FALL 2025 | VOLUME 15

Urban Mayors Press

NEW JERSEY URBAN MAYORS ASSOCIATION

THE OFFICIAL PUBLICATION OF
THE NEW JERSEY URBAN MAYORS ASSOCIATION



ABOUT THE NJ URBAN MAYORS ASSOCIATION

The New Jersey Urban Mayors Association (NJUMA) is housed in the New Jersey Urban Mayors Policy Center at the John S. Watson Institute for Urban Policy and Research at Kean University.

The New Jersey Urban Mayors Policy Center coordinates all activities of the NJUMA and provides policy and legislative analysis. Established in 1991, the New Jersey Urban Mayors Association works with state and federal lawmakers and officials to develop appropriate and effective public policy measures that benefit the state's urban centers and help lawmakers understand how public policy affects New Jersey's municipalities.

As an organization, NJUMA is comprised of **32 New Jersey urban and rural municipalities.** NJUMA serves its members through meetings, policy retreats, and annual conferences, which keep them informed on issues affecting their ability to provide adequate services to their residents. NJUMA also assists its members in interpreting legislation and state policy and works with the Governor's Office to define an urban policy agenda. It uses a 7-Point Plan for Strengthening Cities, Families, and Communities as a guide for addressing the critical issues of its member cities.

This plan is designed to aggressively address the areas of crime and public safety, education and positive youth development, environment and public health, family and community welfare, housing and economic development, tax reform and intergovernmental relations, and unfunded mandates.

NJUMA is a proactive organization that pursues opportunities from the government and the private sector to advance the interests of members. We are consistently exploring opportunities that will strengthen our communities and, ultimately, the state of New Jersey.

EDITORS' NOTE

We're honored to present the Fall 2025 edition of the Urban Mayors Press.

Over the years, we've had the privilege of working alongside many of you, and we remain deeply committed to supporting your municipalities with timely and impactful resources.

In this issue, we spotlight the vital contributions of members of the New Jersey Urban Mayors Association (NJUMA) and share tools and insights designed to benefit municipalities across the state.

A heartfelt thank you to our contributors—your continued support makes this publication possible.

The Urban Mayors Press is edited and distributed by the John S. Watson Institute for Urban Policy and Research at Kean University.

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Table of**contents**

urban mayors press

04 The President's Corner

05 Affirming Local Leadership in Public Health Equity - City of Plainfield

06 From where I stood to Where They Can Go - City of Roselle

07 Meet our Youth Ambassadors for the Newark, NJ Civilian Complaint Review Board (CCRB)

08 The Newark Land Bank

09 Federal Expansion and Regulatory Updates Open New Doors for New Jersey Development

10 Transforming Urban Landscapes: EPA's Brownfields Funding Opportunities in New Jersey

11 The City of Elizabeth is Growing Greener Every Day

12 Strengthening the Safety Net: Willingboro and The Beloved Project Deliver Social Services with Impact

13 Garden State C-PACE: A Game Changer for New Jersey's Urban Revitalization

14 Just Say No and Skip the Stuff

15 Restoring the Trust Fund Builds Stronger Communities

16 A Capital Call to Action

17 The Cognitive Cost of a Digital-Only Future

18 Why AI Literacy Matters for Mayors and City Leaders

19 Why Abbot Pre-school Matters

20 Urban Policing Strategies: A Critical Comparison

21 One Year After Launch, NJ Cannabis Training Academy Serves as a National Model

22 Set Her Free: Breaking the Cycle of Violence and Incarceration

23 Family Courts, Equal Protection, and the Erasure of Black Fatherhood

24 It Takes a Village

25 Rolling Out the Red Carpet How NJ Urban Centers Can Attract Film and TV Productions

26 Climate Ready NJ Partners Prepare Your Economy And Workforce For The Present And Future

27 KUBS Corner

28 NJUMA - Policy Corner

29 NJUMA Events At NJLM Conference- Save The Date

NEW JERSEY URBAN MAYORS ASSOCIATION



The Honorable Adrian O. Mapp | President & Chair
MAYOR, CITY OF PLAINFIELD

The PRESIDENT'S CORNER

This fall, as we turn the page on summer, I am reminded once again of the incredible resilience of our communities. In Plainfield, we recently faced a series of destructive storms that tested not only our infrastructure but also our collective spirit. Homes flooded, businesses were disrupted, and lives were upended. Still, what stood out afterward was not the destruction but the determination.

Neighbors came together, volunteers stepped up, and local leaders worked tirelessly to mobilize resources. That is the story of Plainfield, but it is also the story of every urban city... when adversity hits, we rise together.

Urban centers across New Jersey and beyond know this truth well. We are often on the frontlines of the greatest challenges of our time, whether it be climate change, economic shifts, or social inequities. But we are also engines of resilience and innovation. We do not shrink back in the face of obstacles; instead, we adapt, we rebuild, and we find ways to emerge stronger than before. The storms that hit Plainfield are but one example of how urban mayors and their communities lead with both urgency and compassion.

In the midst of recovery, we also celebrated progress. This August, we cut the ribbon on the Rushmore Recreational Aquatics Complex, home to one of the largest splash pads in New Jersey, a full competition-size pool, and modern locker rooms, restrooms, and concessionary. This state-of-the-art facility is more than a recreational space; it is a symbol of equity, investment, and opportunity. Located in our Fourth Ward, the Rushmore Complex reflects our commitment to ensuring that every child, every family, and every resident has access to safe, modern, and inclusive spaces that uplift both body and spirit.

For Plainfield, this ribbon cutting wasn't just about opening a pool; it was about opening possibilities. It was about demonstrating that even as we face adversity and recover from storms, we never lose sight of building a future where quality of life is a right, not a privilege. For our urban areas, it's a reminder that progress doesn't stop in the face of hardship. In fact, progress becomes even more urgent when our communities need hope and renewal the most.

As urban mayors, we must continue to embody this dual mission: to respond decisively to crises that arise and to invest boldly in transformative projects that will shape the future of our cities. Whether through infrastructure, housing, recreation, or education, we have the responsibility, and the privilege, to lead our communities into a new era of growth and resilience.

Let us carry forward the lessons of this year... that storms will come, but they cannot erode the foundation of unity and progress upon which our cities are built.



In Solidarity

Adrian O. Mapp

President, New Jersey Urban Mayors Association
Mayor, City of Plainfield

Affirming Local Leadership in Public Health Equity

How Plainfield is protecting trust, science, and fairness in the face of misinformation

By Shep Brown, Director, Department of Health and Social Services, City of Plainfield



Shep Brown, Director, Department of Health and Social Services, City of Plainfield

In Plainfield, public health isn't an abstract debate. It is a matter of daily life and sometimes survival. We see it in neighborhoods where chronic disease is common, in families who delay care because of cost, and in seniors who still remember being treated unfairly by a system that claimed to help them.

That is why words at the national level matter. When rhetoric suggests that patients should be treated differently by race, echoing myths such as the false belief that Black patients feel less pain, it doesn't just ignore science. It deepens mistrust, especially in communities already carrying the heaviest burdens.

Silence is not an option when misinformation can cost lives.

This summer, Mayor Adrian O. Mapp and his administration, through my department, introduced a resolution affirming Plainfield's commitment to truth and equity in health leadership. The City Council passed it, placing our city on record against misinformation and for evidence-based care.

The resolution is grounded in three commitments: that health policy must be based on facts rather than stereotypes; that every resident deserves equal access to reliable care and information; and that local leaders have a duty to speak out when public trust is under attack.

These are not just words. Plainfield has shown what they mean in practice.

When COVID-19 testing and vaccinations were scarce, we set up mobile sites in neighborhoods, giving thousands of residents without cars access to care. Each June, City Hall glows red for Global Sickle Cell Awareness Day, reminding families that their struggles are visible and urgent. At our House Music for a Cause festival, more than 12,000 people gather for culture and connection. Men line up for free prostate cancer screenings, confronting one of the starkest health inequities Black men face. Through WIC, senior outreach, social services, and even the arts at the Plainfield Performing Arts Center, we link health equity to services residents already depend on. Culture itself becomes a vehicle for health and justice. These efforts build something fragile but powerful: trust. Parents feel safer bringing children to vaccination clinics. Seniors listen more closely to doctors. Families start to believe the health system can work for them, not against them.

This is not about partisanship. It is about protecting communities and making sure the truth is louder than rumor. Local governments cannot set national health policy, but we can set the tone and stand as reliable messengers when misinformation spreads.

Plainfield has already made that commitment. And if Washington will not defend our communities with truth, then cities like Plainfield must.



Honorable Donald Shaw, Mayor, City of Roselle

From Where I stood to Where They Can Go

Empowering the Next Generation in Roselle

By Honorable Donald Shaw, Mayor, City of Roselle

Growing up in Queens, NY, I didn't have many opportunities to explore different careers or see what my future could look like. Like so many kids, I had dreams — but no clear path to get there. That's why, as Mayor of Roselle, one of my deepest commitments is to make sure our youth today have more exposure, more support, and more chances to grow than I did at their age.

This year, that commitment came to life in powerful ways.

We launched the **Junior Firefighter Academy,** where kids aged 12 to 14 didn't just hear about firefighting — they suited up, learned how to use real equipment, and experienced what it means to protect their community.

In our **Junior Police Academy,** students went beyond the badge. They learned discipline, leadership, and how to conduct motor vehicle stops and crime scene investigations — all while gaining a deeper understanding of the role police play in keeping Roselle safe.

Through **Web Design for Teens,** over 20 students got hands-on training in building websites, working with real businesses, and learning skills that could lead to careers in tech. That's a world I never imagined entering as a teen — and now, our youth are already stepping into it.

We also launched our first-ever **Borough Summer Internship Program**, giving 9 high schoolers their first job experience in local government. Whether working in the health department or municipal court, these interns got a front-row seat to how our Borough runs.

And lastly, our **Clean Communities Team** kept Roselle looking its best — with students taking pride in beautifying parks, streets, and downtown. It's more than a summer job — it's a lesson in ownership and community.

These programs are just the beginning. I want every young person in Roselle to know: your zip code doesn't limit your future. We're building pathways, opening doors, and showing you what's possible — because I've been where you are. And I believe in where you can go.

— Mayor Donald Shaw

Meet our Youth Ambassadors for the Newark, NJ Civilian Complaint Review Board (CCRB)

By: R.H. Robinson III, Manager , Newark, NJ CCRB



Rashanna James-Frison
CCRB Commissioner / Youth Ambassador
Newark, New Jersey Civilian Complaint Board (CCRB)



Alyna Devillafuerte
CCRB Commissioner / Youth Ambassador
Newark, New Jersey Civilian Complaint Board (CCRB)

Thanks to Newark, NJ Mayor, Ras J. Baraka, the Newark, NJ CCRB has embarked on another historic measure by appointing two high school students to the CCRB as Board Members or Commissioners.

These two unprecedented mayoral appointments are the result of a January 2024 Newark City Council passing of an ordinance for 16-17-year-olds to be allowed to vote in school board elections. In addition, this effort creates an opportunity to form a "make sense" partnership with the Newark Board of Education in seeking two high school students every year to serve the one-year term obligation. The genius here is having our Youth Ambassadors speak with their high school peers about de-escalation practices, all while setting examples of being responsible young men/women in society. The other caveat here is that they get to work with Law Enforcement Officials, Lawyers, Educators, Community Activists, and other Governmental Leaders in our jurisdiction, which will ultimately serve as a prerequisite in shaping a bright future for them.

The Newark, NJ CCRB Youth Ambassadors are pictured in this piece.

Please meet Commissioner Rashanna James-Frison (17 years old) and Commissioner Alyna Devillafuerte (16 years old), who both served with distinction and with purpose. Commissioner James-Frison has already authored a book and entered her freshman year at Lincoln University initially as a first-year student, but has been thrust into her junior year because of her previous academic accomplishments and the numerous scholarships she received to justify her prestigious student classification. Commissioner Devillafuerte recently spearheaded a conversation at the July 14, 2025, Kean University's John S. Watson's Institute for Urban Policy & Research's Public Safety Forum for Youths and proved to be an effective speaker, representing the Newark, NJ CCRB. Her delivery & engagement with the young audience was not only persuasive, but she also demanded that they step up and become positive change makers in their respective communities.

Lastly, we are awfully proud of our Newark, NJ CCRB Commissioners, who served as Youth Ambassadors, and we look forward to the next incoming mayoral appointments by Newark, NJ Mayor, Ras J. Baraka.

The Newark Land Bank

By: Marcus T. Randolph, Invest Newark, President and CEO, The Newark Land Bank}

I was just in Detroit, Michigan, for the Center for Community Progress National Land Bank Summit, where our team was asked to present. The scale of the vacant and abandoned property there was different from that here in Newark, but the strategies of working with a Land Bank were similarly at work.

What was further interesting was that when Mayor Ras J. Baraka was exploring Land Banks and spearheading the idea that Newark needed this unique economic development tool, team members from the Detroit Land Bank Authority came to Newark to share about their work and provide guidance. Going to the National Land Bank Summit and having our team share best practices with Detroit and a national audience felt full circle.
At Invest Newark, our team is charged to propel the City's strong and diverse economy, build vibrant communities, and create opportunities for all Newarkers. One of the tools in our toolkit to drive change is the Newark Land Bank.

The Newark Land Bank is a division of Invest Newark. It was established by the State of New Jersey, enabling legislation P.L. 2019, c 159, and City of Newark Municipal Ordinance 6PSF-g adopted on October 16, 2019. The Newark Land Bank strategically acquires, maintains, and repurposes vacant, abandoned, and foreclosed properties, and efficiently returns them to productive use. Specifically, it was created to boost homeownership, reduce blight, create affordable and market-rate housing, and increase M/W/DBE developer or subcontractor capacity. We utilize a variety of sales programs to make homeownership and land purchases accessible to all Newark residents.

Thanks to funding from The Prudential Foundation, Invest Newark has had the opportunity to have support from a unique organization, the Center for Community Progress, as we solve questions like: how to form a Community Advisory Board for the Land Bank, how do we sift through applications efficiently and set criteria for Land Bank purchasers, and how do we work effectively with the city.

A pride point for the Newark Land Bank is our Housing Choice Voucher Conversion program. Mayor Baraka has encouraged the expansion of this innovative program that turns voucher recipients into homeowners. Due to the unique nature of this program on a national scale, the Center for Community Progress recently highlighted this work in a case study titled Creating Homeownership Opportunities in Newark through Housing Choice Vouchers, " which was published in December 2024. I encourage everyone in the broader Urban Mayor's community to access the full study at communityprogress.org/publications/new-jersey-hcv-homeownership.

A brief excerpt highlighting key features of this program is below:

HCVs can also be used to create homeownership opportunities for first-time homeowners, though this provision of the program is grossly underutilized. All housing authorities have the ability to create a homeownership conversion program using HCVs, though not all do. When a HCV is being applied to a mortgage, HUD pays the lender directly the amount of the voucher.

Newark's success with creating new homeownership opportunities proves that when communities collaborate to innovate, dreams can become a reality.



Apartment in Brookdale Ave., Newark



Apartment in Brookdale Ave., Newark - Kitchen



Apartment in Brookdale Ave., Newark - Bedding



Jeffrey Monge, Managing Partner, Monge Capital

Federal Expansion and Regulatory Updates Open New Doors for New Jersey Development

By Jeffrey Monge, Managing Partner, Monge Capital

This fall brings multiple windows of opportunity for New Jersey communities: the anticipated $10 billion federal allocation for New Markets Tax Credits (NMTCs) and recently proposed amendments to the state's Low-Income Housing Tax Credit (LIHTC) Qualified Allocation Plan (QAP)—together, a powerful backdrop for leveraging the NJEDA's Aspire and Café programs.

A Surge in Federal Investment

With $10 billion expected to flow through the NMTC program this fall, mission-driven nonprofits and developers in New Jersey stand to access significant capital enhancements, especially for community-serving projects like health centers, workforce hubs, and cultural institutions. Likewise, LIHTC continues to be the cornerstone of affordable housing financing, generating equity to reduce development costs and maintain long-term affordability.

New Jersey's Strategic Financing Tools

State-level programs like NJEDA's Aspire and Café are critical to filling financing gaps and ensuring project viability:

- LIHTC + Aspire: Affordable housing developers can combine LIHTC equity with Aspire subsidies to bridge funding shortfalls, particularly in transit-rich or high-cost urban markets.
- NMTC + Café: Nonprofits utilizing NMTC financing for community facilities can further enhance sustainability and reduce debt burdens using Café support.

The Added Value of QAP Amendments

In July 2025, the New Jersey Housing and Mortgage Finance Agency (NJHMFA) released proposed amendments to the LIHTC Qualified Allocation Plan. Key updates include:

- Expanding redevelopment eligibility by removing the restriction that, in non-smart-growth areas, a majority of the property must have contained prior structures—thus unlocking more land for affordable housing projects.
- Adding new scoring incentives, such as points for proximity to institutions of higher education and mandatory criteria like the provision of free high-speed internet in all units.

These enhancements, still subject to comments, could significantly bolster LIHTC applications, improving competitiveness and aligning well with strategic layers of funding like Aspire and structured NMTCs.

How These Elements Work Together

This convergence - federal NMTC expansion, a more flexible QAP, existing LIHTC strength, and robust state programs - creates an unprecedented financing ecosystem for community investment in New Jersey. The blend of these tools can:

- Strengthen project feasibility by maximizing subsidy and reducing reliance on high-cost debt.
- Enable broader geographic and demographic reach, from newly eligible sites to projects near universities and those serving underserved populations.
- Empower municipalities and developers to deliver affordable housing and community assets that are both economically and socially sustainable.

A Call to Action for Local Leaders

By leveraging the NMTC allocation, capitalizing on LIHTC QAP enhancements, and layering in Aspire and Café support, New Jersey can reinforce its role as a national leader in equitable urban development.

At Monge Capital, an MBE capital and real estate advisory firm located in Newark, we recognize the importance of timing and strategy. As these opportunities align, the challenge—and promise—lies in local stakeholders seizing this moment to craft compelling, integrated project proposals. To learn more about how we may be able to help capitalize projects, please email us at projects@mongecapital.com.

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Transforming Urban Landscapes: EPA's Brownfields Funding Opportunities in New Jersey

By Ricardo Berrios-Perez, Project Officer, EPA's Brownfield Program



Transforming Urban Landscapes_After Redevelopment_Berry Lane Park



Transforming Urban Landscapes_Concept Map Redevelopment_Berry Lane Park

New Jersey's urban areas have long been symbols of resilience and opportunity, yet they often face environmental challenges that can hinder their development and could impact their communities. These areas, once thriving centers of commerce and industry, now stand as barriers to growth, and one of the most significant obstacles is the presence of brownfields — properties where redevelopment is complicated by the presence of urban blight and pollution.

Understanding Brownfields and EPA's Brownfields Program

Brownfields are typically former industrial or commercial sites, such as factories, gas stations, and dry cleaners, where redevelopment is complicated by contamination due to their past function. These sites can pose health risks to nearby communities. However, when properly assessed and revitalized, brownfields can be transformed into valuable assets, such as parks, housing, or new businesses, thus boosting local economies and improving community well-being. Our program provides financial assistance through grants and technical support to promote the redevelopment of these sites.



Transforming Urban Landscapes_Before Redevelopment_Berry Lane Park

Types of Competitive Funding Available:

- **Assessment Grants:** These help communities evaluate the environmental condition of brownfield sites and plan for their cleanup and redevelopment. They are crucial for understanding the scope of contamination and developing strategic plans to address it.
- **Cleanup Grants:** Once a site is assessed, cleanup grants provide the necessary funds to remove or remediate hazardous substances, paving the way for safe redevelopment.
- **Multipurpose Grants:** These grants combine the capabilities of the aforementioned grants.
- **Environmental Workforce Development and Job Training Grants:** These focus on training residents in skills needed for environmental cleanups and job opportunities, and fostering economic growth.

Types of Non-Competitive Funding Available:

- **Section 128(a) Funding:** Our State and Tribal Response Program Funds, or more commonly referred to as Section 128(a) funding, empowers states, Tribal Nations, territories, and communities to build strong partnerships and local capacity to assess, safely clean up, and sustainably reuse brownfields.

Technical Assistance Programs

- **Land Revitalization Program:** This program helps determine which types of brownfield site reuses are feasible, given local conditions (e.g., economic, infrastructure, social, and environmental conditions), infrastructure availability, community site design preferences, and funding or financing resources.
- **Technical Assistance to Brownfields Program (TAB):** Our TAB provider, New Jersey Institute of Technology (NJIT) will assist communities with their brownfields projects and brownfields grant applications.
- **Targeted Brownfield Assistance Program (TBA): Supplements other efforts under the Brownfields Program and aids at no cost to communities, such as site assessments, cleanups, cost estimates, and community outreach.**

Success Story in New Jersey:

Berry Lane Park, Jersey City, NJ

A 17+ acres of former railyards, lined with auto repair shops and warehouses, that were later redeveloped into the largest municipally owned park in Jersey City by using $800 multipurpose grant in 2019, a $400k cleanup grant in 2016, and another $500k in 2020.

Inspiring Future Change

This journey from contamination to revitalization offers a compelling narrative of possibility - EPA's Brownfields Program is more than just an environmental initiative; it is a pathway to social and economic rejuvenation. So, be on the lookout for our upcoming FY26 Notice of Funding Opportunities this Fall, where we'll announce the updated guidelines for our new wave of funding opportunities.

For more information on current and upcoming opportunities, you can contact our Outreach Coordinator, Yocasta Dejesus, at Dejesus.Yocasta@epa.gov

> **Within five years, you'll get the same oxygen production and carbon sequestration that a forest that's 50 years or older is producing.**
>
> John Evangelisata,
> Executive Director,
> Ground work Elizabeth



City of Elizabeth - 40 by 50 foot plot micro forest



City of Elizabeth Youth fieldtrip



City of Elizabeth -
Members of Groundwork Elizabeth

The City of Elizabeth is Growing Greener Every Day

By: Janay Martinez, Public Information Office, City of Elizabeth

The City of Elizabeth continues to prioritize sustainability, community health, and access to natural resources. Through **Groundwork Elizabeth,** one of our most impactful programs, we are advancing climate resilience, urban agriculture, water management, and youth development.

This year, Groundwork Elizabeth planted five Micro Forests throughout the city, including the first in New Jersey behind the Elmora Library. The 45-by-40-foot plot features 260 native plants and demonstrates how small forests can provide the same benefits as larger ones: reducing neighborhood heat, collecting stormwater, and improving air quality. As Executive Director, John Evangelista explained, **"Within five years, you'll get the same oxygen production and carbon sequestration that a forest that's 50 years or older is producing."**

In addition to the Micro Forest, Elizabeth now has a 50-bed community garden at the Housing Authority, gardens at every elementary school and senior center, and a Micro Farm behind the Elmora Library with another 50-bed community garden.

The Micro Farm also hosts the Micro Farm Adventures: Planting the Seeds for Healthier Eating program, which brings gardening and nutrition education to more than 2,800 Elizabeth students each year through school field trips, after-school programs, and summer activities. Students have the opportunity to garden, harvest, taste fresh produce, and donate food to local pantries — learning both healthy habits and environmental stewardship.

Thanks to Groundwork Elizabeth, our community is planting the seeds of a greener, healthier, and a more sustainable future.



Strengthening the Safety Net. Claudine Archer, Founder of the Beloved Project, and volunteers sharing information at a community event



Strengthening the Safety Net: Willingboro and The Beloved Project Deliver Social Services with Impact

By Honorable Samantha E. Whitfield, Mayor of Willingboro Township, NJ

Across New Jersey's urban centers, mayors share the same challenge: ensuring our residents' most basic needs are met. Hunger, housing insecurity, and the absence of essential supplies can quickly unravel families and neighborhoods. At the same time, federal cuts to social service programs have left municipalities with fewer resources to meet growing demand. Municipal governments cannot shoulder these burdens alone. Strategic partnerships with trusted community organizations are essential to closing service gaps and restoring dignity. In Willingboro Township, we recently launched such a partnership through a social services contract with The Beloved Project, a grassroots initiative dedicated to supporting unhoused and underserved residents.

Founded by Claudine Archer, The Beloved Project began with a simple mission rooted in compassion: to provide essential items and resources to people in need. Over the years, it has grown into a trusted regional partner, working with the Food Bank of New Jersey, homeless shelters, motels, and police stations to distribute hygiene products, food, and other critical supplies. Built on the generosity of donors and the dedication of volunteers, The Beloved Project shows what can happen when passion and purpose meet community need.

This year, Willingboro formalized a partnership with The Beloved Project that expands our ability to serve residents facing economic hardship. Through this collaboration, residents can now access a wide range of supports:

- Financial Assistance for emergency housing, eviction prevention, and utility support.
- Referral Services connecting individuals to addiction treatment and mental health care.
- Reentry Support to assist formerly incarcerated residents transitioning back into the community.
- Essential Supplies Distribution of food, hygiene products, and household necessities.
- Community Service Hours opportunities for youth to build responsibility and civic engagement.
- Veteran Outreach offering targeted services to those who have served our country but now face hardship.

To strengthen accessibility, a Beloved Project Community Service Liaison will be stationed at the JFK Recreation Center, with extended services available at their Beverly-Rancocas Road office.





Strengthening the Safety Net Beloved Project volunteers prepare for food and supplies distribution

Beyond immediate aid, the partnership emphasizes education and empowerment. Quarterly informational sessions at the JFK Center will connect residents to homeownership programs and adult education opportunities. At the Senior Center, monthly outreach sessions will provide resources on estate planning, pain management, and living wills, equipping our elders with knowledge that strengthens families and futures.

Claudine Archer, Founder and CEO of The Beloved Project, expressed gratitude and a shared vision: ***"This partnership affirms our mission to uplift individuals and families by providing resources, guidance, and support. Together with the township, we can strengthen the safety net for our most vulnerable neighbors while creating pathways toward independence."***

For urban mayors across the state, the lesson is clear: partnerships like these extend municipal capacity, deepen community trust, and deliver sustainable service at a time when federal resources are shrinking. Together, municipalities and grassroots organizations can create a safety net strong enough to catch those most at risk.

Willingboro is proud to lead with compassion and collaboration. As we continue to expand possibilities for our residents, we hope this partnership serves as a model for others. When local government and community organizations work side by side, we not only meet immediate needs, but we also build resilient communities prepared to thrive.



NJPACE

NewJerseyPACE.org

Garden State C-PACE: A Game Changer for New Jersey's Urban Revitalization

By Jonathan Cloud, Executive Director, NJPACE

In every downtown that has endured the storms of the past decade—both literal and economic—there is now a quiet record of deferred maintenance: aging roofs, drafty windows, boilers older than a generation. This year, New Jersey turns that liability into an asset with the statewide launch of the Garden State C-PACE Program, the Commercial Property Assessed Clean Energy program administered by the NJ Economic Development Authority (NJEDA). For the 37 cities that are part of the NJ Urban Mayors Association, C-PACE is more than just a financing tool; it's a regenerative solution: transforming energy liabilities into equity, vacancies into vibrancy, and carbon into community wealth.

The New Jersey C-PACE Program is now officially live and accepting project applications, marking a significant milestone for New Jersey's urban communities. This innovative program provides long-term, low-cost financing for essential upgrades that boost energy efficiency, incorporate renewable energy sources, and enhance climate resilience in commercial, industrial, and multi-family properties (with five or more units). Our team at NJPACE played a key role in bringing this proven financing tool to New Jersey, and we are prepared to help your municipality maximize its benefits.

C-PACE financing has a unique structure: it is repaid through a special assessment on the property tax bill, making it ideal for urban redevelopment, adaptive reuse projects, and critical infrastructure resilience initiatives. New Jersey joins over 38 other states and Washington, D.C. in using this successful model.

For municipalities, the program provides a clear path to participation. Local governments can voluntarily participate in the program by passing an ordinance and signing a program agreement with the NJEDA.

Beyond clean energy, C-PACE is a powerful tool for urban economic development. It unlocks private capital for essential building upgrades that reduce operating costs for businesses and property owners. These projects directly create local jobs, improve overall building health and safety, and significantly contribute to long-term community resilience. In areas that need investment, C-PACE can serve as a catalyst, spurring investment in vacant or underutilized buildings. For property owners, it provides a flexible, non-recourse alternative to traditional loans, addressing a critical need for capital in urban centers.

Your participation as an urban mayor is essential to ensuring that businesses, building owners, and nonprofit institutions in your community can access this vital financing. We strongly urge all New Jersey municipalities to opt into the program now.

NJPACE is available to help your city, town, or village. Our mission is to promote sustainable, inclusive growth while advancing New Jersey's clean energy and climate goals.

To learn more about how C-PACE can benefit your community, visit **NJPACE.org** and contact us directly at **info@njpace.org**. We are ready to meet with you and help unlock your city's potential.

Just Say NO and Skip the Stuff!

CLICK TO WATCH

By JoAnn Gemenden | Executive Director, NJ Clean Communities Council

This summer, the New Jersey Clean Communities Council (NJCCC) is on a mission to inspire all New Jerseyans to join the statewide Skip the Stuff movement.

The new outreach campaign focuses on eliminating excess waste – and keeping litter off the streets.

Takeout orders at local businesses commonly include plastic utensils, condiment packets, and napkins that often go unused, thrown away, or end up as litter. The statistics are grim. Americans dispose of about 40 billion single-use plastic utensils each year.

To tackle these alarming figures, NJCCC is spearheading a statewide outreach effort aimed at changing behaviors. To kick off the campaign, local radio broadcasters featured Skip the Stuff radio ads across New Jersey.

The next strategic step is to leverage our partnership with municipalities and counties to amplify this message. The goal is for us all to teach local businesses to embrace sustainable practices and save money at the same time.

We can all benefit! Skip the Stuff will make it easier for restaurants and other businesses in your community to Go Green and Save Green.
This shift is both an environmental and economic win:

- **Restaurants save money.**
- **Customers create less waste.**
- **Our landfills, waterways, and environment benefit.**

As a statewide nonprofit organization that's been tackling litter for nearly 40 years, promoting environmental change is not new – it's what we do.

NJCCC was entrusted to lead the charge in educating the public about New Jersey's single-use plastics law. Despite the initial struggle in educating consumers, this law is instrumental in changing the litter landscape in our state forever. Since May 4, 2022, when the law was signed, more than 24 billion plastic bags have been kept out of our waterways, parks, and neighborhoods.

Other successes include:

- NJCCC oversees the distribution of $27.4 million in clean communities grants to local governments for litter abatement, education, and enforcement.
- NJCCC launched the statewide Reusable Bag Resource Center - an easy online tool at LitterFreeNJ.com that helps New Jerseyans donate clean, reusable bags to those in need;



Restoring the Trust Fund Builds Stronger Communities

By: Staci Berger, President and CEO, Housing and Community Development Network of NJ [Restoring the Trust Fund Builds Stronger Communities

Back in May, a Rutgers-Eagleton poll found that a strong majority of New Jersey residents expressed concern over housing affordability. 63 percent of the poll respondents felt that the Affordable Housing Trust Fund (AHTF) should be used for its original intended purpose, the development and rehabilitation of affordable homes. Despite the growing alarms over housing affordability in NJ, the Governor and Legislature adopted a new budget that diverted over $125 million from the AHTF – a key source for nonprofit developers to build affordable homes – leaving just $5 million for new projects. Nonprofits like Habitat for Humanity saw construction grind to a halt, and the NJ Department of Community Affairs closed its application portal.

The Housing and Community Development Network of NJ (the Network) mobilized quickly. More than 1,300 residents emailed legislators demanding the AHTF be restored. We were able to secure a partial victory: $35 million was reinstated, plus $10 million for Habitat affiliates. It was a remarkable turnaround, but still less than half of what was taken.

Defunding the AHTF is unacceptable when New Jersey faces one of the nation's worst affordability crises. Renters must earn nearly $40 an hour to afford a modest two-bedroom, while the average renter earns just $23.97. Foreclosures still plague our state more than most of the country. Families are being priced out, and communities risk losing stability without sustained investment in affordable homes.

Fortunately, solutions are already on the table. Senator Benjie Wimberly (D-Bergen/Passaic) and Assemblywoman Verlina Reynolds-Jackson (D-Mercer) sponsored legislation dedicating at least half of the new "Mansion Tax" revenue to the Trust Fund, creating a sustainable source of funding for affordable homes. Sen. Britnee Timberlake (D-Essex) has also introduced legislation to restore the full $125 million back into the AHTF. As Sen. Timberlake said, "Affordable housing doesn't materialize on good intentions alone; it demands consistent, deliberate funding."

Investing in the AHTF is not just the right thing to do; it's smart economic policy. Since 2019, nonprofit developers have generated $2.45 billion in economic activity, built nearly 5,000 homes, and created more than 12,500 jobs, much of it supported by AHTF funding. These investments revitalize neighborhoods, support local businesses, and strengthen municipal economies.

That's why we're urging local officials to lead on this issue. Support for restoring the Affordable Housing Trust Fund can help restart stalled projects, strengthen local tax bases, and keep families in the communities they call home. Together, we can make sure New Jersey's affordable homes get built—not promised and postponed, but delivered where they are needed most.

Staci Berger
President and CEO
Housing and Community Development Network of NJ

A Capital Call to Action

by G. Lamont Blackstone, Principal, G.L. Blackstone & Associates LLC

While New Jersey communities may face economic devastation from the Trump mega-bill's budget cuts enacted in July 2025, there is one potential glimmer peaking from the darkness. It involves revised possibilities for economic development.

Hence, the state's next governor will have a pressing decision to make regarding which communities will be prioritized for tax-incentivized equity capital investments. This involves the federal **Opportunity Zone (OZ) program** that was originally enacted during Trump's first term. The good news here is that the new legislation has made the OZ income tax incentive permanent—although with significant revisions.

That means some NJ communities will have a long-term horizon for attracting equity capital from the nation's wealthiest households. And that could be risk capital to finance real estate development and business creation in lower-income census tracts.

New Jersey leads the nation with the highest number of millionaires per capita. Neighboring New York ranks high in the number of billionaires. Those are pools of investors who could be attracted to communities by the program's provisions for the deferral and reduction of capital gain taxes. More significantly, the tax regime provides uncapped favorable treatment of real estate and other investments in lower-income and high-poverty census tracts. That is provided they are held for at least ten years.

However, under the new legislation, census tracts that are deemed "rural" will be significantly favored. Specifically, the OZ legislation's rural definition will give preferential treatment to low-income census tracts in municipalities with populations of less than 50,000. Another stipulation is that those municipalities cannot be contiguous to towns and cities larger than 50,000 people.

Provided that they do not fail this adjacency test, that means only about 20% of the member municipalities of NJUMA could potentially win rural OZ tract designations. That list probably includes Asbury Park, Atlantic City, Bridgeton, Millville, Neptune, Pleasantville, and Willingboro. However, other NJUMA member cities might still have one or more census tracts that can be approved under the **non-rural** provisions.

So, the next governor must finalize the census tract selection process by July 1, 2026. Additionally, only 25% of the qualifying census tracts, whether rural or non-rural, can be approved for OZ designations. Thus, municipalities that meet the statutory metrics should prepare to bolster their designation chances. And they should rush to do that in the coming months.

This could entail identifying potential development sites, completing rezoning efforts, targeting infrastructure priorities, and other related tasks. And given the more restrictive qualifying criteria, New Jersey will see a reduction in the number of potential OZ census tracts. Economic Innovation Group, a think tank whose research sparked the original OZ proposal, estimates that NJ will experience a 23% decrease in OZ-qualified tracts.

Thus, mayors should begin planning now. And given New Jersey's status as the most densely populated state in the union, they should be prepared to comment on the Treasury Department's forthcoming OZ regulations—lest they find the Garden State is unfairly disadvantaged by federal interpretations of what can be deemed rural.



G. Lamont Blackstone
Principal, G L Blackstone & Associates

G. Lamont Blackstone is a commercial real estate consultant who has structured and administered public-private development partnerships nationwide, including in NYC, Philadelphia, and San Diego. The author is also a guest columnist for Commercial Observer, a real estate magazine, where he writes on diversity and human capital issues. He can be reached at urbancorerealty@aol.com.



EDITORIAL

The Cognitive Cost of a Digital-Only Future

By Carlita Eastman I Office of ASW Verlina Reynolds-Jackson, Legislative District #15

This Article was previously published by Trenton Journal on July 7, 2025

Before we fully embrace a digital future, we must consider the impact on our cognitive development. Research shows that reading digitally can lead to lower comprehension compared to reading print materials. In New Jersey, legal notices are currently required by law to be published in print newspapers. However, Senate President Nick Scutari's bill suggests moving these notices to public entities' websites. While this shift towards digital can enhance accessibility—offering features like translation and audio options—it raises concerns about the long-term cognitive effects, particularly for younger generations who are increasingly drawn to digital media.

Legal notices might seem trivial, but they reflect a significant shift in how we interact with information, a shift that is also being codified into law. A meta-analysis by researchers at the University of Valencia revealed a surprising statistic: for younger readers, comprehension from physical texts can be "6 to 8 times greater" than from digital devices when the reading time is the same, say professors Cristina Vargas and Ladislao Salmerón. Although young people aren't legal notices, this is a plea for discussions that need to be had about what should and shouldn't be digital.

Sen. Andrew Zwicker (D-Middlesex) advocates for an inclusive approach, suggesting that the term "newspaper" should extend to online platforms, requiring legal notices to be shared in both print and online. His proposal takes into account the "technophobia" some older adults may experience—a demographic that should continue to access physical newspapers when possible. Older people, particularly those with dementia, may find it challenging to process visual and linguistic information quickly. Given that print media tends to enhance comprehension, it may play a crucial role in preserving cognitive function over time.

The issues extend beyond comprehension, but to media literacy too. The failures of mainstream media outlets to provide unbiased coverage on key issues have, in part, contributed to this concerning trend. In 2013, it led to 31% of adults wanting to abandon them, and with the levels of dissatisfaction Americans feel, that number is likely higher now. Young people now turn to social media platforms to consume the news. Not all social media influencers spread disinformation, but there is limited credibility and accountability online, which complicates the matter. Media literacy—critically thinking through information and discerning fact from fiction—has become deeply important for our brains and overall development.

Access to legal notices is especially important for people with disabilities, where digital platforms can significantly improve accessibility. On the other hand, people in rural areas can face inconsistent internet connectivity, where print media might be more accessible. Those realities don't change the conversations that need to be had surrounding digital media. Those are systemic issues within a society that has historically neglected the needs of disabled or low-income people, rather than an inherent flaw in print or digital media.

This is less a critique of the current state of digital and print media and more a call to action to have conversations about when media should be digital and when it shouldn't, or to find a middle ground between the two. Now that lawmakers are making these decisions, it is imperative to strike a balance between accessibility and the long-term implications for cognitive health.

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Dee C. Marshall, CEO of AI Training Plus

Why AI Literacy Matters for Mayors and City Leaders

By: Dee C. Marshall is CEO of AI Training Plus (formerly Diverse & Engaged)

> **"AI won't replace people, but people who are AI-literate and fluent will replace those who are not"**

In Fall 2025, cities across the country are at a turning point. Artificial intelligence is no longer futuristic—it is here, shaping how we live, work, and learn. And yet, many city leaders still view AI as something for the private sector, for technologists, or for IT departments. The truth is that AI literacy is not just a business issue. It is a leadership issue for every mayor, every municipality, and every community.

The Problem

Most mayors are not yet connecting AI to their workforce challenges. They see staffing shortages, inefficiencies, and burnout as problems of budget and headcount, not as issues where AI can help. Municipal staff are being asked to do more with less, yet few are being trained in the tools that could make their work more efficient and less overwhelming. Even more pressing is what's happening in our schools. K–12 teachers are already behind in AI literacy. That gap is not just about classroom technology; it is about the long-term economic health of entire communities. If teachers fall behind, students fall behind. If students fall behind, they graduate unprepared for the jobs of the future. The result is communities stuck in low-wage jobs, higher unemployment, and neighborhoods more vulnerable to homelessness and crime.

The Stakes

Ignoring AI literacy creates a new kind of divide, a digital divide that will shape who has access to opportunity and who does not. The consequences are real: higher unemployment rates, reduced workforce participation, greater instability, and growing inequities across education and employment.

In 2020, the national conversation centered on diversity, equity, and inclusion as a way to ensure fair opportunities. In 2025, the equity conversation has shifted. AI literacy is the new equity issue. If cities fail to act, they risk widening inequities instead of closing them.

The Opportunity

AI literacy offers mayors a clear path forward. For municipal staff, it means greater efficiency, higher quality work, and the ability to do more with less without burning out employees. For teachers, it is a tool for catching up with higher education, preparing students for a changing workforce, and even improving retention by equipping educators with new skills and support. For communities, it is the assurance that residents will not be left behind but will be prepared for both the future of work and the demands of today.
And for mayors, investing in AI literacy strengthens workforce resilience and positions their cities as leaders in innovation, education, and economic development.

A Personal Call to Action

When I started my career on Wall Street, I was often "the only" the only Black woman, the only one who didn't have immediate access to higher education, the only one from a single-parent household. I know what it feels like to walk into spaces where others are already ahead because of the resources they've had. If I had access to AI, then it would have been the great equalizer—a tool to support my unique genius and level the playing field.

That is what AI literacy represents for cities today. Just as DEI was once about equity—ensuring people had the right resources and opportunities to thrive, AI literacy is now the great equalizer for municipalities and their communities.

The future of our cities depends not on whether AI replaces people, but on whether our people are prepared to use AI. Mayors must lead the charge by investing in AI literacy training for municipal staff, Boards of Education, and teachers. The choice is clear: build communities that are prepared for the future—or risk leaving them behind.

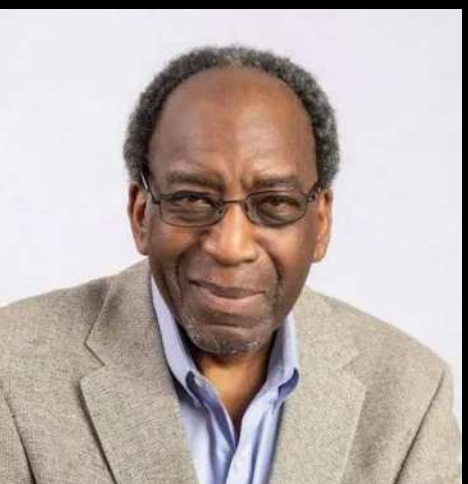
About the Author:
Dee C. Marshall is CEO of AI Training Plus, where she helps organizations and cities adopt AI with a people-first approach to workforce transformation. Recognized as a LinkedIn Top Voice in Equity and a national advocate for women and historically underrepresented groups, she serves on the Board of Directors at WBENC and on the Leadership Advisory Council for WIPP. She is a frequent advisor to corporate, community, and policy leaders on workforce transformation and equity.

Why Abbott Preschool Matters

By: Jhanae E. Wingfield , Assistant Professor of Early Childhood and Literacy Education - Rutgers University, Newark & Charles M. Payne, Henry Rutgers Distinguished Professor of African American Studies and Director of the Joseph Cornwall Center for Metropolitan Research



Jhanae E. Wingfield , Assistant Professor, Early Childhood and Literacy Education-Rutgers University- Newark



Charles M. Payne, Henry Rutgers Distinguished Professor of African American Studies and Director of the Joseph Cornwall Center for Metropolitan Research

The landmark 1985 Abbott v. Burke ruling led to one of New Jersey's boldest investments in education: the creation of Abbott Preschool. The courts required the state to fund high-quality preschool in its most under-resourced districts. What began as a court-mandated intervention has evolved into a national model for how public pre-K can help close gaps in opportunity and achievement—and how cities can strengthen their futures.

The evidence is clear. Children who attend Abbott programs enter kindergarten with stronger language, math, and social-emotional skills. Research from the National Institute for Early Education Research (NIEER) shows Abbott alums are more likely to be reading on grade level by third grade and less likely to be held back. Students who attend for two years are less likely to need special education services and more likely to graduate from high school. For cities, that means stronger local workforces, lower dropout rates, and fewer families cycling through poverty. Investing in Abbott isn't just about early learning.

The stakes are especially high in New Jersey's cities. In Union City, once written off as a struggling district, Abbott laid the groundwork for one of the nation's highest-performing urban school systems. Early investment, bilingual instruction, and seamless alignment between pre-K and K–12 have allowed Union City's students, many from immigrant and working-class families, to consistently outperform expectations. The lesson for policymakers here is, when cities invest early, long-term results follow.

Despite its success, Abbott is under threat. Critics claim it costs too much, that benefits "fade out," or that under-enrollment proves a lack of demand. These arguments miss the mark. The cost of Abbott is outweighed many times over by reduced spending on remediation, special education, and social services. Under-enrollment reflects gaps in outreach and access, which have suffered since a 2011 budget cut of 20 percent. Although funding has since been restored, New Jersey's early childhood budget has not grown proportionately.

Abbott is more than an education program; it is an economic and social engine for cities. It allows working parents to pursue employment and education with reliable childcare. It supports dual-language learners and fosters inclusive classrooms. It anchors neighborhoods by ensuring children, regardless of ZIP code, begin school on equal footing. For urban mayors and legislators, Abbott is not just about fairness; it is about economic stability, workforce readiness, and reducing long-term costs to municipal budgets. Wealthier districts fear Abbott takes resources away from them. In truth, Abbott strengthens the entire state by reducing inequality, building a skilled workforce, and making New Jersey's cities more competitive and livable.
As Abbott marks its 25th year, the challenge is not proving its value but sustaining and expanding it. That means extending access to more districts, improving compensation and training for early educators, and ensuring outreach so all families can benefit.

For urban leaders, the message is urgent: Abbott Preschool is not just a legacy to defend, it is a proven strategy to secure the future of New Jersey's children, families, and cities.

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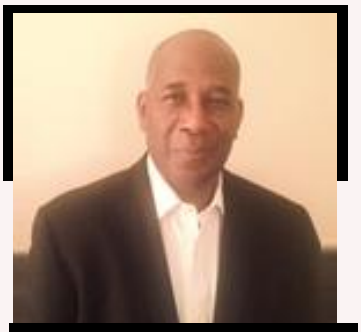
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Urban Policing Strategies: A Critical Comparison

By: Dr. Kirk D. Rhodes, M.S., J.D.



Dr. Kirk D. Rhodes, M.S., J.D.

In August 2025, President Donald Trump deployed 2,200 National Guard troops to Washington, D.C., and later sent thousands more, including Marines, to Los Angeles in response to rising urban crime. These actions triggered legal challenges and widespread criticism. The District of Columbia sued the administration, calling the deployment a "forced military occupation," while a federal judge ruled the Los Angeles deployment illegal, citing violations of the Posse Comitatus Act.

These events reignited a national debate over the role of military policing in urban areas and whether it truly enhances public safety—or undermines it.

Military Policing: Control Over Connection

Military policing is built on hierarchical command, tactical enforcement, and the use of military-grade equipment. It is designed for high-risk scenarios like terrorism or riots, not routine urban policing.

- Hierarchical command structure
- Tactical enforcement and combat-style training
- Use of armored vehicles and military-grade weapons
- Emphasis on deterrence over engagement

Public perception is often negative, especially in marginalized communities. The presence of armed troops tends to escalate tensions and erode trust.

While the White House claimed over 1,800 arrests and 188 guns seized in D.C., critics argue that such tactics violate democratic norms and fail to address the root causes of crime.

Community Policing: Partnership Over Power

Community policing focuses on collaboration, prevention, and trust-building. Officers engage with residents and work with local organizations to solve problems before they escalate.

- Foot patrols and neighborhood engagement
- Partnerships with schools and nonprofits
- Focus on long-term crime prevention
- Emphasis on trust and shared responsibility

Recent data support its effectiveness:

- Violent crime dropped by 15% and property crime by 10%
- 80% of residents report feeling safer
- 70% of residents express higher trust in police
- 73% of officers report greater job satisfaction

Despite these successes, community policing is often mischaracterized as a failure. In reality, what has failed is the widespread adoption and proper implementation of the strategy.

Urban Impact: A Strategic Crossroads

Military policing may offer short-term control, but it often leads to long-term instability and public resentment. Community policing, while slower to implement, builds lasting safety and trust.

As cities across the U.S. grapple with rising crime and political pressure, the choice of strategy will shape not just public safety—but the very fabric of democracy.

The recent deployments under President Trump serve as a cautionary tale: militarizing urban policing risks undermining the freedoms it claims to protect, while community policing offers a more sustainable and humane path forward.

One Year After Launch, NJ Cannabis Training Academy Serves as a National Model



Melanie L. Willoughby, E.D, NJBAC

By Melanie L. Willoughby, Executive Director of the New Jersey Business Action Center (NJBAC) New Jersey Department of State

When the New Jersey Business Action Center (NJBAC) launched the New Jersey Cannabis Training Academy (CTA) last October, our mission was to help communities most harmed by the war on drugs participate in the multi-billion-dollar cannabis industry.

This new cannabis industry, as one can imagine, is a heavily regulated industry. To legally own or operate a cannabis business, New Jersey requires aspiring business owners to go through challenging and time-consuming licensing procedures and approval processes, which can all be cost-prohibitive.

The CTA, supported by the New Jersey Cannabis Regulatory Commission (NJ-CRC), removes the barrier to entry into this lucrative marketplace by offering an online technical assistance and educational program that proactively supports and informs applicants as they navigate the complex licensing process for obtaining a cannabis business license, all at no cost. In total, the CTA offers 10 levels filled with 60+ learning modules of video and PowerPoint presentations, all led by more than two dozen cannabis instructors who have won cannabis licenses in New Jersey, consulted on teams who've won licenses in New Jersey or beyond, or have been working within the industry and bring specific subject matter expertise that is unmatched.
Based on responses from our CTA instructors, the services the CTA provides are valued at approximately $175,000 in consulting hours for a student who completes all 10 program levels.

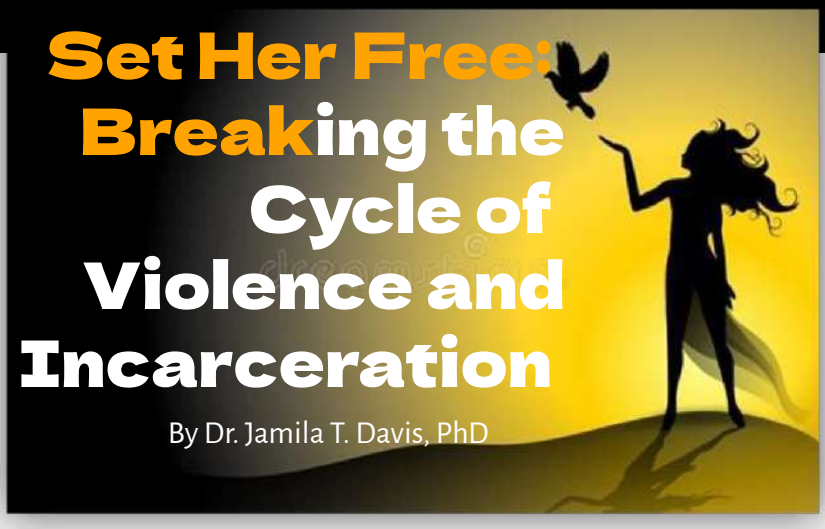
In addition to this core curriculum, the CTA recently added several training courses to help new and current cannabis business owners, and their staff, navigate the requirements of the industry's badging process as they seek to establish, or renew, their Cannabis Business ID Cards. These cards are mandatory for one to work in the industry. This additional badge training, provided at no cost, can help support more than 9,000 currently badged cannabis workers who live inside and outside the State.

The demand for CTA's no-cost services is hard to ignore. By the end of 2024, just two months after its launch, CTA enrolled nearly 900 students. That number has only increased month over month. As of August 2025, more than 1,600 students have enrolled in the CTA.

However, CTA benefits extend beyond individual businesses and underserved communities. The potential increased tax revenue for the State of New Jersey is impressive. According to NJ-CRC, September 2024 data, out of over 3,000 applications submitted, 251 cannabis businesses have generated $61 million in sales tax revenue, averaging $243,000 per license. That means that with a $1.5 million annual budget, CTA could help generate more than $23 million in sales tax revenue, providing a return on investment that is 15x the State's investment.

Moreover, pioneering such a comprehensive, learner-led program has made CTA a model for other states to follow. This past spring, NJBAC representatives traveled to Maryland to share their knowledge and expertise on creating and operating what has now become the largest government-run cannabis technical assistance program in the country. As the commercial cannabis industry continues to expand nationwide, many more states will look to New Jersey and the CTA as a blueprint for creating pathways for their own burgeoning cannabis industry.

Set Her Free: Breaking the Cycle of Violence and Incarceration



By Dr. Jamila T. Davis, PhD

I **grew up watching violence and calling it love.** By the time I became a young woman, I had learned to shrink my voice, hide my pain, and survive. That survival instinct followed me into adulthood and into decisions that landed me in a federal prison cell for close to a decade.

I wasn't incarcerated because of domestic violence, but I was shaped by it. I am a product of the trauma-to-prison pipeline, and I am not alone.

Most people think of domestic violence as bruises and broken bones. What they don't see is the courtroom. What they don't see is the prison cell. What they don't see are the women sitting in jail because they were never given a way out.

Across New Jersey, domestic violence is rising fast. In Newark, aggravated assaults climbed by 9 percent from 2023 to 2024, and roughly half of those assaults were domestic-violence related. Statewide, over 70,000 domestic violence incidents were reported to police in 2023, resulting in nearly 27,000 arrests and 57 domestic-violence-related homicides — a 46 percent increase since 2019. Girls and young women ages 16 to 24 experience the highest rates of dating and relationship violence, which means too many are learning about abuse before they even graduate high school.

And the victims are getting younger. Earlier this year, 16-year-old Kayla Spivey was shot and killed in Newark by her partner. She was a teenager with her whole life ahead of her. Her murder is a heartbreaking reminder that we cannot wait until women are in crisis to intervene. We have to start younger — teaching our girls to love themselves, to recognize the early signs of abuse, and to know that they are worthy of safety.

That is why I created I Love Me More, a trauma-informed curriculum designed to teach self-love, healthy relationships, and emotional healing to young girls. We have brought this program to East Orange Public Schools and Newark's University High School, giving girls tools to see their value and make safer choices. When we introduce trauma-informed care early — in middle school, in high school, in after-school programs — we change the trajectory before it becomes a police report or a prison sentence.

But even when we miss those early opportunities, we must not give up on women. For too many, the violence does not stop at home. It follows them into the courts and prisons. Nearly three-quarters of the women incarcerated at Edna Mahan, New Jersey's women's prison, report being abused by the person connected to the crime they are serving time for. Instead of receiving care and protection, many of these women are penalized harshly — some even receive decades-long or life sentences as first-time offenders. The system punishes them twice: once for being victims, and again for surviving.

These stories are rarely told in the media and almost never told in policy rooms. We talk about crime, but not the childhood trauma that fuels it. We talk about safety, but not the fear that keeps women silent. Set Her Free, the documentary I created, was made to change that — to uncover the truth that justice-impacted women are not just defendants. They are survivors.

But awareness is not enough. We need action, and we need it now.

The answer is trauma-informed care. This is not a buzzword. It is a shift in how we respond to harm. It means asking "What happened to her?" instead of "What's wrong with her?" It means training police, EMTs, judges, and social workers to recognize trauma and respond with compassion and strategy.

Trauma-informed care also means building survivor-centered crisis teams that can show up when a 911 call is made, connect women to safe housing, and provide mental health support right away. It means creating court diversion programs that offer counseling and treatment rather than jail time when women are charged with survival crimes.

Without trauma-informed care, we are simply recycling pain. From the home to the courtroom to the next generation, the cycle repeats. Children of incarcerated mothers are five times more likely to end up incarcerated themselves. If we want safer cities, we have to stop passing trauma down like an inheritance.

Our mayors and municipal leaders have the power to make this happen. Fund emergency shelters and transitional housing so no woman has to choose between abuse and homelessness. Support Senator Angela McKnight's bill to give incarcerated survivors a path to resentencing. Bring programs like I Love Me More into schools, recreation centers, and community spaces so we start prevention early, not after it's too late. Make trauma-informed care the standard in every city, not the exception.

I conducted the research for my doctoral dissertation at Newark's Shani Baraka Center, a place that shaped my work and changed my life. It was Mayor Ras J. Baraka who gave me that first opportunity as a justice-impacted woman to do this work and use my voice for change. Since then, I have gone on to become the inaugural Community Practitioner in Residence at Seton Hall University and a Research Fellow at the Yale School of Public Health. I have dedicated my life to turning pain into purpose, advocating for policies that break the trauma-to-prison pipeline, and creating programs that give women and girls a chance to heal and lead.

As we enter Domestic Violence Awareness Month, let this not just be a time when we put on purple. Let it be the month we decide to take action. What will you do today to change the future of your city?

When we teach our girls to love themselves, we change the future of our cities. When we heal women, we heal families. When we prevent violence, we protect our communities. When we set her free, we set all of us free. Knowing this truth, what are we waiting for? Instead of pinning on a ribbon, let's pin down real solutions — investing in housing, trauma-informed care, and prevention so no other girl's life ends like Kayla's. May she rest in peace.



Family Courts, Equal Protection

and the Erasure of Black Fatherhood

By Derrick T. Griggs, MBA, Community Advocate & Founder, Derrick T. Griggs Civic Association

Personal Story

For more than 500 days, I have been separated from my son, Ibrahim, by orders of the Monmouth County Family Court. This separation has occurred without substantiated findings of abuse, despite overwhelming evidence in my favor: a 200+ page psychological evaluation affirming my parenting capacity, a certified polygraph examination showing no deception, counseling reports confirming a secure father-son bond, and official findings of "unfounded" from the New Jersey Division of Child Protection and Permanency.

Yet, Ibrahim remains apart from me, subjected to the damaging effects of parental alienation and misinformation. Each day that passes deepens the trauma, not just for my son, but for our entire family.

My experience is not an isolated tragedy. It reflects a systemic crisis in family courts across New Jersey and the nation — one that disproportionately undermines the rights of Black fathers. Too often, custody and parenting decisions are made not on facts or evidence, but on harmful stereotypes and unchecked biases that strip fathers of their rights and children of their stability.

I share this story not only as a father fighting for his son, but also as a Black man who has lived the consequences of systemic injustice. I grew up without my father, who was killed when I was three years old. Every male figure in my family faced incarceration, and I myself was arrested as a young man. But I fought to break that cycle — graduating as valedictorian, earning degrees from Rutgers University and an MBA, and serving as CEO of a nonprofit organization in New York City. I believed that education, hard work, and service would protect me from the injustices my family endured.

Yet, even with this record, I find myself treated as though I have no right to my child — as if Black fathers are still excluded from the protections of the Constitution. This is more than a custody dispute. It is a civil rights crisis.

Family courts must be accountable to the same principles of due process and equal protection that govern every other area of law. Judicial decisions should be rooted in evidence, not bias. Black fathers should not have to prove their humanity or their right to raise their children beyond what the Constitution already guarantees.
I recently encountered a deeply powerful video that captures this broader injustice and the emotional truth of this struggle: **Return My Son Story**

The erasure of Black fatherhood is a silent epidemic. It undermines families, destabilizes communities, and perpetuates cycles of inequality. Reform is urgently needed:
- Judicial accountability for decisions that ignore evidence and perpetuate discrimination.
- Training on implicit bias for family court judges and professionals.
- Policies that affirm the fundamental right of parents — regardless of race or gender — to raise their children free from unjust interference.

My case is ongoing, but it represents a larger truth: until family courts recognize and protect the rights of Black fathers, our communities will continue to suffer. This fight is not just mine — it belongs to all who believe in justice, equality, and the future of our children.



IT TAKES A VILLAGE

By Dr. Peggy Thompson and Trinity Thompson, Kean University

Dr. Peggy Thompson

Growing up in the South, my mother attended a one classroom segregated underfunded schoolhouse for Black students. “I was pulled out of school in the 6th grade so I could help my parents till the land,” is what she told me when I was a teenager. Tilling the land, in the context of Black culture, conveys significant historical, economic, and symbolic heaviness, reflecting a complex and often disenfranchised relationship with agriculture and land ownership. Helping her parents “till the land” resulted in not completing her education beyond that grade level. While in her mid-fifties my mother finished what she started by completing her high school education and obtaining a certification to become a home health aide.

It was hard for me to fathom her having to be pulled out of school at such a young age and her words were forever etched in my heart. To honor her sacrifice, education became an important component of my life’s journey collectively as an individual and a mother. I ensured my children understood the value of learning, the privilege of higher education, the opportunities afforded in a world that expected them to fail because of the color of their skin, resulting in all of them having college degrees.

Similar in determination, character, and strength, my youngest daughter and I have navigated educational and collegial space together from the onset of her freshmen year at Kean University. We thrive as strong Black educated women because of the sacrifices my mother made for us and because Kean University is not just a University but a community that cares.

Trinity Thompson

My higher education journey began in 2020, an extremely rough period for students pursuing degrees in higher education. I was scared to begin this new chapter in my life and excited at the same time. What should have been a “typical” freshman year of acclimating and socializing became a year impacted by the extreme difficulties of COVID, yet I felt like I was a part of a community that genuinely cared about my well-being.

I was given the opportunity to work as a General Education Mentor, aiding students in academic, mental, and social success, and as a Graduate Assistant, coordinating meetings with the New Jersey Urban Mayors Association, as well as working on the Healthy Inclusive Community project. I was grateful for the opportunity to be able to give back to the Kean community that poured so graciously into my cup. My supervisors guided me through my work journey. My mother was there with me through every obstacle and ensured my academic safety and well-being. Dr. Joseph Youngblood II mentored and pushed me in the direction of obtaining my master’s degree to help prep and position me for law school.







In 2023, as I was pursuing my master’s degree, my mother was also pursuing her doctoral degree. Watching my mother in her leadership role at Kean University, her academic drive and endurance inspired me to continue with my ultimate educational dream of obtaining a Juris Doctorate. We traveled our academic roads together, inspiring, supporting, and holding each other up, graduating a week apart in May 2025.

I graduated with a master’s in forensic psychology from Kean University, and my mother graduated from Drew University with a Doctor of Ministry in Institutional Leadership with a specific focus on Black Women’s Social Justice Leadership. My grandmother and mother inspire me every single day of my life, and they are among the many reasons I continue to push myself to obtain the highest degree I can receive. I am currently studying for my LSAT and planning to go to Law School.



Photo caption: Taneshia Nash Laird, pictured at Newark Symphony Hall, where, as CEO, she helped generate millions in revenue by hosting major film and television productions.

Rolling Out the Red Carpet

How NJ Urban Centers Can Attract Film and TV Productions

By Taneshia Nash Laird, Thrive Tide Partners

New Jersey's urban centers are poised to benefit significantly from the state's robust Film and TV Tax Credit program, with up to $400 million annually now available to attract productions. As urban mayors, you have a unique opportunity to position your municipality as not just a backdrop, but a thriving hub of economic activity, job creation, and increased visibility.

During my tenure as CEO of Newark Symphony Hall and previously as executive director of the Trenton Downtown Association, I extensively leveraged film and TV opportunities. In Newark, our nonprofit earned millions by renting our facility and parking lot to productions. In Trenton, I secured the city's depiction rights in a major Hollywood film and facilitated licensing agreements with more than a dozen local businesses. Here are practical strategies to position your city for film industry success:

Establish a Clear Point of Contact

Designate who in your municipality will proactively pursue location opportunities—your Business Improvement District, a Film Office, Tourism Office, or City Hall liaison. This person must cultivate strong relationships with the New Jersey Motion Picture and Television Commission (NJMPTVC) and assist productions with municipal permitting.

Prepare Essential Resources

Site Inventory: Document and photograph potential filming locations throughout your municipality. Historic buildings, distinctive streetscapes, parks, and municipal facilities all have appeal. Share these materials proactively with NJMPTVC.

Permit Ordinance: Enact a clear municipal ordinance outlining the film permit process. Productions need certainty about requirements, timelines, and costs upfront.

Local Vendor Directory: Maintain an updated list of businesses ready to serve productions: catering companies, dry cleaners, hotels, equipment rental shops, security services, transportation providers, and temporary office space. Productions spend significant money locally on goods and services beyond location fees.

Navigate Common Challenges

Successful film-friendly cities proactively address typical concerns. Develop protocols for managing parking restrictions, noise ordinances, and traffic disruption. Consider how to balance resident needs with production requirements—many cities find that advance notice and clear communication with affected neighborhoods can prevent most problems.

Amplify Your Success

Once your municipality attracts its first productions, publicize these wins through official channels, local media, and social media. Build momentum by showcasing your city's film-friendly reputation and the local businesses that have benefited.

Embrace the Power of Reputation

Film and television production operates on word-of-mouth recommendations. Cities known for streamlined permitting, responsiveness, and cooperation quickly become favorites among location scouts. Conversely, municipalities that are seen as difficult rapidly develop negative reputations that can last for years. Prioritize customer service and treat production companies as valued economic development partners.

Engage Your Municipal Council

Productions sometimes request to portray your city explicitly, requiring council approval. Ensure your legislative body understands both the economic importance and time-sensitive nature of these decisions. Production schedules don't accommodate lengthy deliberation processes.

The Bottom Line

New Jersey's enhanced tax incentives create an unprecedented opportunity for urban centers willing to compete for production dollars. With strategic preparation and proactive outreach, your municipality can transform from a filming location into a preferred production destination, generating revenue for local government and businesses while showcasing your city to audiences nationwide.

Climate Ready NJ Partners Prepare Your Economy And Workforce For The Present And Future

Co-authored by: Alex Rivera, Director of the Center for Economic and Workforce Development, Innovation and Social Entrepreneurship at the Watson Institute, and Darimar Weert, Project Coordinator, Watson Institute

Over the next four years, $73 million provided by the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration to NJ Department of Environmental Protection will implement green infrastructure projects and train workers to plan, install, and maintain projects in coastal areas, including Newark, Paterson, and Perth Amboy. **The Watson Institute is pleased to partner on the workforce development component of this effort with Rutgers University, Newark South Ward Environmental Alliance, New Jersey Environmental Justice, and The Watershed Institute**. Together, we are offering two green infrastructure certifications, the Chesapeake Bay Landscape Professional Program and the National Green Infrastructure Certification Program. Both offer multiple certification levels designed for everyone, from high school students to experienced construction and labor professionals, in English and Spanish.

The goal of green infrastructure is to capture stormwater as close to where it falls as possible to avoid runoff and flooding. Embedding practical green infrastructure skills at multiple levels of your community's workforce will strengthen your roads and parks' ability to handle larger and more frequent rain events while beautifying your community. Less flooding means fewer costs and inconveniences for your residents and businesses.



Let's learn more about the types of green infrastructure solutions that people will learn in the green infrastructure certification programs.

- **Not all green infrastructure projects involve using plants or soil.** Rain barrels are a simple solution to implement that collects rainwater from roofs for irrigating plants and other non-drinking water uses. Pervious pavements are an alternative to typical pavements that do not absorb any water; instead, they absorb water and allow it to drain into the soil under the pavement.

- **Bioswales or rain gardens are beautiful and practical green infrastructure solutions** that work by directing water from a spout, lawn, or paved surface and slowing rainwater so that it has time to absorb into the soil. Water is slowed down by rocks and plants. These installations also frequently use soil with properties that help quickly drain water into the ground.

- **Tree planting also supports stormwater management by slowing down the speed at which rainwater reaches the ground and by absorbing water through the roots.** Trees also carry the benefit of heat reduction in your communities. Heat is the most significant natural disaster public health threat to your community, taking more lives than any other type of weather event.





Photo credit:
Outdoor Equity Alliance



Our workforce programs are customizable to people's **skill level and availability; able to be completed in as little as one day or over several weeks**.

If you're interested in training opportunities or want to learn how your community can participate, please contact us. Together, we can build a resilient NJ by empowering communities, creating green jobs, and shaping policies that protect our shared future - **Email Alex Rivera - alex.rivera@kean.edu**



KUBS Corner

Co-authored by Michael Shapiro, KUBS Coordinator, Transformational Learning & External Affairs Dr. Peggy Thompson, Divisional Operations Manager, Transformational Learning & External Affairs (KUBS Corner)

The Kean University Building Stronger Urban Communities (KUBS) program hosted its 3rd Annual All-Girls High School Volleyball Clinic, welcoming 90 student-athletes from across New Jersey. Students from Long Branch, Hillside, Bayonne, Newark West Side, Newark Arts, and Roselle Catholic participating in the KUBS Volleyball Clinic developed their skills, connected with college athletes, and experienced the Kean University campus environment. The program was designed to give student participants a complete and immersive volleyball clinic experience.

The day began with introductions and a dynamic series of skill-based drills, where student participants rotated through stations focusing on serving, passing, setting, and defense. Each drill was led by Kean University women's volleyball players. Student participants had the opportunity to see demonstrations firsthand, practice with Kean University student athletes, and receive guidance and feedback during each drill.

After the midday lunch break, the energy shifted from learning to application. Student participants returned to the court for controlled scrimmages, where their newly sharpened skills were integrated into live game situations. The scrimmages were constructed to test what student participants learned during practice and provided an opportunity for them to experience the pace and intensity of playing alongside Kean University college-level role model student athletes. Emphasis on both skill development and game-play application ensured that student participants walked away not only with new techniques but also with the confidence to apply them in competition.
Kean University's Volleyball Head Coach, Don Perkins, said the event created valuable instruction and energy.

"There's credibility when KUBS players watch our athletes perform a skill and then immediately get coached through it," Perkins said. "The energy carried into our practice, which turned out to be our best of the preseason, and it was hugely beneficial for both sides."

Kean University Senior outside hitter Alison Kowalewski, a sport and event management major, said giving back is central to her Kean experience.
"I've learned how important it is to give children from urban communities the opportunity to learn from college students," Kowalewski said. "Being a college athlete is a unique experience, so sharing that and teaching what we know is such a simple yet impactful way to give back."

The KUBS program continues to strengthen its impact on urban communities and underrepresented students across New Jersey. By combining skill development with mentorship, KUBS clinics help foster student confidence and create meaningful connections with Kean University's student athletes that extend well beyond a single day of training. Continuing its mission to bridge cultural and resource gaps, expand access to specialized sports, strengthen community connections, and open new pathways that connect students to higher education and beyond, the KUBS program plans to expand clinic offerings by adding golf and football clinics soon.



NEW JERSEY URBAN MAYORS ASSOCIATION

NEW

NJUMA Policy Corner

Starting now, the New Jersey Urban Mayors Association will feature a new segment in our quarterly newsletter, The Urban Mayors Press. This segment, called NJUMA Policy Corner, will spotlight the most pressing public policy issues our mayors are actively addressing across the state.

As a kickoff, we'd like to take a moment to revisit our 7-Point Plan for Policy Engagement. NJUMA's work is both rooted in and guided by the following objectives:

1. Housing & Economic Development

Our first point, Housing and Economic Development, drives our efforts to support neighborhood and downtown revitalization, promote economic development policies such as Urban Enterprise Zones, improve job training and technology access, incentivize public servants to live in the communities they serve, and prioritize affordable, safe housing. The NJUMA leverages our federal resources and regional economic development strategies to advance the well-being of low- and moderate-income residents in New Jersey.

2. Crime & Public Safety

Point two, Crime and Public Safety is upheld in the NJUMA's support of public safety initiatives, crime prevention strategies, and reentry through strategic partnerships.

3. Education & Positive Youth Development

Furthermore, point 3, Education and Positive Youth Development, recognizes the necessity of high-quality childcare, early education, and youth programs. The NJUMA promotes civic engagement, mentorship, and career preparation opportunities for early-career professionals. We consistently employ data-driven strategies to invest in youth success.

4. Environment & Public Health

Moving on to point 4, Environment and Public Health, NJUMA addresses environmental and health risks in urban municipalities, including lead poisoning, poor air quality, site contamination, and lack of green space. We aim to advance urban revitalization strategies that emphasize renewable energy, energy efficiency, conservation, and environmental justice. We support brownfield remediation, initiatives to counteract climate change, workforce development in renewable energy, and expanded access to quality health care.

5. Family & Community Welfare

To point 5, Family and Community Welfare, the NJUMA will sustain our investment in community programs that provide direct support to children, youth, and families. Including expanding coordination among state agencies, especially in school-based youth services. We encourage continued reform in welfare, foster care, health and mental health services, and substance abuse treatment. Through our work, we aim to protect children, strengthen families, and promote family self-sufficiency.

6. Tax Reform

Moreover, the NJUMA pursues comprehensive strategies to reform property, sales, and excise taxes. Addressing school funding formulas, property tax administration, and potential budget deficits. We hope to reduce over-reliance on property taxes and increase fiscal efficiency, while taking into consideration the broader restructuring of the state's tax system.

7. Intergovernmental Relations & Unfunded Mandates

Finally, to point 7, Intergovernmental Relations and Unfunded Mandates, the NJUMA coordinates regularly with legislators at all levels to address cross-jurisdictional issues such as immigration, unemployment, reentry, crime, and education equity. We oppose unfunded state mandates that unjustly burden municipalities and result in increased property taxes. We also work strategically with state and federal partners through our Executive Committee to support urban cities and implement coordinated solutions.

The 7-Point Plan, in its entirety, is available online at **https://www.kean.edu/njumas-7-pointplan.**
If you would like to speak with us about one or more of these policy issues, please contact **NJUMA's Policy Assistant,**

Dyquan Waters, at watersd@kean.edu.
Until next time,
The New Jersey Urban Mayors Association

NJUMA Events At The 2025 NJLM Conference





Thank you for your contributions and continued support!

Submissions for the Winter Edition are due **Dec. 15th.** Any Questions? Please email, **watson@kean.edu**

NEW JERSEY URBAN MAYORS ASSOCIATION

To learn more about NJUMA, visit us at

kean.edu/new-jersey-urban-mayors-policy-center

Did You Know?

The New Jersey Urban Mayors Association (NJUMA) represents 33 municipalities with a combined population of 2,339,866 based on the 2020 U.S. Census data! The municipalities in NJUMA are at the forefront of addressing critical urban issues shaping the future of New Jersey's urban communities. Stay connected as NJUMA continues to lead impactful discussions and innovative solutions for our cities and residents!

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social media