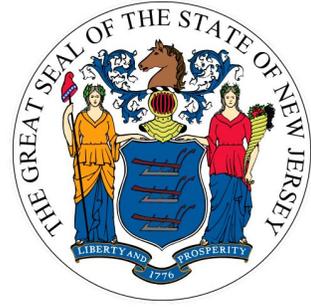


2018 YMCA New Jersey Youth & Government Officer's Topic List



Economics

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Minimum Wage

Environment

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Special Education
Opioid Crisis
Independent Voter
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"Opioid Crisis"

Austin Chen

Kean-Livingston Clerk

chen.austin007@gmail.com

Issue: The opioid crisis has ravaged New Jersey; annually opioid abuse costs the New Jersey Healthcare System millions of dollars and thousands of lives.

Necessary Background: Opioids are a group of drugs that act upon the opioid receptors of the body, effectively relieving pain. Taken as short term pain relief, opioids are highly effective in hospital settings, helping patients on the road to recovery. However, due to its euphoric effects, opioids are highly abused. Most addicts were originally patients who, after realizing the powerful effects of opioids, began to abuse their prescriptions. These cases quickly spiral out of the control with people resorting to street heroin, a far more powerful and dangerous version of pharmaceutical opioids, to fulfill their addictions. Heroin eventually leads to overdoses and death unless opioid addicts can receive help and rehabilitate[1]. New Jersey has one of the highest heroin overdose rates in the nation, beating the national average by a factor of three[2].

Evidence: From 2010 to 2015, the rate of opioid related deaths increased by 214%. More dangerous than street heroin is Fentanyl, a powerful pharmaceutical opioid responsible for 417 deaths in 2015 in New Jersey; this number is an eight-fold increase from just two years ago[3]. More worrisome than death statistics is evidence that nearly 128,000 New Jersey Residents regularly use heroin[4]. The exponential growth of opioid deaths and increase in heroin usage are merely indications that New Jersey is on the event horizon of its opioid crisis. Camden and Cape May are the most affected counties with heroin death rates nearly 8 times that of the national average[5].

Impact: The opioid epidemic could be one of the largest medical crises that New Jersey has ever experienced. Every patient's recovery results in thousands of dollars in expenses and, rehabilitation efforts are not always effective. Many of New Jersey's most dangerous cities are held back from socio economic recovery because of their high opioid addiction rate[5].

Possible Solutions: One current effective solution is counseling groups such as Narcotics Anonymous(NA). Sharing with others that are recovering in the same way can help former addicts on the road to becoming contributing members of society. A current issue is the heavy cost of paying for a drug recovery bed in rehabilitation centers in the state of New Jersey. Beds cost more than \$20,000 dollars, a price that most opioid addicts cannot afford. Counties with the largest drug problems sometimes have no heroin recovery beds. If solutions could be made to reduce the cost of recovery wards in hospitals, addicts may be convinced to brave the terrible effects of withdrawal and begin the road to recovery.

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"Health Care"

Dustin Han

Kean/Livingston Assembly Speaker

dustinhan77@gmail.com

Issue: Recent radical changes to health care policies along with a degrading health care system has put many New Jerseyans in significant danger of losing accessibility for even the most basic form of health treatment.

Necessary Background: With the passage of the Affordable Care Act in 2014, Chris Christie and the New Jersey government was able to spread health coverage to more than half a million citizens and simultaneously saved the state around \$2 billion in state funding that originally went to charity care. However, recent times has seen many New Jerseyan politicians take many initiatives to repeal the current policies towards health care. Specifically, the plan looks to end the expansion of Medicare and start the movement towards relying on limited federal funding by ending the open entitlement process that currently exists. The main reason why there are growing opponents to the current health care system are due to a firm belief that the contemporary system is not effective in providing the health needs of citizens.

Evidence of Problem Existing: One specific issue with the current health care system in New Jersey is the creation of the new insurance policies called OMNIA, which was made by the Horizon Blue Cross and Blue Shield of New Jersey. Essentially, a select few hospitals were chosen as "Tier One" hospitals, typically those that have larger hospital networks. Other hospitals, the majority of them being smaller hospitals, were chosen as "Tier Two" hospitals. Under the new insurance plan, in exchange of only being able to receive treatment from "Tier One" hospitals, patients would generally pay lower costs. These policies have been expanded so that even around 40,000 uninsured New Jerseyan citizens who could not afford the previous plans would now be able to be a part of the new one. However, this change is concerning in the fact that "Tier One" hospitals now essentially are now monopolies and "Tier Two" hospitals lose huge financial gains and are even shut down. In addition, economic failures and business

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policies have put out more than half the pharmaceutical jobs out of business and health care for low income New Jersey residents are at an all time low.

Impact: Evidently, the problems with the New Jersey health care system have affected residents in a significant manner. While more people are insured than before, the quality of treatment received is simply not up to par to necessary standards. There are also residents that still are not insured even with the expansion of Medicaid. In addition, the financial aspect of healthcare has caused a huge shift in power, as now only a few hospitals dominate the healthcare field, which essentially creates a monopoly and mainstreams medical treatment through these few hospitals.

Possible Solutions: While reason for reforming the current health care system is somewhat justified, there are many different ways to address the health care issue other than completely eradicating the existing system. For instance, Rather than giving government officials even more control over health care, the better approach would be to pursue patient-centered, market-based health care reforms. This approach would give Americans and their families much greater control over their health care dollars and decisions. By making individuals and families the key decision-makers in a reformed health care system, powerful economic incentives will realign the interests of plans and providers and patients to maximize value by delivering higher quality care and services at lower cost. In addition, true reform of the tax treatment of health insurance would give individual tax relief to workers and their families for the purchase of the health insurance plans they want. It would make the system simpler, fairer, and neutral with respect to how or where one obtains health care coverage. It would replace the current open-ended tax relief afforded only to those workers who have employer-based coverage with a more rational and equitable system of individual tax relief.

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“Independent Voter Suppression”

Gabe Beckford

Cleveland/Wilson Assembly Clerk

gabriel.a.beckford@gmail.com

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Issue: New Jersey's 2.6 million unaffiliated voters were barred from voting in 2016's primaries unless they changed their party identification.

Necessary Background: New Jersey is a closed primary state, which means that only voters who identify with a party can vote in primary elections. There are about 5.5 million registered voters in NJ, 2.6 million of which are unaffiliated. This leaves almost half of all New Jersey voters out of the primary process. The only way an unaffiliated voter can vote in an NJ primary is to switch their party identification. Proponents of this system argue that it is the best way to make sure that only dedicated members of each party influence nominees. While potentially true in some cases, what has occurred more pervasively is the increasing radicalization of party platforms and leadership.

Evidence of Problem Existing: 2.6 million voters did not vote under their unaffiliated status in the 2016 NJ primary. They either did not vote, or succumbed to the party system and registered as a Democrat or Republican. This has occurred for all primaries in NJ.

Impact: Almost half of all of New Jersey's voters are rendered voiceless throughout the primary season. Being an unaffiliated voter is just as valid as being a party voter. People have many reasons for not associating with parties, ranging from not agreeing with either's platforms to not agreeing with the two party system as a whole. Regardless, these people should have the opportunity to vote for the candidate of their choice in all elections in NJ. In essence, 2.6 million voters are either being suppressed or forced to manipulate their ideological standing by the two party system.

Possible Solutions: New Jersey can become an open or blanket primary state. An open primary allows voters to vote for candidates from whatever party they want, given that the candidates are all from the same party. A blanket primary allows voters to vote for candidates from whatever party they want, with no requirement to vote along party lines. Either way, unaffiliated voters are given a voice throughout the entire electoral process.

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"NJ Transit Management"

Jason Wu

Cleveland/Wilson Assembly Clerk

jason.wu2153@gmail.com

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Issue: Continued neglect of deteriorating NJ Transit management in both rail maintenance and fare collection has severely hindered the efficiency of New Jersey public transportation [1].

Necessary Background: The New Jersey Transit Corporation has been recognized as a state-owned public transportation system since 1979 [2]. It currently provides several services including over 2,000 public buses, 3 light rail lines, and 10 commuter rail lines [2]. Despite significant increases in NJ Transit passengers, the corporation has exhibited continuous decline in management [2]. The accumulating deterioration of aging rails has resulted in frequent train delays [2]. Additionally, revenue generated from NJ Transit has been lost through neglect in collecting fares from public passengers [3]. From a safety perspective, poor technical maintenance of NJ Transit trains have resulted in frequent derailments, often times putting passengers in substantial danger [6].

Evidence of Problem Existing: Inadequate maintenance of NJ Transit rails has already demonstrated several dangerous incidents including the crash of a commuter train into Hoboken Station in late 2016, killing 1 and injuring over 100 [4]. Furthermore, several instances of train derailments have been reported such as the Amtrak derailment in March of 2017 [6]. Delays in train schedules have also become exceptionally common, as Penn Station lines froze in periods of nearly 3 hours in April of 2017 [5]. In regards to train fares, some have estimated losses in revenue from uncollected fares at up to \$5.5 million [3].

Impact: NJ Transit collectively constitutes a service area of over 5,000 square miles with nearly 223 million annual passengers [2]. Consequently, it has functioned as a significant source of state revenue in addition to a vital transportation service for New Jerseyans. Reforming the unsustainable characteristics of the NJ Transit would not only benefit the state through reducing accidents and augmenting revenue, but would also improve the lives of New Jersey citizens through minimizing delays and adjusting fares.

Possible Solutions: A predominant goal would be to increase the efficacy of fare collection on NJ Transit transportation services. This could be done through setting quotas on train staff members, as an immense quantity of unchecked tickets are caused by understaffed trains [3]. This would generate more revenue in addition to decreasing escalating fare rates, as more efficient ticket collection would offset reduced passenger costs. Another potential solution to alleviating the deteriorating state of NJ Transit rails involves targeting physical maintenance of lines through pushing for more thorough inspections, preventing costly accidents from occurring altogether.

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“Minimum Wage”

Kevin Schwartz

Cleveland/Wilson Senate President

kevinschwartz412@gmail.com

Issue: New Jersey's current minimum wage is ineffective at covering the cost of living in the state causing economic difficulties for low income workers

Necessary Background: The minimum wage was first instituted in 1938 as a part of the Fair Labor Standards act aimed at protecting workers from exploitation. It has been raised 22 times in accordance with both rising cost of living and inflation. A major aspect in the selection of the minimum wage is the idea of a living wage, or a wage that covers cost of living.

Evidence: Current New Jersey minimum wage is \$8.44 an hour, which would end up earning around \$17,000 for a full time worker. That would put a family of 4 roughly \$6,000 below the federal poverty line. New Jersey is also ranked 3rd in states with the highest overall tax burden, causing a high cost of living that isn't often covered by a minimum wage.

Impact: This low minimum wage has a myriad of detriment on New Jersey. From a societal perspective, it places a large number of the residents of the state under the federal poverty line. It also forces them to work multiple jobs, taking away from time with their children and impacting their development. From an economic perspective it has the potential to hamper the state's economic development. With the state population being buoyed by immigration, a large number of these immigrants are working minimum wage jobs. With the current pay of these jobs, it takes away from potential spending transactions within the state.

Possible Solutions: One possible solution to this issue is to raise the minimum wage. Although this would raise the direct income of these workers, hours could potentially be cut or workers fired. Another option is to lower some of the taxes in the state. This would not directly impact the income of these workers, it would lower the cost of living putting more money in the pockets of these workers.

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"Pipelines"

Matt Lisanti

Cleveland/Wilson Assembly Speaker

matthewlisanti1@gmail.com

Issue: The Pine Barrens, a valuable ecological and economic resource to the state of New Jersey, is the future site of gas pipeline projects. These pipelines, and the construction required to implement them, specifically pose a threat to the 17 trillion gallons of fresh drinking water contained in the Kirkwood-Cohansey aquifer, the soil, habitat, and other fragile elements of the Pinelands.

Necessary Background: In 2015, the Board of Public Utilities approved a plan to create a 22 mile-long pipeline that would run throughout the Pine Barrens. The reasoning for such an operation was that the pipeline would allow Beesley's Point Coal Plant to transition its energy source to natural gas. The proposed implementation, therefore, is seemingly beneficial in its nature; however, a more covert result of this transition is that the plant will significantly increase its energy use, thus inflicting a negative ecological impact overall. Additionally, New Jersey Natural Gas plans on creating a 30 mile-long pipeline that will stretch from Burlington County to an existing pipeline in Chesterfield. The pipeline will serve to transport fracked gas through New Jersey and Pennsylvania.

Evidence of Problem Existing: Although natural gas is typically the most ecologically considerate alternative to coal as an energy source, in this case, the risk involved with the implementation of these pipelines is tremendous; the aquifer is used as drinking water throughout the state and, if tainted, will impose astronomical economic costs to the people of New Jersey, who will be forced to seek clean water from a different, more expensive source. Additionally, the Pine Barrens is a producer of the third most cranberries in the country and the fourth most blueberries. These crops are essential to the economy of New Jersey, and should not be put at risk.

Impact: Withholding the fact that the construction of said pipelines will take place in an ecological focal point of New Jersey (the Pine Barrens) is the only way to even consider the logic and rationale behind the decisions made by the Board of Public Utilities and the New Jersey Natural Gas. By doing so, however, one can still see the dangers that are imposed by implementing pipelines and gas fracking. For one, pipelines are prone to error; any burst in the material is probable. As a result of such errors, the air quality and water quality of the aquifer in the Pine Barrens would be put at risk. Additionally, runoff is a threat to the soil and the habitats of the area; the implementation of these pipelines will alter the compactness of the soil in a negative manner, while reducing the amount of stable habitats in the area. Moreover, gas fracking in general is a risky process, as it is a lengthy procedure that includes constant drilling,

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and the use of chemicals. Essentially, gas fracking will jeopardize the state of the aquifer, the land, and, consequently, the economy of the Pine Barrens if even the slightest detail goes wrong.

Possible Solutions: Although the issues surrounding the pipelines discuss ecological impacts on the Pinelands, the key to forming a solution is centered around economics. As such, the rationale behind the implementation of the pipelines must be viewed from a business standpoint. Natural gas is now cheaper than coal; thus, it makes sense for a business to convert to the cheaper input. In order to combat this issue, it would be highly recommended that the State of New Jersey subsidizes businesses like the Beesley's Point Coal Plant. In doing so, there would be more of an incentive to abandon the current plans to construct the pipelines throughout the Pine Barrens. However, if this subsidization is to be carried out, the government must act swiftly, and the subsidy must be substantial. Although there may be a short term financial loss imposed by the subsidy, it is necessary to eliminate the current risk of the situation. Alternative solutions could include the restriction of natural gas in ecologically sensitive areas, such as the Pine Barrens. This proposition, although intriguing, will likely be difficult to carry out. A more probable solution would be a stricter regulation of gas fracking and pipeline construction, as a means to reduce errors that inflict the most damage on the environment.

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"Special Education"

Nalin Gardilla

Kean/Livingston Assembly Clerk

nalingardi@gmail.com

Issue: Special education has become a neglected issue, as the current special education system only funds students until the age of 21. Due to lack of a proper curriculum, students are left underprepared when it comes time to enter the workforce.

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Necessary Background: Over the past decade, special education quality has declined due to major funding cuts and the recycling of a failed curriculum year after year. The most detrimental of the following systems set in place is the duration of the government funded program. As of right now, special education lasts from 3-21 years old, and due to a lack of governmental assistance after that certain age, students are "cast out" of the education system abruptly. The current education curriculum focuses on actually increasing the student's cognitive ability, nothing is being taught of how to function in society with some sort of rudimentary job. With no sort of funding after the age of 21 and a faulty education, special needs individuals are left jobless and the education they receive becomes useless.

Evidence of Problem Existing: This problem is very much real, and there is no real legislation addressing this eminent issue. As of 2016, there are 213,727 special need children in the current education system. However, of these students, only a select few actually end up receiving a stable job and becoming a functioning part of society. The incorporation of common core and other ongoing changes to the New Jersey education system have also taken a toll on special education. Common core takes a "one size fits all approach" which is the last thing needed when it comes to special needs education and has led to even more confusion among curriculum that has no real world application. Another issue that requires direct attention is the age at which government funding for special needs education stops. Government funding currently stops at the age of 21, many students coming out from this school system are thrown out in the real world, and are expected to "figure it out" by themselves. This is very consequential to them, as they are given no preparation for what to expect as they enter the workforce.

Impact: The impact of these events could be very fateful for the entirety of society on top of its profound effect on the special needs population. With these special needs individuals serving no real purpose in society they are left stagnant, and they contribute to the already rising state unemployment rate. However, the impact of these events simply does not stop there, with no assistance from the government, these individuals many times become homeless with nowhere to turn. If special education is not reformed in the next couple years, it could set in place a chain of events that will lead to the overall damage of society.

Possible Solutions: Some simple and feasible solutions would be to provide some sort of governmentally funded assistance program to aid special needs individuals to ease into the workforce while not having to worry about their financials. Another solution would be to completely revamp the current education curriculum to focus more on life application and to completely remove common core from the special needs education curriculum, as it serves no purpose for their betterment but actually becomes more of a hassle.

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"Property Tax"

Pranav Mallampalli

Kean-Livingston Senate President

pranav.mallam@gmail.com

Issue: At this point in time, the state of New Jersey has the highest property tax rate in the nation: 1.89%. To the plight of most of Jersey householders, this current rate has stood strong for more than a decade. Unlike the majority of states in the country, New Jersey collects a sizable percentage of its tax revenue while still maintaining other tariffs such as income tax. As a result, decreases in population size, a weakened economy, and a generally angry citizenry have persisted, call into question the necessity for such a high rate of taxation.

Necessary Background: The problem with regards to taxation, property tax, in New Jersey is far older than many may realize. For more than four to five decades, New Jersey has consistently maintained its status as the most expensive state of residence. This statistic has continued into this year-2017- and it is possible that it may continue for many years to come if action is not taken. Another important realization is New Jersey's outstanding labor costs and density. Due to its high concentration, New Jersey's labor costs rank among the highest in the nation; this may be reasons as to why the property tax is so obscenely high.

Evidence of Problem Existing: Much evidence can be cited to show the presence of this issue, namely New Jersey's failing economic state. To reiterate, an significant portion of state tax revenue comes from the property tax, emphasizing New Jersey's over reliance on the property tax. Though this is a broad and general statement, it is important to note that much of the revenue collected from property taxes are used to pay for the majority of local and municipal agencies and program. This reliance upon this tax causes a significant problem for both residents of the state and the state administration. The reason for this is New Jersey ranks highest in the country for citizens emigrating to other states. As a result, revenue reduces as do real estate values.

Impact: The impact of having an extremely high property tax can be related directly to small business growth in the state of New Jersey. A clear issue contributing to New Jersey's failing economy can be attributed to a lack of incentive for new business. New Jersey ranks highest in the country for resident exits, an issue that carries over to small business owners and entrepreneurs. Similar to the political controversies in Atlantic City, in which many casino

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owners pulled their commercial interests out of the city's casinos. Many entrepreneurs often leave the state to pursue greener pastures in other states.

Possible Solutions: A possibly obvious solution to this issue would be to raise other taxes in order to lighten the burden on the property tax. These may include the gas tax, and increasing the limit on inheritance tax and/or abolishing this or the real estate tax. Simultaneously, there are options regarding the abolishment of other tariffs to emulate taxation systems like other states; this would include the abolishment of income tax like the state of New Hampshire.

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