

# John S. Watson Institute

Kean University links people to policy through urban-focused policy development, partnerships, engagement, and innovation

*Karl Weiskopf, Director of Policy and Research, John S. Watson Institute for Urban Policy and Research at Kean University*



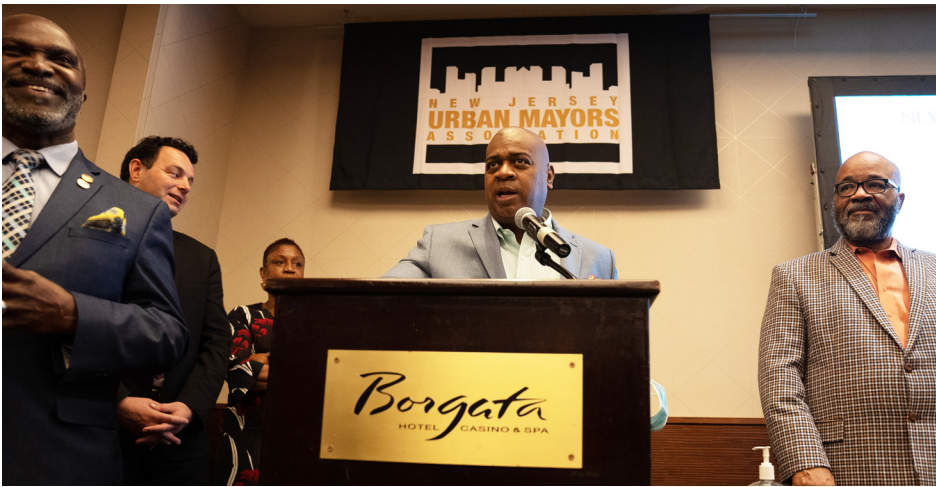
Bridgeton Mayor Albert B. Kelly, president emeritus of the New Jersey Urban Mayors Association with Barbara George Johnson, MPH, J.D., Vice President for External Affairs and Urban Policy at Kean University and Executive Director of the John S. Watson Institute for Urban Policy and Research at Kean University, and Joseph Youngblood II, PhD, J.D., Senior Vice President for Transformational Learning and External Affairs at Kean University at the 2021 League Conference.

From High Point to Cape May, municipalities serve residents, safeguard taxpayers' dollars, and undertake strategic planning to bridge the gap between theory and practice daily for the benefit of all. This is an objective toward which the John S. Watson Institute for Urban Policy and Research at Kean University also continues to strive. Having transitioned to Kean, the Institute is poised to augment its history as a resource that has transcended partisan and political shifts to elevate cross-disciplinary, urban-focused policy research, service learning, and civic engagement on issues relevant to cities in New Jersey and around the world for over 30 years.

Kean's recent designation as New Jersey's public urban research university offers new opportunities for the Institute. "As New Jersey's premier urban research university, Kean is positioned as a statewide urban anchor institution," said Kean President Lamont O. Repollet, Ed.D. "That enables the Institute to lead the charge in uncovering practical, scalable, and sustainable solutions to our state's most pressing social, civic, and economic challenges."

## A thought pioneer

Organized in an integrated, evolutionary framework of policy centers, the Institute uses a 'linking people to policy' approach to advance policy, research, and environmental change for underserved communities and communities of color. The Institute is recognized as a highly respected, visible, and statewide thought-pioneer that has strengthened leadership in all sectors. It has informed policy- and decision-making



Mayor Adrian O. Mapp of Plainfield, NJUMA Vice President, Mayor André Sayegh of Paterson and NJUMA member; Barbara George Johnson; speaking Mayor Ras J. Barbara of Newark, NJUMA president and chair, and Mayor Kelly at the NJUMA reception at League of Municipalities 2021 Annual Conference.

on urban issues ranging from school funding, prison reform, and reentry and housing affordability, among others, and is frequently called upon by elected officials and business leaders to address such issues.

Through innovative initiatives in areas, including cultural competency in early childhood programs, urban agriculture, obesity reduction, and

maternal-child health, the Institute has broadened the range of perspectives, voices, and indigenous knowledge in the policymaking process to explore new policy and practice paradigms. Through established, sustained, and mutually beneficial synergies with the greater Trenton region and other regions across the state, the Institute has employed community engagement and capacity

development as tools to strengthen communities, organizations, and individuals. The Institute, demonstrated as a statewide convenor and facilitator, has leveraged relationships with academic, government, and industry partners to create interdisciplinary and cross-sectoral solutions.

### Institute at work

The Institute has committed itself to the City of Trenton since its inception. Following the 1991 renaming of the Trenton Office of Policy Studies after the venerable Assemblyman John S. Watson, the first Black state legislator to chair an appropriations committee in the nation, the Institute supported Douglas H. Palmer, Trenton's first Black mayor and inaugural president of the New Jersey Urban Mayors Association (NJUMA), with best practices in municipal leadership and public policy until 2001.

"For more than three decades, I can't think of any governors, urban legislators, or policy makers, nor any major urban policies in New Jersey that have not

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## John S. Watson Institute for Urban Policy and Research at Kean University

### Linking People to Policy for Over Thirty Years

<b>1991</b>	<b>Institute</b> renamed in honor of <b>Assemblyman John S. Watson</b> , the first Black state legislator in the nation to chair an appropriations committee.	<b>2009</b>	<b>Center for Health Policy</b> supported by RWJF conducted an environmental scan of childhood obesity risk factors and services in five identified high-risk cities, which led to the creation of the NJ Partnership for Healthy Kids.
<b>1991 – 2001</b>	The Honorable Douglas H. Palmer, first Black mayor of Trenton and inaugural president of <b>NJ Urban Mayors Association (NJUMA)</b> , supported by the <b>Institute</b> with best practices in municipal leadership and public policy.		<b>CUE</b> participated in a policy task force in New Orleans that provided <b>policy advice on recovery from Hurricane Katrina</b> .
<b>2002</b>	<b>Institute</b> launched the first charter class of <b>Leadership Trenton</b> , which graduated 243 Trenton-area alumni fellows over eight years.	<b>2010</b>	The <b>CUE</b> director became a member of the <b>NJ Clean Air Council</b> and the <b>EPA Clean Air Act Advisory Committee</b> .
<b>2003</b>	Historic first meeting of <b>NJUMA</b> , urban superintendents and urban schoolboard presidents on <b>Abbott</b> mandates.	<b>2011</b>	<b>Institute</b> hosted <b>Nuts &amp; Bolts of Social Enterprise</b> conference on generating social-economic value in underserved communities through residential talents.
<b>2003 – 2005</b>	<b>Abbott Preschool Initiative</b> advised early-childhood teachers on obtaining their preschool-to-third-grade certification.	<b>2012</b>	<b>CUE</b> participated in the establishment of the <b>NJEJA committee on cumulative impacts</b> , which eventually resulted in landmark statewide legislation.
<b>2004</b>	With funding from NJ Department of State, <b>Institute</b> embarked on a faith-based initiative in support of nonprofit capacity building.		<b>NJUMA</b> hosted the <b>Spring Economic Development Summit: The Future of Economic Development in the New Economy</b> .
<b>2005</b>	<b>Center for the Urban Environment (CUE)</b> reactivated after student-led air-monitoring project overseen by Nicky Sheats, Ph.D., and the New Jersey Environmental Justice Alliance (NJEJA).	<b>2013</b>	<b>Institute</b> designated <b>FEMA</b> point of contact after Hurricane Sandy for disaster-specific state/federal recovery programs & NGO/corporate giving programs.
<b>2006</b>	<b>Center for the Positive Development of Urban Children (CPDUC)</b> provided leadership and oversight on economic impact study of the childcare industry.		<b>CUE</b> director served as <b>co-author</b> of the <b>public health chapter</b> of the <b>National Climate Assessment</b> .
<b>2007</b>	<b>CPDUC</b> launched first <b>NJ Cultural Competency &amp; English Language Learners Summer Institute and Mentoring Program</b> for early-childhood teachers.		<b>CPDUC NJ Cultural Competency Institute</b> featured on Constant Hine's " <b>Coaching Connections</b> ," a national radio show with 30,000 listeners.
	<b>NJUMA</b> and suburban communities jointly released <b>seven-point plan "Uniting Mayors to Strengthen NJ's Urban Cities, Families, and Communities."</b>	<b>2014</b>	With grant funding, <b>CPDUC</b> duplicated <b>NJ Cultural Competency Institute</b> for <b>65 teachers in 33 classrooms</b> in <b>Paterson</b> and <b>Newark</b> .
<b>2008</b>	<b>CPDUC</b> and <b>NJ League of Municipalities</b> engaged non-traditional champions for children to increase early-childhood investments through hosted forums.		<b>CUE</b> critiqued the <b>EPA's Clean Power Plan</b> from an EJ perspective with several other EJ colleagues.
	<b>Center for the Urban Environment (CUE)</b> participated in establishment of <b>committee on cumulative impacts</b> , <b>Coalition for Healthy Ports</b> , and <b>EJ Leadership Forum on Climate Change</b> .	<b>2015</b>	<b>Institute</b> commissioned to develop the nation's first <b>Comprehensive Economic Development Strategy (CEDS)</b> to improve urban communities.
	<b>NJUMA</b> convened <b>State of Our Cities Conference</b> surrounding issues including healthcare, affordable housing, economic development and public safety.		<b>NJUMA</b> hosted the <b>Academy on Resilience Design Mitigation</b> with state agencies and city planners to guide development and redevelopment in municipalities.

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[kean.edu/watson-institute](http://kean.edu/watson-institute)

	CPDUC presented at the <b>67th World Assembly and Conference</b> sponsored by World Organization for Early Childhood Education.	<b>2019</b>	Institute staff commissioned by NJ Dept. of Community Affairs to research for the NJ Urban Enterprise Zone (UEZ) assessment.
	NJUMA hosted <b>Federal Policy Roundtables</b> on available resources and urban issues with NJ congressional delegation and directors of federal agencies.	<b>2020</b>	CUE contributed leadership, technical and educational support for a <b>landmark cumulative-impacts law</b> adopted by the New Jersey State Legislature.
	Institute and partners hosted the <b>New Directions for Addressing Problem Properties</b> conference featuring experts from DC, MD, MN and NJ.		CPDUC offered <b>virtual mentoring/coaching</b> to K-12 teachers in Trenton and <b>sessions on culturally-responsive pedagogy</b> to 25 teachers/administrators.
<b>2015 – 2017</b>	Institute collaborated with White House and city staff to bring <b>My Brother's Keeper</b> , a national initiative for young men of color, to the city of Trenton.	<b>2021</b>	<b>Center for Economic and Workforce Development, Social Entrepreneurship and Innovation</b> designated as a <b>USEDA University Center</b> .
<b>2016</b>	CPDUC worked with Trenton schools' <b>bilingual/ESL</b> teachers to offer <b>NJ Cultural Competency Institute</b> to <b>23 teachers</b> in <b>12 classrooms</b> with K-4 students.		Institute launched the <b>Center for Urban Policy Research (CUPR)</b> , which provides policy analysis and research to the <b>Legislative Black Caucus</b> - legislative collaborative.
	CUE and partners <b>planned and presented</b> at national forum on the EPA <b>Clean Power Plan</b> sponsored by the Building Equity and Alignment Initiative.	<b>2022</b>	<b>Center for Health Policy Development</b> conducted an environmental scan and community-engagement initiative on Black maternal-infant mortality to inform the development of a Maternal/Health Institute in Trenton.
	Institute co-authored <b>Cost of Poverty</b> report exploring disparities between the tax base in four <b>NJUMA</b> municipalities as compared to suburban/rural cities.		
<b>2017</b>	CUE director published article on climate change policy from an EJ perspective.		
	CPDUC adopted 700 students and provided mentoring to teachers, administrators and literacy/math coaches working with diverse children and families.		
	NJUMA partnered with NJ Brownfields Interagency Working Group to host a conference on redeveloping brownfields and abandoned properties.		
	NJUMA released <b>Designing Urban Policy for a Thriving New Jersey: The New Jersey Urban Mayors Association (NJUMA) Urban Policy Agenda</b> .		
	Institute staff co-authored <b>City of Passaic Master Plan on Economic Development</b> .		
	Institute staff advised the New Jersey Department of Community Affairs on various municipal projects.		
<b>2018</b>	CUE, NJEJA and the <b>Center for American Progress</b> organized a conference on EJ policy held in Trenton at which the <b>CUE</b> director spoke.		
	CUE director participated in establishment of the <b>Equitable and Just National Climate Platform</b> .		
	CPDUC <b>NJ Cultural Competency Institute</b> featured in a blog based on O'Neill and Brinkerhoff's <b>ECE Organization: Unlocking Your Teams Natural Gifts</b> .		

The John S. Watson Institute for Urban Policy and Research is *"the think and do tank for public policy."* The institute is dedicated to deepening the analysis around critical public policy challenges and broadening the range of policy ideas, perspectives and options available.



been counseled, advised, or shaped by the Institute in the interest of urban cities and residents,” Mayor Palmer said. Today, the Institute supports over 32 municipalities under the NJUMA banner, whose current president is Ras Baraka, mayor of the state’s largest city, Newark.

The Institute has led the way on the most pressing policy issues over three decades. Ana I. Berdecía, founding director of the Center for the Positive Development of Urban Children at the Institute, has promoted nurturing well-trained preschool teachers, high-quality childcare programs, and culturally competent, linguistically sensitive K-12 classrooms. After Abbott decisions affecting preschool teachers and providers, Berdecía ensured that experienced teachers and teachers of color stayed in classrooms and childcare centers statewide. Broadly, the Institute is the only policy organization in New Jersey to convene mayors, school boards, and superintendents around the implementation of Abbott decisions.

This year, the Institute hosted a virtual policy retreat, which brought together members of the Legislative Black Caucus, Legislative Latino Caucus, and NJUMA for the first time to facilitate the intentional delineation, analysis, and preparation for action on the policy priorities of all three groups. These milestones represent only a portion of the activities upon which the Watson Institute has embarked since it was founded.



Barbara George Johnson and Assblywoman Shavonda E. Sumter, Chair of the New Jersey Legislative Black Caucus, District 35.

“In its early years, and in partnership with (Retired NJLM Executive Director) Bill Dressell and NJLM, many of the distinctive, impact-oriented initiatives in which the Institute engaged—ranging from our focus on Abbott implementation to the establishment of the only entity nationwide dedicated to servicing mayors of urban communities—were the first of their kind,” said Joseph Youngblood II, Ph.D., J.D., former executive director of the Institute and senior vice president for transformational learning and external affairs at Kean.


### Linking people to policy

In 2015, the Institute developed the first Comprehensive Economic Development Strategy (CEDS) dedicated to improving urban communities, which required managing a steering committee of 200 multi-sector stakeholders, task forces, and 20 urban municipalities in the northeast region of the state to complete a long-term planning effort to find solutions for common economic- and community-development obstacles, with

the primary goal of utilizing existing community assets.

“We have never undertaken any research project, activity or initiative whose implications were purely theoretical,” said Barbara George Johnson, J.D., vice president for external affairs and urban policy at Kean. “If we are to truly ‘move the needle,’ we must continue to center the ‘linking people to policy’ approach that drives everything we do, and our integration into the Kean ecosystem will catalyze our endeavors to effectuate positive change for people in urban communities and statewide.”

Nicky Sheats, Ph.D., J.D., director of the Center for the Urban Environment (CUE) at the Institute, was instrumental in providing leadership, technical and educational support that culminated in New Jersey’s landmark cumulative impacts legislation passed in 2020, which mandates the application of evaluative mechanisms grounded in environmental justice principles before undertaking projects that would pollute historically overburdened communities. Sheats thereafter began leading efforts to scale the legislation for introduction in Congress.

Crucially, the Institute served as a conduit between the governor’s office and NJUMA members to maximize efforts to respond to and recover from the catastrophic effects of the COVID-19 pandemic on urban communities and statewide. Currently, in collaboration with the NJ Economic Development Authority (NJEDA), it is assessing factors contributing to infant mortality among women of color, predominantly Black and Latina women, and identifying approaches and services to inform the establishment of a comprehensive maternal-infant health center in Trenton. 

## Realizing a vision

William Watson, the first executive director of the Institute, in June 2022 reflected on the legacy of his father, Assemblyman John S. Watson.

“For him, it was never about standing behind the microphone; it was not about getting his picture taken. Everything had to be focused on what we would do as a society to make people’s lives better,” he said. “Everything he did as a freeholder and as a member of the General Assembly gave him the ability to put in place legislation that directly impacted people that had the greatest need.”

Policy change for those most in need of help remains the lodestar around which the Watson Institute orients every initiative in which it is engaged. Through its new affiliation with Kean, the Institute will continue to realize Assemblyman Watson’s vision as it charts a new course towards a modern, equitable people-centered policy paradigm for the benefit of all.