



## Testimony to the Health and Human Service Committee January 27, 2016

Thank you Speaker Preito and Chairwoman Huttler for this opportunity to speak with you all today. My name is Rev. Sara Lilja, I am the Director of the Lutheran Episcopal Advocacy Ministry in NJ.

Poverty is a moral crisis in our State. We are hearing today from many experts testifying about the specific numbers; 38% of all NJ families are struggling to make ends meet, 1 in 5 children are food insecure, and there are 300 people on a waiting lists to receive medication to help treat their heroine addiction in one treatment facility in Camden alone. We hear story after story of suffering, poverty, and hardship. All this while the wealthiest 2 % of New Jerseyands report record income increases since the Great Recession in 2008.

The wealth gap is extreme in our state. New Jersey is the 2<sup>nd</sup> wealthiest state in the nation, while we have 25% of our population living at or below 150% of the Federal Poverty level. There can be no justification for this. Poverty is immoral in our state!

We must change the narrative; the poor are not lazy or undeserving. The poor are our landscapers, our housekeepers, our nursery school attendants. You may not know their personal financial difficulties, but make no mistake, you encounter the working poor when the restaurant worker brings your lunch, or the security guard bids you good day.

I am apart of the Coalition of Religious Leaders, a diverse group of leaders from the Jewish, Islamic, Catholic and Protestant communities, we are ready to help address this moral crisis that effects us all. We are asking that you, this legislative committee to talk with your fellow legislators in caucus about this crisis. We ask that when you hear misinformation spoken about the poor that you correct it. We, religious leaders of all faiths are willing to help by holding forums or bring both sides of the isle together to hear from our neighbors about their struggles.

I urge you to use all that you are learning today to be the agents of change; don't just let the conversation be locked up by patrician politics. This is a moral crisis, and we offer our help to educate all of the legislator to this reality.

And we call upon you to help change the debate and influence the opinions of your colleagues. Every resident of New Jersey deserves an opportunity to success, not to be stuck in a dead end job that will never help them get out of the cycle of poverty and hardship. Thank you.