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**Emerging Issues and
Additional Priorities**

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Beyond advancing the still-unrealized but essential recommendations identified in our 2017 Crossroads report, the past eight years have brought new issues to the forefront that now demand the state's immediate attention. These issues also reflect the concerns expressed by participants at our four 2025 Crossroads NJ Conversations series held across New Jersey. At every stop of the series, we learned that New Jerseyans share far more in common than the partisan lines that too often divide us. Regardless of geographic location or political affiliation, residents voiced similar concerns, among them being priced out of neighborhoods they helped build, unreliable transit making daily life unpredictable, and unequal education funding that divides children's futures by ZIP code.

As the conversations concluded, one message rang loud and clear: New Jerseyans want leaders who will confidently address the urgent challenges residents face every day. To ensure that all New Jersey residents can thrive, the state must address the following priorities.

Support for Families and Children

High-Quality, Affordable Child Care

High-quality child care programs have been proven to close achievement gaps, prepare kids for kindergarten, and improve employment opportunities for parents by reducing their work barriers.¹ Recent policy changes, such as the federal enforcement of work requirements for social welfare programs and the rising cost of child care, which now consumes 20% to 30% of the average New Jersey family's paycheck,² have made it harder for families to work while also caring for their children. Though child care affordability is an issue impacting families across the state, low-income families bear the brunt of high child care costs. Those who qualify for child care subsidies have fewer options and are, at times, subject to additional tuition fees to cover costs exceeding the subsidy rate. While the expansion of universal preschool in New Jersey is a positive step forward,³ more attention is needed to improve the quality and supply of child care options and adequately pay the child care workforce.

Basic Income

A guaranteed basic income provides unconditional cash payments to families so they can cover expenses for essential services and needs such as food, housing, and health care. It is a crucial safety net addition for today's economy, where full-time work does not guarantee financial stability. It is also an effective tool for addressing economic inequality and poverty. Contrary to the argument that guaranteed income discourages work, pilot program studies conducted in Newark⁴ and Paterson,⁵ New Jersey, demonstrate that providing cash assistance did not disincentivize work. Instead, recipients used the money to supplement their work income for student debt repayment, groceries, and emergency expenses.

Baby Bonds

Although New Jersey was one of the first states to propose a baby bonds program in 2020,⁶ the state has not passed legislation to fully implement and fund a program. Baby bonds address wealth inequality at its roots by providing children born into low-income families with state-funded investment accounts that grow over time, creating a financial foundation for adulthood that can be used for homeownership, college, and other opportunities. Connecticut's baby bond program provides children born into low-income families with a \$3,200 deposit when they are born, about \$1,200 more than New Jersey's proposed program. In Connecticut, the funds are invested and grow over 18 years, potentially reaching \$10,000 to \$24,000 by the time the child turns 18.

Evidence shows that modest asset cushions can significantly improve college completion rates,⁷ and reduce reliance on predatory lending.⁸ By investing early in its youngest residents, the state could strengthen economic mobility and break cycles of generational poverty.

Democracy and Government Transparency

Establishing an Independent Comptroller Position

Having a state Comptroller that is appointed by the Governor strips away the independent oversight necessary to effectively assess how the government spends public money. From mismanaged state contracts to concerns about the pension fund, New Jersey has experienced numerous financial scandals and waste that might have been prevented or detected earlier with robust independent auditing. Creating an independent Comptroller position would establish an office with the jurisdiction to audit any state agency, public authority, or entity receiving state funds without seeking permission from the groups being reviewed.

Re-establishing the Office of the Public Advocate

While re-establishing the Office of the Public Advocate has already been recognized in the Housing and Land Use section of this report, it is vital to understand that the office itself and its functions promote government transparency and accountability at large. Restoring the Office of the Public Advocate would ensure that New Jersey residents, regardless of wealth or connections, have a stronger voice in holding the government accountable. Historically, the office has fought for civil rights, challenged eminent domain abuse, and protected access to education and public resources. A newly restored and independent office would investigate complaints against state agencies, promote transparency, and recommend reforms that identify and prevent waste, fraud, and abuse of public dollars.

OPRA (Open Public Records Act) Reform

OPRA was designed to ensure that government records remain accessible to the public; however, recent changes have curtailed rather than enhanced access. Broad exemptions for "inter-agency communications," "deliberative process," and "personnel records" are loopholes that let agencies withhold information under vague justifications. In 2024, Governor Murphy made reforms to OPRA that encouraged the digitalization of public records, while also limiting access to different kinds of information, such as police bodycam footage,

government contracts, court proceedings, and real estate transactions. The amended law also notably shifted attorney fee responsibility away from state agencies in the event a records request was brought to court and found in favor of the requester. OPRA is a critical component of greater government transparency and should be strengthened to safeguard the rights of workers, students, journalists, and all New Jersey residents to hold the state government accountable.

Same-day Voter Registration

New Jersey has made progress in voting access, but the state still lags behind others that have recognized and enforced same-day voter registration as a tool for increasing democratic participation. By requiring voters to register at least 21 days before an election, New Jersey creates unnecessary obstacles that disproportionately affect young people, low-income residents, and communities of color who may be more likely to miss deadlines due to work scheduling. Twenty-three states and Washington, D.C. have implemented same-day registration,⁹ and research shows that same-day voter registration increases turnout, especially among young voters.¹⁰

Voting Rights Act

There is a need to strengthen New Jersey's electoral system so residents of the state can exercise their fundamental right to participate in our democracy. Several states, including New York and Virginia, have enacted state-level Voting Rights Acts designed to review electoral practices in areas with past discrimination, track fair access to voting, and provide language support to English language learners. By strengthening voting rights and protections, the Garden State could address a number of persistent barriers like long lines, inaccessible polling places, and limited language support.

Support Efforts for a More Complete Count in the 2030 Census

The decennial Census is the cornerstone of our country's democracy. A full and complete count of all residents in our state and across the nation determines representation in Congress, directs federal funds for critical programs like SNAP and Medicaid, and ensures local governments have access to data that leads to better, more informed decisions about infrastructure needs, including education, health systems, and transportation.

New Jersey benefitted from a robust 2020 Census outreach campaign in which the state supported community-based organizations and county governments to supplement and enhance get-out-the-count efforts in partnership with the U.S. Census Bureau. A similar approach, begun four to five years before the decennial count, would put our state on the path to a fairer, more accurate Census. By starting early, New Jersey will be better positioned to encourage municipal participation in the Local Update of Census Addresses (LUCA) process, which will begin in 2027. The Census is a massive undertaking—the largest peacetime operation conducted by our federal government—and it will require support and participation from all corners of our state.

Transportation

Expanding Transportation in South Jersey

South Jersey faces chronic underinvestment in public transportation that limits economic opportunity, increases car dependency, and exacerbates environmental pollution. Residents without access to a car in more rural, car-dependent counties like Atlantic, Salem, Cumberland, and Gloucester, for example, face limited options when shopping for basic needs like food.¹¹ Expanding South Jersey transportation is not just about convenience; it is about connecting residents to jobs, education, healthcare, and improving air quality in communities already burdened by highway pollution and industrial facilities.

Immigration

Prioritizing Policies that Welcome and Support Immigrants

Immigrants are essential to New Jersey's economic vitality. New Jersey is home to over two million immigrants representing 29% of the state's working population, generating \$194 billion in economic output each year for the state.¹² Immigrant entrepreneurs also founded nearly half of New Jersey businesses, creating jobs and revitalizing communities.¹³ Beyond economics, immigrants strengthen social networks and enrich cultural institutions through diverse traditions, languages, and perspectives that make New Jersey communities more vibrant. For example, increasing funding to the Office of New Americans would improve access to social services, workforce development, employment services, and legal services for immigrant communities throughout the state. Additionally, protecting tuition equity and creating pathways to pursue entrepreneurship opportunities also provide immigrant communities with the tool to realize their own hopes and dreams. Comprehensive reforms protecting the rights and privacy of New Jersey's immigrant groups would strengthen New Jersey communities and recognize that the well-being of immigrants is connected to the well-being of the state.

Affordable Housing

Rental Protections

New Jersey lacks comprehensive statewide rent control, allowing landlords in most municipalities to raise rents without limits, forcing families to choose between unaffordable increases or displacement from their communities. While some cities like Jersey City and Hoboken have enacted vacancy control policies, establishing a cap on rent increases upon vacancy, other municipalities have not implemented similar measures. Statewide protections for renters already exist in California¹⁴ and Oregon.¹⁵ New Jersey could follow suit and thereby ensure families, senior citizens, and people with disabilities can remain stably housed in their communities. Additional tenant protections that could promote stability and prevent displacement include limiting landlord collusion by establishing guardrails around rent-setting software and restricting the role of credit checks in screenings for affordable housing.

Protecting and Expanding Funding for Affordable Housing Development

Safeguarding and growing the Affordable Housing Trust Fund is especially important, as it is often the only public source available for smaller, community-driven, shovel-ready developments. Additionally, reserving at least 50% of the mansion tax for critical housing needs—such as preserving existing affordable homes and preventing evictions—would also help municipalities advance the unprecedented number of affordable housing developments now in the pipeline under New Jersey’s recently strengthened Mount Laurel framework.

Zoning Reform

Zoning reform must be a priority consideration in order to expand the number of affordable housing options in New Jersey. Advancing zoning reforms to support a wider mix of housing options and adaptive reuse can include encouraging conversions of aging office parks and shopping centers into mixed-use developments; supporting homeowners who want to create ADUs; and making it easier for religious institutions and nonprofit organizations to pursue inclusionary projects that include affordable homes.

Climate

Community-led Investment in Clean Energy

The New Jersey Board of Public Utilities (BPU) approved a rate hike of roughly 20% during the summer of 2025,¹⁶ placing an immense financial burden on many New Jersey residents and adding to the strain on communities of color who are disproportionately located near fossil fuel infrastructure that causes respiratory illness and cancer.¹⁷ New Jersey could benefit from the implementation of clean energy strategies that prioritize communities historically burdened by pollution from power plants, highways, and industrial facilities to ensure they benefit directly from renewable energy. Similarly, providing seed funding for community organizations and requiring robust local, public engagement in siting decisions about where to build clean energy infrastructure would create a smoother transition into clean energy in New Jersey.

Criminal Justice

Jury Service for Formerly Incarcerated People

New Jersey has one of the most restrictive jury service bans in the country. Unlike other states, which allow jury service for those convicted of certain types of crimes, New Jersey bars against all individuals convicted of a felony from jury service.¹⁸ This perpetuates a judicial system in which juries can never reflect the full diversity of New Jersey’s communities. The exclusion of returning citizens removes their lived experience from the jury deliberation process and further separates them from civic responsibility and reintegration into their communities after serving time.

Endnotes

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