amount but otherwise have sufficient financial standing to purchase the home.⁸⁷ In fact, nationally the median down payment amount is about 9% for all applicants, while the median down payment for Black and Hispanic homebuyers was around 4%.⁸⁸ Under the existing practice, sellers can screen prospective homebuyers based on their down payment amount and even use that information to project whether the applicant can secure a mortgage which can disadvantage asset-limited homebuyers, as well as first-time and first-generation homebuyers. Due to the barrier that this practice presents to asset-limited homebuyers, the Wealth Disparity Task Force recommends adopting pending legislation that prohibits this practice.

✔ Eliminate fees on phone communications between incarcerated individuals and family members

In keeping with national best practices, the Task Force recommends that the State eliminate fees for phone communication in state facilities. These fees can burden the family members of individuals who are incarcerated and create financial strain on loved ones and others seeking to maintain family and community bonds, particularly when young children are involved.⁸⁹

Conclusion

Many of the proposals recommended by the Wealth Disparity Task Force are underway, others can be implemented over a number of months, and for some it will take longer to address the structural barriers identified in the recommendation. Public engagement must continue to help direct implementation and assess outcomes as proposals are adopted. Interagency collaborations have formed to advance this work, but to truly build a State of Opportunity where all who live in New Jersey can realize the full promise of the Garden State, each of us must commit to this effort.

Let the work continue!

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- ¹⁵ Summary of testimony shared during the Health Working Group Listening Session Housing Working Group Listening Session and through written testimony.
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