

May 7, 2020

Mayor Steven Fulop  
280 Grove Street  
Jersey City, NJ 07302

Jersey City COVID-19 Community Relief Fund Committee  
Jersey City Economic Development Corporation  
298 Academy Street  
Jersey City, NJ 07306

Dear Mayor Fulop and Members of the Jersey City COVID-19 Relief Fund Committee:

As the 71% majority of Jersey City residents who rent their homes face another crushing bill this month, we write to urge you to enact the Mayor's commitment to an inclusive relief fund by:

- Dedicating at least a \$2 million majority of the Jersey City COVID Relief Fund as direct-to-tenant rent relief for residents making below 50% of Jersey City's AMI (\$34,550 for an individual, or \$49,300 for a family of four<sup>1</sup>);
- Giving first-in-line priority to applicants within that category who have been excluded from other forms of federal relief under the CARES act; and
- Adding at least two Relief Fund committee board members from community organizations with direct experience working with undocumented communities, and two committee members with non-City-or-County-appointed experience representing low-income Jersey City tenants.

Here's what we know: nearly a quarter of Jersey City renters are already severely cost-burdened, spending more than half their monthly income on rent — and that's before COVID disproportionately decimated the livelihoods of low-income residents, undocumented residents, and Jersey City's communities of color.<sup>2</sup> Near half of all Jersey City renters devote more than 30% of every paycheck to rent.<sup>3</sup> And of the almost 42% of Jersey City residents who are foreign-born, the lower-skilled have a median income of \$15,531 (roughly 22% of Jersey City's AMI) while the highest-skilled have only a median income of \$50,000.<sup>4</sup> Without paychecks, without savings, accruing months of back-rent debt and risking landlord harassment even under the current eviction moratorium, Jersey City renters face a terrifying future.

The situation is even more dire for Jersey City residents barred from federal relief. Citizens who could not file tax returns while incarcerated now cannot receive CARES Act aid. And Jersey

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<sup>1</sup> U.S. Department of Housing & Urban Development, FY 2020 Income Limits, Jersey City HUD Metro FMR Area.

<sup>2</sup> American Community Survey 1-year estimates.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid.

<sup>4</sup> New American Economy Cities Index.

City's many undocumented immigrant residents — as [Make the Road New Jersey](#), [New Jersey Policy Perspective](#), and [Rutgers University](#) detailed in reports earlier this month<sup>5</sup> — have been impacted hardest by the pandemic. These thousands of our neighbors, whom we pledged to protect under sanctuary city status, are ineligible for Federal stimulus payments, SNAP, TANF, unemployment insurance, and other forms of assistance, all of which require immigration documentation. Their U.S. citizen children and spouses are excluded from federal stimulus payments as well. Their housing is at risk. Their safety is directly interwoven with that of our entire community.

But we have a chance to join cities across the country in taking back some justice for everyday residents. As we write this to you, the cities of Austin, Boston, Chicago, Los Angeles, New York, Minneapolis, San Jose, Seattle, and St. Paul, along with Montgomery County, MD, have all devoted significant resources specifically targeted at very low-income residents who were passed over by federal relief. We are pleading with you to do the same.

Right now, the City has pledged a \$3 million, donation-backed relief fund with an additional \$1.5 million earmarked specifically for small businesses. We urge you to:

- Reserve a minimum of \$2 million of the Jersey City COVID-19 relief fund as direct-to-tenant rental assistance for households in Jersey City making less than 50% of AMI, with first-in-line priority for residents who have been excluded from federal relief;
- Commit to explicit information-sharing safeguards to protect applicants from exposure to federal immigration authorities (including, but not limited to, allowing applicants to self-certify ineligibility for federal assistance, and keeping no written record of applicants' immigration status or country of origin), and to protect their aid status from disclosure to landlords in order to avoid harassment;
- Commit to adding at least two Relief Fund committee board members from community organizations with direct experience working with undocumented communities, and two committee members with non-City-or-County-appointed experience representing low-income Jersey City tenants;
- Cap relief amounts per household and commit to assigning relief to qualifying applicants via lottery to ensure as even a spread of aid as possible before the fund is exhausted;
- Make applications in multiple languages available both online and by phone, and make applications available to community members directly through trusted community organizers on the ground to ensure maximum accessibility.

As New Jersey Policy Perspective and Rutgers University concluded in their recent study, government response failed lower-income families in past recessions. “This approach has led to major negative impacts on the health and general well-being of low-income and middle-class

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<sup>5</sup> “Undocumented Workers in Service Sector Most Likely to be Harmed by COVID-19”, New Jersey Policy Perspective and Rutgers School of Management and Labor Relations Center for Innovation in Worker Organization, April 2020; “Essential and Excluded: A Survey of Immigrants in New Jersey Under COVID-19”, Make the Road New Jersey, April 23, 2020.

families, especially for immigrants. If the state's policy response doesn't prioritize these families throughout its recovery, they are sure to fall even further behind." Let's seize this opportunity to do better by our own.

Sincerely,

*The Center for Undocumented Students at St. Peter's University*

*Congregation B'nai Jacob of Jersey City*

*Hudson County Progressive Alliance*

*Fr. John Hyatt, SJ*

*The Jersey City Anti-Violence Coalition Movement*

*Jersey City Vigil for Refugees*

*Make the Road New Jersey*

*NJ-08 For Progress*

*James Solomon, Jersey City Ward E Councilmember*

*Saint Aeden's Migrant Center*

*The Social Justice Program at Saint Peter's University*

*Welcome Home Jersey City*