

# NEWS RELEASE

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## FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

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### **REPORT PRESENTS COMPREHENSIVE ANALYSIS OF NEW JERSEY POVERTY, CALLS FOR COORDINATED STATE APPROACH & GOAL-SETTING**

Trenton — A panel of statewide policy experts gathered today to respond to a new report released by the Legal Services of New Jersey (LSNJ) Poverty Research Institute (PRI), entitled “Poverty Benchmarks 2010: Assessing New Jersey’s Progress in Combating Poverty.” The Poverty Benchmarks series, now in its fourth year, is the only source that provides, on a regular basis, information on New Jersey-specific data across a broad spectrum of poverty-related indicators not brought together in other reports. Noting that “poverty in New Jersey is concentrated by demography and by place – so that people struggling to meet their daily needs are almost invisible to those with higher incomes,” Melville D. Miller, Jr., LSNJ president, said “Before there can be effective programs to address the issue of poverty, society must share a common understanding that we are all worse off for the existence of poverty in our midst. More accessible poverty data contributes to this understanding. We see this work as integral to Legal Services’ mission, because any consequent reduction in poverty will lessen the legal problems and therefore the need for legal representation for those without means.”

Discussing the report’s focus on the response of state government to poverty, Miller said that, “while many governmental and non-governmental entities seek to address problems related to poverty and inadequate income, state government has a unique ability and responsibility to respond to poverty, and it must be held accountable for its effectiveness in addressing the systemic causes and consequences of poverty. This report presents a context for such an accountability analysis. Unquestionably,” he

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continued, “the current economic climate has created both an increased need for government assistance programs and a significantly reduced capacity to fund them. Reconciling these opposing forces presents the new governor with an immense immediate challenge. Recognition and understanding of the hardships facing people of low income, particularly at this time of economic crisis, is more important than ever and will require intense commitment from State leadership to avoid catastrophic consequences for people in poverty.”

One of the primary researchers, Allan Lichtenstein of LSNJ’s Poverty Research Institute, noted “The report’s data and analysis are presented in four parts, covering the current economic crisis and increased hardships for people of low income; the most recent statewide poverty data; particular aspects of poverty, including food insecurity, housing, health care, education and transportation; and major state programs that address elements of poverty, with recommendations for state government action.”

Shivi Prasad, another primary PRI research analyst, set forth some of the major findings in the report’s analysis of 2008 Census poverty data:

- “Children, women living in female-headed households, Blacks or African Americans, and Hispanic or Latinos were disproportionately represented among the poor.”
- “Working Blacks or African Americans, Hispanics or Latinos, and women living in female-headed households were more likely than other demographic groups to be living in poverty.”
- “Severe income inequality and geographic disparities in the incidence of poverty remain persistent features of New Jersey’s socio-economic landscape.”

“Looking at specific aspects of poverty,” Prasad added, “the report found that:

- Food insecurity increased for the third consecutive year, reaching the highest level in ten years.

- Housing affordability continued to be a challenge for residents of low income in 2008.
- New Jersey residents living in the state's urban centers were among the most severely cost-burdened in 2008.
- The percentage of renter-occupied homes that were overcrowded increased considerably in 2008.
- Despite some gains, the health insurance coverage of New Jersey residents living in poverty continued to be lower than the national average for the third consecutive year, and New Jersey continued to lag the nation in child health insurance coverage in 2008.
- Although access to qualified teachers improved in all school districts in 2008, including districts of lower socio-economic status, and the number of school districts of lower socio-economic status in need of improvement decreased in 2008, significant proficiency disparities in mathematics and language arts persist between students from the lowest and highest socio-economic school districts in grade four, middle school and high school.”

Sabine Schoenbach, the third primary researcher on the PRI report, noted that “The first ‘call for State action’ in the final section of the report, which reviews major state programs that address elements of poverty and makes recommendations for state government action, is for the State to coordinate the efforts of the diverse departments and programs that do, or could address poverty and to set a statewide poverty-reduction target.” Other, more specific recommendations are included in the report.

The PRI report was presented as part of a special forum held today at the Masonic Temple in Trenton, featuring a panel of respondents with expertise on various issues of poverty as well as experience in advocacy efforts to reduce poverty in New Jersey. Panelists included Sheldon Presser of the Association for Children of New Jersey ([spresser@acnj.org](mailto:spresser@acnj.org); 973-643-3876); Dr. Mary Gatta, from the Rutgers Center for Women and Work ([gatta@rci.rutgers.edu](mailto:gatta@rci.rutgers.edu); 732-932-0051); Reverend Bruce Davidson,

director of the Lutheran Office of Governmental Ministry in New Jersey ([bdavidson@njsynod.org](mailto:bdavidson@njsynod.org); 609-396-4071); and Daniel Santo Pietro, executive director of the Hispanic Directors Association of New Jersey ([info@hdanj.org](mailto:info@hdanj.org); 732-828-7606).

“Poverty Benchmarks 2010” can be found on-line at <http://www.lsnj.org/PRIResearch.cfm> and can be searched by key word to locate county-specific data or other variables of interest. Printed copies are also available.

Legal Services of New Jersey, located in Edison, heads a statewide system of seven non-profit corporations which provide free legal assistance in civil matters to low-income people in all twenty-one counties of New Jersey. The Poverty Research Institute was established by LSNJ in 1997 to create greater public awareness of poverty’s scope, causes, consequences and remedies, as a way to help alleviate some of the legal problems of those living in poverty. It is the first and only entity exclusively focused on developing and updating information on poverty in the state. PRI conducts systemic research on the incidence, effects and other aspects of poverty – as well as the relationship among poverty, work and public policy – and makes its findings available to the public. Its work is supported, in part, by a grant from the Fund for New Jersey.

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