



For Immediate Release

Broad Coalition Joins Forces to Call For Action On Policing and Criminal Justice Reform

August 3, 2016, Newark, New Jersey—Today, a broad coalition of leading New Jersey civil rights, community, and religious leaders “requested that the legislature undertake a comprehensive and inclusive examination of criminal justice reforms needed to positively transform the relationship between police and the residents of New Jersey.”

In the attached letter addressed to the Senate President, the Speaker of the Assembly, and the leaders in both bodies, the coalition explained that “the recent heartbreaking events in Baton Rouge, Louisiana, Falcon Heights, Minnesota and Dallas, Texas have heightened the reality that, in New Jersey and on the national level, such a transformation in the relationship between law enforcement and many of the communities they serve is in order.”

The coalition further noted that “these events have caused policymakers across the nation to reflect on how police accountability measures—including efforts to build trust and legitimacy, improve oversight, and enhance officer wellness—can be strengthened without impacting public safety.” At the same time, the coalition explained, “these incidents have occurred in the midst of wide, often bipartisan, agreement that our nation’s focus on incarceration, rather than rehabilitation and incarceration alternatives, has had devastating consequences—particularly for our communities of color. Indeed, a recent report by the Sentencing Project revealed that New Jersey has the largest gap in black-white incarceration rates in the nation.”

Accordingly, the coalition called for a “comprehensive and inclusive set of hearings” on policing and criminal justice reform “that could serve to educate the public and policy makers, and to initiate the introduction of more holistic and meaningful criminal justice reform legislation, with a focus on tested strategies like community policing.” These hearings would enable the state to evaluate the best practices of other states and serve as the starting point for comprehensive policing and criminal justice reform legislation in New Jersey.

Contact: Ryan P. Haygood
President & CEO, New Jersey Institute for Social Justice
973.624.9400
rhaygood@njisj.org

Richard Smith
President, NJ State Conference of the NAACP
609.310.0211
president@njnaacp.org

“Social justice should be the underlying goal of all humanity.”
-Alan V. Lowenstein, Institute Founder



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Nicholas deB. Katzenbach, Esq.*

*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

August 3, 2016

The Honorable Stephen M. Sweeney
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New Jersey State Senate
State House
Trenton, NJ

The Honorable Vincent Prieto
Assembly Speaker
New Jersey Assembly
State House
Trenton, NJ

The Honorable Thomas H. Kean, Jr.
Republican Leader
New Jersey State Senate
State House
Trenton, NJ

The Honorable Jon M. Bramnick
Republican Leader
New Jersey Assembly
State House
Trenton, NJ

Re: Criminal Justice Reform For The Benefit of All

Honorable Sirs:

We write to respectfully request that the legislature undertake a comprehensive and inclusive examination of criminal justice reforms needed to positively transform the relationship between police and the residents of New Jersey and to support public safety. The recent heartbreaking events in Baton Rouge, Louisiana, Falcon Heights, Minnesota and Dallas, Texas have heightened the reality that, in New Jersey and on the national level, such a transformation in the relationship between law enforcement and many of the communities they serve is in order.

These events have caused policymakers across the nation to reflect on how police accountability measures – including efforts to build trust and legitimacy, improve oversight and enhance officer wellness – can be strengthened without impacting public safety. At the same time, these incidents have occurred in the midst of wide, often bipartisan, agreement that our nation’s focus on incarceration, rather than rehabilitation and incarceration alternatives, has had devastating consequences—particularly for our communities of color. Indeed, a recent report by the Sentencing Project revealed that New Jersey has the largest gap in black-white incarceration rates in the nation. This recognition has prompted New Jersey lawmakers to introduce numerous pieces of reform legislation in the past year to address the myriad issues plaguing our criminal justice system. As leaders of the legislature, you are best positioned to convene hearings that explore critical policy questions and ensure a wide range of voices have the chance to be heard, including those of civil rights advocates, law enforcement, and community representatives from across the state.

In many respects, New Jersey has already made significant progress in criminal justice reform. Thus, with a comprehensive legislative package, the state could substantially build upon its various successes, paving the way for New Jersey to be a national leader on criminal justice reform. As noted by the Brennan Center for Justice, New Jersey has seen a decrease in the numbers of individuals incarcerated without an increase in the levels of crime. Bail reform, long a significant impediment to progress, is on the cusp of being

implemented; this is thanks, in large part, to the work of the legislature. On the administrative side, many of us have worked closely with the Office of the Attorney General and a host of community and advocacy groups to effect change here in New Jersey. As a result, lines of communication have been opened in ways that other states might envy, and senior officials within the department have been a strong presence in communities throughout the state. Last year alone, the Attorney General worked with community leaders across the state to develop a statewide policy on body-worn cameras that, together with the funding needed to implement that policy, are significant steps to ensure confidence in the task that law enforcement is doing every day. Despite these advances, there are many areas for potential reform, including decreasing racial disparities in incarceration, increasing uniformity in alternatives to incarceration (such as drug treatment and stationhouse adjustments) across counties, decriminalizing low-level offenses and reconfiguring how municipalities collect their fines, and eliminating the criminalization associated with non-payment of child support.

We, a coalition of concerned nongovernmental organizations, have also been looking deeply into the factors that affect interactions between law enforcement and communities that they serve, including implicit bias and cross-cultural understanding. Last year, for example, the NAACP sponsored implicit bias training in a session that was launched by the acting Attorney General and attended by more than 150 chiefs, or their designees, across the state. Weeks later, the chiefs opened the doors of the police academy to leaders of the NAACP and the Black Issues Convention and invited the chapter presidents to use the "shoot-don't shoot" training simulator. Across the state, more than one thousand citizens have participated in community conversations sponsored or supported by many of the organizations listed below. We are confident that many thousands more have participated in town halls and vigils prompted by the loss of life, the desire for justice, and the need for further reform.

These efforts by nongovernmental organizations have generated constructive dialogue, concrete recommendations for reform, and robust community-based action plans. Nevertheless, much more work needs to be done in addressing the law enforcement-community divide, as well as many other criminal justice issues. We believe our collective efforts, and shared interests, would be enhanced if the legislature undertook a comprehensive and inclusive set of hearings that could serve to educate the public and policy makers, and to initiate the introduction of more holistic and meaningful criminal justice reform legislation, with a focus on tested strategies like community policing. Not only would these hearings enable the state to evaluate the best practices of our sister states, but they would also serve as the starting point for comprehensive criminal justice reform legislation in New Jersey.

Accordingly, we would like to meet with the leadership to discuss the structure of a set of hearings that would broadly explore issues related to criminal justice and continue New Jersey's forward progress on the path to a society that is at once more just and safer.

Sincerely,



Ryan R. Haygood, Esq.
President & CEO
NJ Institute for Social Justice



James Johnson, Esq.
Founding Member, NJ Communities Forward
Board Members, NJ Institute for Social Justice

Jiles H. Ship

Commissioner Jiles Ship
President, Northern New Jersey Chapter
National Organization of Black Law Enforcement Executives



Richard Smith
President, New Jersey State Chapter
National Association for the Advancement of Color People

Reva Foster

Reva Foster
State Chair
New Jersey Black Issues Conference



Antonio Hernandez
President
National Coalition of Latino Officers



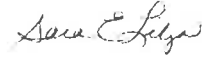
Lazaro Cardenas
Vice President
Latino Action Network



Cuqui Rivera
Administrative Chair
Integrated Justice Alliance



Linda Scherzer
Director, Community Relations Committee
Jewish Federation of Greater MetroWest NJ



Rev. Sara Lilja
Director
Lutheran Episcopal Advocacy Ministry



Vivian Fraser
President & CEO
Urban League of Essex County