

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

-Alan V. Lowenstein, Institute Founder



June 16, 2021

Dear Senate President Sweeney and Speaker Coughlin:

We are writing today to urge you to lead the Senate and the Assembly through passage of A711/S322, which would establish the New Jersey Reparations Task Force.

As the United States continues to experience a long overdue reckoning around race, so does New Jersey, where we shamefully have some of the worst racial disparities in the nation. One glaring example is our state’s racial wealth gap – among the highest in the nation – where Black families hold just a few cents at the median compared to white families. The median Black New Jersey household has a net worth of just \$6,100 compared to \$352,000 for the typical white family in our state.

These disparities are like cracks in our foundation – cracks that we have seen erupt into earthquakes in Black communities under the stress of this past year.

These cracks are also no accident. They are a clear and inevitable result of generations of policy design.

As Julia Martin points out in her recent in-depth article on the history of slavery in our state, “New Jersey residents might like to think that, as Northerners, we don’t share the South’s brutal slave history. We would be wrong.” The piece highlights that New Jersey, in fact, was known as the “slave state of the North.”

A direct line can be drawn from New Jersey’s role in American slavery to the racial disparities that we see today. From our founding as a colony, racial exclusion and discrimination have been embedded in the foundation of New Jersey – where slavery took root deeply. By 1830, more than two-thirds of all enslaved people in the North were in New Jersey, and early on the state created a racially exclusive system for distributing property. After finally becoming the last Northern state to end slavery, New Jersey developed its own system of sharecropping which set a groundwork for continued economic exclusion of Black residents for generations. From redlining to racially restrictive covenants to barriers in implementing the GI Bill for Black veterans, barriers to wealth-building for Black families continued, while policies supported wealth-building for white residents. Further, exclusionary zoning and predatory lending practices continue to limit the

Board of Trustees

Douglas S. Eakeley, Esq.

Chair

Paulette Brown, Esq.

Vice Chair

Kenneth Y. Tanji

Treasurer

B. John Pendleton, Jr., Esq.

Secretary

Ryan P. Haygood, Esq.

President & CEO

Elise C. Boddie, Esq.

John J. Farmer, Jr., Esq.

Paul J. Fishman, Esq.

Michael D. Francis, Esq.

Jerome C. Harris, Jr.

Rev. Timothy Adkins-Jones

Sandra King

Robin A. Lenhardt, Esq.

John H. Lowenstein, Ph.D.

Diana DeJesus-Medina

James McQueeney

Patricia Nachtigal, Esq.

Darrell K. Terry, Sr.

Martin Vergara II

Nina Mitchell Wells, Esq.

Antoinette Ellis-Williams, Ph.D.

Gary M. Wingens, Esq.

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

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

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

Founders

Alan V. and Amy Lowenstein*

Founding Board President

Nicholas deB. Katzenbach, Esq.*

Founding Board Vice President

Hon. Dickinson R. Debevoise*

*deceased

60 Park Place, Suite 511

Newark, NJ 07102-5504

ph. (973) 624-9400

fax (973) 624-0704

email: justice@njisj.org

www.njisj.org

do social justice.

ability of Black people to build wealth through homeownership in our state, where Black people remain the most likely to receive a subprime home loan today.

Thus, New Jersey by law and in practice has created a system of economic advancement that supports wealth-building for white people, while continuing to erect barriers to those same opportunities for Black residents in the state.

Because these disparities were created by policy design and not individual behavior, so must their demise be through policy and systemic change.

A Reparations Task Force is the critical first step in making that happen.

We are told, Speaker, that you believe there is not enough support for such a measure. We beg to differ. As the signatories to this letter illustrate, support is widespread – from New Jersey’s Black residents and their allies, to its elected officials and to its multi-faith clergy across our state.

Earlier this year, the Institute and the United Black Agenda partnered with the Legislative Black Caucus to hold a powerful press conference in support of this bill, joined by a line-up of multi-faith leaders.

Here are just a few lines from their powerful remarks, video of which can be found here (bit.ly/RepTaskForcePresser).

Rev. Anya Sammler-Michael, Senior Co-Minister of the Unitarian Universalist Congregation at Montclair in Montclair, New Jersey, began her remarks by explaining that everyone in New Jersey has benefited from or been harmed by slavery. “I have benefited. Governor Murphy, Speaker Coughlin, you have benefited,” she said. “What is it that prevents the passage of this bill that would investigate what it would mean for New Jersey to take responsibility for this injustice? What is it other than fear? Fear of what we might find and what we might lose. And, by we, I mean those of us who without this study would continue to benefit from the same sinful history. You must not let fear steal your courage.”

Senior Rabbi David Vaisberg of Temple B’nai Abraham in Livingston, New Jersey, echoed these sentiments, saying, “You have to fix that which you broke. You have to give back that which you took. We need to figure out what exactly do we need to give back to repair that damage and then some.”

Rev. Charles Boyer, Pastor of Bethel A.M.E. Church in Woodbury, New Jersey, emphasized that “Today’s issues – the racial wealth gap – the racial disparities in the prisons – the housing situation for Black people – the health disparities – all can be tracked back to New Jersey’s original sin.”

Bishop William H. Stokes of the Episcopal Diocese of New Jersey affirmed by remarking that “[t]o engage in this difficult hard work of telling ourselves the truth – of acknowledging our wretchedness... and to attempt to redress a wrong that can never be fully righted ... should be

used as an opportunity for true confession, repentance and forms of formal meaningful redress to allow current and future generations ... true equity, fairness and justice.”

Imam Wahy-ud Deen Shareef of the Council of Imams in New Jersey added that “One scholar said that hearts cannot heal when knowledge is confused. And until we begin to reveal the actual truth of what was done there will be no reconciliation, there will be no healing and there will be no coming together.”

Senate President Sweeney and Speaker Coughlin, New Jersey has an opportunity to be a national leader in these pivotal times. We know that if you hear and move with all this support, you can create more.

When considering reparations, many people get paralyzed by the many questions that arise about how exactly this policy would work.

Reparations can look like all sorts of things, including not only financial dispensation but also policies like many that the Institute and its partners support now in the areas of voting rights, democracy, criminal justice reform and – of course – economic justice.

But we do not need to have all the answers now. We have to be willing to ask the question and hear and act on the answers when they arrive.

Indeed, it would be the Task Force’s role to research and study the legacy of slavery in our state and then make recommendations about what kind of reparative policies are warranted.

It is time we reckoned with this history, for it is only when we face our unjust past that we can create a truly just future – that we can build a new, stronger and more equitable foundation.

We urge you to join with us and our partners in the important work of repairing the harms of the past through support and passage of A711/S322 to establish the New Jersey Reparations Task Force.

Respectfully,

Action Together New Jersey

All of Us or None – Northern New Jersey

American Civil Liberties Union of New Jersey

American Friends and Service Committee Prison Watch Program

Asbury Park Transformative Justice Project

Bethany Baptist Church

Black Lives Matter Paterson

Black Lives Matter Paterson Youth Council

BlueWaveNJ
Brothers for Awareness
CAIR – NJ
Camden County East NAACP
Chosen Generation Community Corp
Community Baptist Church – Atlantic City
Community Planning & Advocacy Council
Council of Imams in New Jersey
D.A.S.H. Consulting LLC
Embracing Race – The Conversation
Equal Justice USA
Equity Innovation Strategies
Erase The Divide LLC
EraseTheRedline Inc.
Essence Fitness Studio
Fair Share House Center
Faith in New Jersey
First Baptist Church
First United International Ministries
FORTE House
Gloucester County NAACP
Gospel Light Church of God in Christ
Housing & Community Development Network of NJ
Hudson County Progressive Alliance
Indivisible Central NJ
Latino Action Network Foundation
Le Bon Pretzels
Lift as We Climb Inc.
Lutherans Engaging in Advocacy Ministry NJ
Make the Road New Jersey
Masjid Waarith Ud Deen

Morris County Human Relations Commission
Mount Zion Baptist Church of Pleasantville
National Association of Social Workers – New Jersey Chapter
National Parents Union
Network for Social Work Managers – New Jersey
New Brunswick Area NAACP Branch
New Brunswick Theological Seminary
New Community Corporation
New Jersey Alliance for Immigrant Justice
New Jersey Black Issues Convention
New Jersey Citizen Action
New Jersey Institute for Social Justice
New Jersey Parents Caucus
New Jersey Policy Perspective
New Jersey Religious Action Center of Reform Judaism (RAC-NJ)
Newark Alliance
Newark Community Development Network
Newark Community Street Team
Newark Interfaith Alliance
Newark NAACP
NJ 11th For Change
NJ NAACP State Conference
NJ Working Families
NJ-08 For Progress
NJPC
Not in Our Town – Princeton
Not Just A Black Body, Inc.
Our Revolution Essex County
Parent Impact
Paterson Healing Collective
People’s Organization for Progress

Piscataway Progressive Democratic Organization
Platinum Minds
Princeton University Chapter of Students for Prison Education, Abolition, and Reform (SPEAR)
Returning Citizens Support Group
Rutgers Parity Project, Rutgers Law Camden Chapter
Rutgers Social Development Research Program
Rutgers University-Newark
Salvation and Social Justice
Seabrook JACL
Sisters for Awareness Black Leadership & Equality
Smith & Jones Financial Solutions
Social Justice Matters, Inc.
SOMA Action
South Jersey Mutual Aid
St Paul Baptist Church, Montclair
The Diocese of New Jersey
The HUBB Arts & Trauma Center
The Inclusion Project
The League of Extraordinary Gentlemen
The New Jersey Black Issues Convention
The Unitarian Universalist Congregation at Montclair
Turning Point United Methodist Church
United Community Corporation
United Way of Northern NJ
Urban League of Essex County
UU FaithAction NJ
Victoria Foundation
Waterspirit
What's The Movement L.L.C.
Women for Progress
Youth 4 Justice NJ

Youth Advocate Programs, Inc.

YWCA Northern New Jersey

YWCA Princeton