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Sweeney, Turner, Hughes & Jackson Emphasize Need to Fight for Economic Fairness

Roundtable With Advocates & Financially-Disadvantaged Produces Renewed Commitment To Defeat Poverty

TRENTON — Senator President Steve Sweeney, Senator Shirley K. Turner, Mercer County Executive Brian Hughes and Trenton Mayor Eric Jackson said a renewed commitment to state budget initiatives that will help working families who have fallen further behind is needed to counter the economic policies that have favored the wealthy. Joining in a roundtable discussion with anti-poverty advocates, the public officials listened to firsthand accounts from people who live with economic hardship and pledged to take budget actions that could help to restore economic fairness.

"We need economic policies that help the working poor and others who struggle each day to support themselves and their families," said Senator Sweeney. "Under the current administration, the wealthy have prospered in recent years while everyone else has been pushed further behind. The economic truth is that from 2010 to 2012 every income group has seen the buying power of their take-home pay decline, with the exception of millionaires, who have gained an average of $123,000."

Senator Sweeney has introduced legislation that would restore the state’s Earned Income Tax Credit to 25 percent of the federal credit. The Christie administration cut it to 20 percent in 2010. Eligibility for benefits ranges from $20,330 for childless workers to $53,267 for wage earners with three or more children. The EITC restoration is coupled with a millionaires tax, which would have the wealthy contribute more of a “fair share” with an increase amounting to two cents on the dollar for income above $1 million a year.

Restoring the full EITC would cost about $60 million annually, according to OLS projections.

The legislators said they will advocate for the funds needed to prevent the loss of federal food stamps. Senator Turner has legislation that would protect the approximately 160,000 New Jersey families from losing an average of $90 a month in federal food aid under the SNAP program.

"Families should not be forced to choose between putting food on the table or paying their heating bill or buying life-saving medicine," said Senator Turner. "By providing a minimal increase in the state’s heating assistance program we could prevent a devastating cut in food aid for hungry families. We need to keep the safety net in place to meet the nutritional needs of the most vulnerable families."

The governor has vetoed previous attempts by Senator Turner and others that would use $3.2 million in state funds to generate approximately $17 million in federal food assistance. SNAP use has increased dramatically in recent years, with 876,000 people making use of the aid, including 410,000 children, “a reflection of the increased burden on the poor,” Senator Turner said.

"Both the EITC and the SNAP benefits are not only the fair and compassionate things to do to help those in need, they will help boost the economy because the money will be used for daily expenses," said County Executive Brian Hughes. "The tax break for the working poor could mean one week of groceries, one month of electricity or three weeks of gasoline. It can make a real difference in the lives of those working hard to make ends meet."

The participants also referred to the administration’s elimination of rebates for renters and increases in tolls and proposed increases in mass transit fares as additional hardships on those with modest incomes. More than 850,000 renters had their rebates eliminated by the Christie Administration.

"We need more economic fairness and more opportunities for the working poor and the middle class,” said Mayor Jackson. “The wealthy don’t need our help, they are doing well by themselves. We have to do more to expand economic opportunities to everyone."

The number of millionaires in New Jersey has increased 38 percent from 12,208 in 2009 to 16,842 in 2013, and has gone up 45 percent from 11,600 in 2004, according to state Treasury Department figures.

The millionaires tax – which would expire after four years, under Senator Sweeney’s bill – wouldn’t be needed if the state’s economy had kept pace with the national recovery, Senator Sweeney said, because we would have added $4.7 billion in revenue.

"People don’t want to struggle to pay their bills, but far too many New Yorkers working hard - even working two or three jobs - still can’t cover monthly costs,” said Serena Rice, of the Anti-Poverty Network. “These workers are essential for our economy, and investments like this proposal to restore the Earned Income Tax Credit are essential investments in building a workforce that can afford to live here."

One of the roundtable participants spoke about her struggles as a working parent.

"As a single parent, it’s a daily struggle trying to make ends meet for my family,” said Devika Smith, a resident of Jersey City who works as a certified nursing assistant at a nursing home. "I recently gave my son my last ten dollars so he could get to school, but had no money left for my own bus fare to get to work. Luckily, a co-worker spotted me on the street and gave me a lift. Sometimes it feels like I’m living on the very edge—all I want is to go to bed at night knowing that I can feed my children and pay my rent."

(Attached Photo. Seated from L to R: Jim Jacob, President and CEO of NJ Shares, Board President of Anti-Poverty Network; Devika Smith, Participant; Senate President Steve Sweeney; Serena Rice, Executive Director of Anti-Poverty Network; Senator Shirley K. Turner; Assemblywoman Elizabeth Maher Muoio; Dennis Micai, Executive Director of Trenton Area Soup Kitchen; Sherry Rubel, Participant; Robert Worell, Participant; Mercer County Executive Brian Hughes; Trenton Mayor Eric Jackson.)