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Testimony before the Women and Children Committee

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Good afternoon Chairwoman Lampitt and members of the committee. My name is Elizabeth Weill-Greenberg, and I'm the Communications Manager for the Anti-Poverty Network of New Jersey. APN is a network of individuals with lived experiences of poverty, direct service providers, labor organizers, researchers, seasoned advocates, and leaders from numerous faith communities.

Thank you to the Committee members and fellow anti-poverty advocates for being here today. And thank you to Speaker Prieto for calling these important hearings.

We are all here today because New Jersey is facing a crisis. Female headed families make up more than half of all families living in poverty. Since 2007 more households with children have fallen into poverty. According to the Legal Services of New Jersey Poverty Benchmarks Report, in 2014 children made up a higher percentage at each level of poverty than their share of the total population. While children made up 22.9% of the total population, they comprised almost 30% of people living in households with an income below 200% of the federal poverty line, more than 33% of people living in official poverty, and more than 31% of people living in severe poverty. Childhood poverty disproportionately impacts Hispanic and Black

children, as their poverty rates are almost four times the rate for White children.¹

But as widespread as this problem is, there are common sense solutions we can implement to stem this crisis. Today I will address three of these solutions - earned sick time, higher wages, and expansion of high quality pre-K.

Workforce policies impact a parent's ability to earn an adequate income and care for her children. One of the most basic rights is the right to stay home from work without forfeiting pay when you or your child is ill. But currently over 1 million New Jersey workers are denied this right. This means low-income parents must either send their children to school or daycare sick -- spreading illnesses and ignoring the needs of their children - or else lose much-needed wages, or possibly even their jobs. For families on impossibly tight budgets, the loss of even one day of pay can mean they don't make rent, or can't pay the utility bill, or the mom is forced to go without food so her children can eat. A strong state mandate is needed to require employers to provide this right to the most vulnerable workers, which is why APN continues to support Chairwoman Lampitt's bill from last session, A2354.

We cannot discuss eradicating poverty without addressing poverty wages. New Jersey's minimum wage did not increase this year and remains at \$8.38 an hour. This wage is woefully inadequate. A New Jerseyan making minimum wage would have to work more than 87 hours a week to earn about \$38,000 annually, which is 200% of the federal poverty line, often referred to as a measure of true poverty.

Tipped workers fare even worse as their minimum wage is just \$2.13 an hour, a paltry wage which disproportionately impacts women workers, as New Jersey Policy Perspective demonstrated in their 2014 report on the subject. In New Jersey, more than 70% percent of tipped workers are women.²

¹ Poverty Benchmarks 2015, The Annual Overview of New Jersey's Progress Against Poverty, Legal Services of New Jersey

² Increasing the Minimum Wage to \$10.10: A Win-Win for New Jersey, April 29, 2014

Many of the families behind these statistics, struggle to afford food, rent, and bills -- high quality pre-school, the cost of which can rival market rate housing, remains an impossible expense.

Study after study has shown the benefits of high quality preschool for children. But far too many New Jersey children are blocked from this opportunity simply because they are poor. The National Institute for Early Education Research (NIEER) at Rutgers University found that by 5th grade, children who attended one of New Jersey's high-quality preschool programs are on average, three-quarters of an academic year ahead of students who did not attend a quality preschool and are also less likely to require special education.³

Preschool not only provides children with the educational foundation they deserve, but it allows parents to join or stay in the workforce, making pre-K expansion both an investment in economic opportunity for parents and educational opportunity for their children.

In closing, for far too long, we have told struggling families that if they just work harder, the American Dream can be theirs. But with poverty wages, a high cost of living, and weak worker protections, this dream is increasingly unattainable. New Jersey is in the midst of a financial and moral crisis; it is incumbent upon our legislators to work with community members and those living in poverty to enact solutions.

³ [Industry Insights: New Jersey should get down to business with preschool, April 8, 2015](#)