



## ECONOMIC JUSTICE

Approved by the JCRC Assembly January 19, 2016

### I. PREAMBLE

In his 1944 State of the Union address President Franklin Roosevelt outlined an Economic Bill of Rights that included:

- The right to a useful and remunerative job in the industries or shops or farms or mines of the nation;
- The right to earn enough to provide adequate food and clothing and recreation;
- The right of every family to a decent home;
- The right to a good education;
- The right to adequate medical care and the opportunity to achieve and enjoy good health;
- The right to adequate protection from the economic fear of old age, sickness, accident and unemployment.<sup>1</sup>

The Economic Bill of Rights that President Roosevelt spoke of has never been fully realized, but the aspiration is as compelling today as it was in 1944. These objectives still define economic justice. Advancing economic justice means working to enhance the economic stability of individuals and communities by providing fair and equitable ways for people to earn a decent living and build sustainable economic resources. Economic justice aims to ensure individuals' equal opportunity to share in our country's prosperity.

The Jewish Community Relations Council has a strong interest in the subject of economic justice because we believe an equitable and just society helps promote strong democratic institutions, which are a safeguard for historically oppressed peoples, and an atmosphere

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<sup>1</sup> Myers-Lipton, Scott. *Ending Extreme Inequality: An Economic Bill of Rights to Eliminate Poverty*. Routledge, 2015. XIII. Print.

in which people of all backgrounds can flourish. JCRC has long been engaged in efforts to improve the quality of life of the most vulnerable among us. There is a deep and rich Jewish tradition in text from which we draw guidance in understanding economic justice. One cornerstone is the concept of human dignity. As stated in the Babylonian Talmud, Brachot 19b, “Come and learn: Human dignity is so important that it supersedes even a biblical prohibition.” The frame of human dignity helps us to think about how we help someone prosper economically and, moreover, how we empower individuals to live a dignified life.

Another related cornerstone of Jewish thought is compassion for those who are in poverty and are socially marginalized. Exodus Rabbah 31:12 declares, “There is nothing in the world more grievous than poverty; it is the most terrible of all sufferings. Our sages have said: If all troubles were assembled on one side and poverty on the other, [poverty would outweigh them all].” In addition, Deuteronomy 10:18-19 states, “[God] upholds the cause of the orphan and the widow, and befriends the stranger, providing him/her with food and clothing. You too must befriend the stranger, for you were strangers in the land of Egypt.” These are among the words in our tradition that guide Jewish efforts to take care for others and strive to alleviate poverty.

## **II. ROOT CAUSES OF POVERTY AND ECONOMIC INEQUALITY**

We recognize that there are multiple and complex causes of poverty and economic inequality. We believe that a multi-pronged approach, including thoughtful public policy, is needed to advance the conditions necessary for economic self-sufficiency and equity for all Americans.

The American economic system, strong for many reasons, also results in economic inequality. “Labor markets alone cannot reduce poverty because not all poor can be expected to ‘earn’ their way out of poverty. Single parents with young children, disabled workers and the unskilled all face significant challenges earning an adequate income no matter how much they work.”<sup>2</sup>

Moreover, a history of government policies and social traditions has left certain groups out of wealth-building systems and structures. These policies, as codified into law, drastically impacted generations of entire communities. A few examples of such policies include: slavery, redlining, exclusions from the G.I. Bill, lack of voting rights, exclusionary housing, lack of access to quality public education, student loan debt, a weak safety net, and an antiquated tax system that does not fairly allocate burdens or benefits. Many such policies still exist and must be changed if we want to enable everyone to participate fully in our society.

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<sup>2</sup> Timothy M. Smeeding, “Poorer by Comparison Poverty, Work, and Public Policy in Comparative Perspective”. Pathways, Winter 2008.

### **III. POLICY PRINCIPLES**

#### **Role of government**

The United States' strong democracy ensures the protections and freedoms that we as a minority population enjoy. This democracy is strengthened by an equitable society where people are educated, healthy and have the opportunity to be productive participants in the economy.

Therefore, the government has a fundamental interest in and responsibility for promoting conditions that allow low-income individuals and families to become economically self-sufficient. In addition, the government has a responsibility for caring for those who cannot actively participate in the economy.

We recognize the important role of the non-profit and private sectors in addressing poverty. Federal, state and local government public policy and programs, and partnerships with the private sector to administer such programs, are essential to creating a more equitable society.

Government has a responsibility to implement best practices in these services—and to ensure that their private sector partners do so as well. It has a responsibility to maximize the prospect that publicly funded programs that alleviate poverty are efficient and impactful in achieving desired outcomes.

#### **Wealth and income inequality**

We support enactment and enforcement of laws to end discrimination in hiring and promotion. We strongly favor an end to racial and gender inequality in pay. Women and men doing substantially equal work must be paid an equal wage.

We support smart policies that address key drivers of the racial and gender wealth gaps. These drivers include lack of homeownership, lack of income, poor education, disability status, poor health care, immigration status, and incarceration.

We believe people need assistance building their assets in order to stay out of poverty. The government must support wealth building and management tools for economically disadvantaged and historically economically marginalized populations. Such support may take many forms such as increasing access to bank accounts, incentive programs for first time home buyers, and incentivizing college savings accounts and retirement accounts with refundable tax credits or matching public dollars.

## **Jobs and fair wages**

We believe that jobs should pay a living wage that allows people to be self-sufficient.

- A wage earner working full time should be able to provide an adequate level of support for oneself and one's family.
- All workers deserve earned paid time off (vacation and sick leave) and generous family leave programs.
- Wages and benefits for low income families, seniors and people with disabilities must be adjusted to accurately reflect inflation and to reflect the cost of living for the area they live in to allow them to maintain self-sufficiency.

We recognize that there are many barriers to entering the labor market that prevent people from gaining sufficient employment. We support policies that remove barriers to employment and allow people to be self-sufficient. The government should:

- Make full-time childcare accessible, affordable and available. Childcare workers should be paid an adequate wage, and state reimbursement for childcare workers must be adjusted to account for local wages and cost of living.
- Make public transportation accessible and affordable.
- Protect and preserve the rights of workers to unionize.
- Help those who were formerly incarcerated to reenter the workplace and avoid recidivism, including, where appropriate, removing questions on job applications about felony convictions that perpetuate the effects of incarceration.
- Provide access to skill-building and workforce training for people entering and re-entering the workforce and for people who are transitioning between industries as industries become obsolete.
- Support and provide paid internships and workforce incentive programs for young adults and adults re-entering the workforce from disadvantaged communities.

## **Education**

We believe that education is the best long-term solution to address inequality and poverty. We support effective enforcement of federal and state constitutional guarantees of equal protection, as well as state and federal civil rights laws that enhance enforcement of these rights, to equalize educational opportunity in America.

The State must build and maintain a well-prepared teaching force through such efforts as strengthening teacher education, offering scholarships and forgivable loans for high-quality teacher education, modernizing and streamlining certification procedures and requirements, improving clinical training and support, and providing higher teacher compensation that reflects the importance we place on education.

We support ample and equitable funding for public education. Disparities in funding for districts and schools should be eliminated and extra funding for the poorest schools and districts should be provided as needed. In addition, special education services for those with disabilities must be fairly and equitably funded.

We believe all children should receive early childhood education and believe California should provide free or low cost preschool to all low and moderate income children.

We support policies to address the skyrocketing costs of higher education so that low and moderate income students can afford to attend college without incurring an overwhelming level of debt. We believe that local and state governments should incentivize and assist families to begin tax deferred child college savings accounts.

### **Tax reform**

We believe the personal and corporate tax codes need to be reformed to generate needed revenue and to increase tax fairness. The government must:

- Make the tax system more equitable, based on the ability to pay, otherwise known as a "progressive" tax system. Taxes on higher income taxpayers should be increased to provide additional funds for basic social services.
- Improve the tax code for low and moderate income workers through refundable credits such as a permanent Earned Income Tax Credit, a Child Tax Credit, a Savers credit, and other refundable tax credits. Refundable tax credits benefit low and moderate income workers more than non-refundable tax credits, exclusions, deductions, or preferential rates.
- Reform California's Proposition 13, passed in 1978, to bring in needed tax revenues, through such changes as a "split-roll" reform which leaves in place protections for homeowners and allows commercial property to be taxed at a rate which reflects actual valuation of the property.

### **Food Security**

From the Torah to the prophets, feeding the hungry is a core Jewish imperative. We strongly believe that every person should have sufficient financial resources to afford a nutritious diet.

We support policies to increase access to affordable, nutritious and culturally appropriate foods.

We support programs that provide people with low incomes access to nutritious foods, including expanding access to farmers markets, bringing nutritious food into neighborhood markets, and encouraging supermarkets to build in areas that are food deserts.

We believe every person should have access to facilities to prepare healthy meals and should be provided with knowledge of basic nutrition, safety and cooking.

### **Homelessness**

We believe homelessness is a complex problem that requires a regional approach.

We support the creation of safe and secure shelters for people who are homeless. Shelters should connect people with social services and long-term housing and provide secure places for their belongings.

We believe that the government must invest adequate resources to address homelessness. Wrap around services for homeless individuals—including housing, mental and physical healthcare, and job training and placement—are needed to move people from homelessness towards self-sufficiency. It is important that these services are provided without criminalizing homelessness or infringing on the rights of homeless individuals.

### **Quality Affordable Housing**

We believe the government should provide funding and create policies for ensuring affordable housing, including both increasing production of new affordable housing and preserving and rehabilitating existing housing. We believe:

- Special focus should be given to ensuring low and moderate income earners can thrive in the communities in which they work, ensuring senior and family housing is preserved, and enforcing legal obligations to keep housing affordable and to replace lost units.
- Surplus public land in quickly growing areas should be made available for affordable housing sites, including transit agency properties.
- No new housing sites should be built on or near any site that is environmentally hazardous.
- All rental units should meet health and safety standards.
- All home buyers should be protected from predatory lending.

## **Healthcare**

We believe that healthcare is a basic right and that affordable coverage is critical to maintaining our state's—and our nation's—economic and social stability. Accordingly, we support policies designed to increase access to healthcare. We believe:

- Medicaid and Medicare must remain as entitlement programs, available to individuals who are poor, elderly or disabled. Medicaid is an important component of the emergency safety net providing some measure of security against medical catastrophe.
- Medicaid beneficiaries should not have unnecessary barriers to accessing and utilizing services. Premiums, deductibles and co-pays have a disproportionate impact on those with smaller incomes and could be prohibitive barriers that will keep needed healthcare away from America's most vulnerable populations.
- Drugs comprise one of the largest and fastest growing components of healthcare expenditures. We support policies to empower all healthcare entities to use their substantial purchasing power to obtain the most favorable prices and terms from manufacturers and providers of prescription drugs.
- The State of California should provide access to healthcare for undocumented residents.
- The State of California should reduce barriers to enrolling in Covered California and Medi-Cal and to maintaining coverage. The State should:
  - a. Streamline and simplify enrollment in Medicaid and Covered California.
  - b. Expand integrated systems of enrollment assistance and “navigation.”
  - c. Ensure reimbursement rates for Medi-Cal that encourage provider enrollment.
- Medi-Cal should include dental care, vision care, mental health, fitness education, nutrition education, drug treatment, home care, and speech and audiology therapy.
- The State should integrate delivery of medical, behavioral and long-term care services.
- The State should integrate Medicare and Medi-Cal for people in both programs.
- Consumer protections must be in place to ensure adequate and timely access to healthcare and appropriate cost-sharing.

### **Public Benefit Programs**

We believe programs like CalWORKs, Cal Fresh, General Relief and Social Security Insurance should be indexed for inflation and to reflect the cost of living to ensure that families, seniors and people with disabilities can make ends meet.

We oppose policies that impose onerous requirements on recipients of public benefits programs, which lead to de facto discrimination against certain groups of people.

Seniors or people with disabilities who receive Social Security should be able to qualify to receive the Cal Fresh program.

### **Digital Divide**

Digital divide is a term that refers to the gap between demographics and regions that have access to modern information and communications technology and those that have limited or no access. This technology can include the telephone, television, personal computers and the internet. We support closing the digital divide through increasing connectivity, expanding digital literacy training, and expanding innovative programs that make technology more affordable.

## **IV. CONCLUSION**

JCRC strongly affirms the value and dignity of every human life and the right of each person to pursue economic self-sufficiency. This policy statement will be utilized as a means to advocate based on the principles we have set forth as we work independently and in coalition with other communities and organizations that share our concerns and core principles.