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More Than 60 Civil Rights Leaders and Housing Advocates Call On Gov. Murphy and Legislative Leadership to Protect Affordable Housing

New Jersey Must Move Forward to Address Housing Affordability — Going Back to COAH Is Not the Answer

TRENTON – Today, more than 60 civil rights leaders and housing advocates sent a [letter](#) to Governor Murphy, Senate President Scutari, and Assembly Speaker Coughlin, calling for their commitment to uphold the principles and spirit of the *Mount Laurel* Doctrine and to not return to the Council on Affordable Housing (COAH) or a similar agency-based system of enforcement for affordable housing obligations.

New Jersey's landmark [Mount Laurel Doctrine](#) requires all towns to create their fair share of affordable housing. Thanks to current enforcement of the Doctrine by the New Jersey judiciary, the state is developing more affordable housing than ever before. Since 2015, when the New Jersey Supreme Court put an end to COAH's decades of dysfunction, New Jersey's annual affordable housing production has [nearly doubled](#) — providing safe and healthy housing to more than 50,000 people over the last eight years.

“Recent calls to return to COAH or a similar system of endless state agency review of affordable housing plans from local elected officials and some state legislators are nothing more than veiled attempts to maintain segregation throughout New Jersey,” said **Adam Gordon, Executive Director at Fair Share Housing Center**. “We already know that COAH did not work to build affordable housing. Those advocating for a return to that system are focused on keeping low-income families and people of color out of their towns — not on addressing the housing affordability crisis facing the majority of New Jerseyans.”

“New Jersey is one of the most diverse states in the country, yet also one of the most segregated,” said **Richard Smith, President of the NAACP New Jersey State Conference**. “We must do all that we can to end segregation and create equitable, inclusive communities throughout New Jersey. We cannot go back to the failed bureaucracy of the Council on Affordable Housing and allowing wealthy towns to pay out of building affordable homes. We call on Governor Murphy and our legislative leaders to defend the law that the Southern Burlington County and Camden County NAACP established decades ago: every town must do its fair share.”

“Housing is at the center of almost all racial disparities, and without a safe, healthy, and affordable place to call home, no individual, family, or community can thrive,” said **Dr. Jesselly De La Cruz of the Latino Action Network Foundation**. “Protecting the current enforcement process for affordable housing obligations is critical to addressing the housing crisis currently facing all New Jerseyans. Those calling for a return to the old system want to maintain their status and power, instead of building inclusive communities.”

“To end homelessness in New Jersey, there is nothing more important than effective enforcement of New Jersey’s fair housing laws,” said **Connie Mercer, CEO of the Coalition to End Homelessness**. “We cannot go back to the days when affordable housing obligations existed on paper, but not in reality. We need to build on the success happening now, and do even more going forward.”

“Housing affordability and instability often places people in dire situations, including violent ones,” said **Elizabeth Reubman, Policy Director of Newark Community Street Team**. “For the health and safety of all New Jerseyans, the state must prioritize the development of more affordable housing, and not just in urban centers. All towns must do their fair share. Going back to a system that didn’t work puts everyone at risk.”

“The current process of enforcing towns’ affordable housing obligations has helped VOADV create many housing opportunities with wraparound services for families throughout South Jersey,” said **Owen McCabe, Housing Development Director at Volunteers of America Delaware Valley**. “But we need to do more. There are many more families who apply for homes than are available. Now is the time to build off of what works.”

“Where one lives is the biggest predictor of someone’s health and success. As one of the most segregated states in the country—with some of the worst racial disparities—we should be focused on building healthy communities where everyone has an opportunity to thrive regardless of race,” said **Racquel Romans-Henry, Policy Director at Salvation and Social Justice**. “Going back to a failed system will do nothing to strengthen our communities and will only set us back.”

“As New Jersey continues to grapple with the lack of affordable housing and intensely segregated communities across the state, it is vital that the Legislature act to codify and build on the current processes to ensure there is meaningful enforcement of affordable housing obligations,” said **Joe Johnson, Policy Counsel at the ACLU of New Jersey**. “If we are to address this critical issue, New Jersey must not return to the days of lax enforcement, minimal oversight, and carveouts which allowed municipalities to disregard their obligations for far too long.”

“New Jersey is one of the most diverse states in the country — but it is also one of the most segregated,” said **Laura Sullivan, Director of the Economic Justice Program at the New Jersey Institute for Social Justice**. “We must prioritize affordable housing development and racial and economic integration so that all New Jerseyans — particularly Black and Brown communities — can thrive and benefit from all the state has to offer.”

“New Jersey has a housing crisis. In 2019 our state ranked #1 in the percentage of adult children, ages 18 to 24, who are still living with their parents,” said **Chris Sturm, Policy Director for Land Use at New Jersey Future**. “We need more affordable housing units — and court enforcement has proven to be the best mechanism for ensuring that they are built.”

“The Mount Laurel Doctrine is responsible for providing thousands of homes to residents throughout New Jersey. Since oversight has been transferred to the courts, Habitats for Humanity across the state have successfully worked in partnership with municipalities, tripling housing production,” said **Lori Leonard, CEO of Habitat for Humanity of South Central New Jersey**. “Attempts to revert to a historically failed enforcement process will diminish our ability to

provide families struggling with the high cost of living the opportunity for an affordable place to live, as well as increasing the deficit of affordable homes in the state.”

“Since 2015, Morris Habitat for Humanity has constructed nearly 100 new homes, collaborating closely with municipalities to fulfill their Mount Laurel Doctrine obligations. Our ongoing partnerships have paved the way for a robust pipeline, with plans to build over 300 additional homes. These 400 homes signify opportunities for families to achieve affordable homeownership, made possible only by the current enforcement of the Mount Laurel Doctrine by the New Jersey courts,” said **Liz DeCoursey, CEO, Morris Habitat for Humanity**. “In the face of an unprecedented housing crisis, reinstating COAH would jeopardize the progress of the past 8 years. On behalf of over 200,000 fellow New Jerseyans seeking an affordable place to call home, I urge the continued enforcement of the Doctrine through the New Jersey courts.”

“As we continue to advocate upward economic mobility for all New Jersey residents, we understand the imperative nature of housing in the arena of economic justice. Access to housing, both rental and homeownership, is absolutely necessary to create generational wealth,” said **Beverly Brown-Ruggia, Financial Justice Program Director at New Jersey Citizen Action**. “Ensuring that the 4th round of Mount Laurel obligations continues to provide housing opportunities to Black and Brown communities is paramount to the work we at New Jersey Citizens Action believe in.”

“We are just beginning to chip away at the tremendous shortage of available and affordable homes in our state,” said **Staci Berger, President and CEO of the Housing and Community Development Network of NJ**. “The system in place now is allowing more families than ever before to access healthy, affordable homes. We cannot afford to hinder that progress by going back to a process that enables recalcitrant towns to shut people out. We cannot press pause when people are unable to afford to live in our state. We can only *HouseNJ* by continuing to move forward in a way that creates greater opportunities for all residents to be able to afford to call NJ home.”

“Supportive Housing Association supports a thoughtful examination of any changes to the current and successful framework that has led to much needed increases in the building of affordable housing,” said **Diane Riley, Executive Director of the Supportive Housing Association of NJ**. “However New Jersey cannot afford a move back to an unsuccessful framework and more delays. We can examine and improve but continue to build.”

“Housing sits at the center of all health determinants. Providing safe and secure housing is vital to continued progress within our communities,” said **Anita D. Wemple, President and CEO of Community Planning and Advocacy Council**. “Any conversation that entertains the reintroduction of COAH or RCAs is not only irrational but would be a direct attack on low to moderate-income communities and specifically communities of color.”

“New Jersey is in the midst of a housing crisis. The need for affordable housing is at an all-time high and our homelessness programs cannot keep up with the demand. To reinstate COAH will only further exacerbate an already difficult housing market,” said **Jeff Bashe and Blair Schleicher Wilson, Co-Chairs at The Housing Alliance of Morris County**. “We urge New Jersey to prioritize policies that accelerate the development of affordable housing, not those that set them back.”

“There is no progress for African American communities without housing. Protecting and strengthening the Mount Laurel Doctrine is an essential tool for Black forward progress,” said

Alexander H. McLucas, District Director of the New Jersey Association of Alpha Phi Alpha Chapters. “This constitutional mandate is a critical component for civil rights and social justice within New Jersey. The work started by Ethel Lawrence must be protected.”

“Homes for more than 50,000 lower income people have been created since transferring oversight of the Mount Laurel Doctrine back to the courts in 2015. The incompetence at best, or intentional dysfunction of the Council on Affordable Housing has been well documented,” said **Frank Argote-Freyre, Chair of the Board of Fair Share Housing Center.** “It created a crisis of affordable housing in New Jersey, and we cannot afford to return to those days.”

[Read the sign-on letter to Governor Murphy, Senate President Scutari, and Assembly Speaker Coughlin.](#)

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[Fair Share Housing Center](#) is a nonprofit advocacy organization that uses legal, policy, and community-building strategies to dismantle decades of racial and economic discrimination in New Jersey and nationally that excludes people from the opportunity to live in safe, healthy, and affordable housing.