

1.2 million residents in New Jersey food insecure as gubernatorial election nears

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New Jersey's gubernatorial election will take place on November 2, but neither Democratic incumbent Phil Murphy nor Republican challenger Jack Ciattarelli is proposing to address the social crisis gripping the state.

The response of the state's ruling class to the pandemic over the last year and a half has intensified social misery by increasing unemployment and food insecurity and undermining health services for the state's most vulnerable residents. The state government, which represents the interests of New Jersey's corporate and financial oligarchy, has placed the burden of the acute economic and health crises on the shoulders of the working class.

Last year, the Community FoodBank of New Jersey (CFBNJ) predicted that food insecurity in the state would increase by 56 percent because of decreased income and rising poverty and unemployment. This prediction has been fulfilled. More than 1.2 million New Jersey residents, including about 400,000 children, do not know where they will get their next meal. This number represents more than 13 percent of the state's population of 8.9 million—more than one in eight people.

Of all states, New Jersey is projected to have the highest percent increase in food insecurity overall (36 percent) from 2019 to 2021, according to CFBNJ. It also is projected to have the highest increase in food insecurity among children (55 percent) in this period. In New Jersey's 11th congressional district, one of the ten most affluent congressional districts in the country, food insecurity among children is projected to increase by 169 percent between 2019 and 2021. This latter finding starkly illustrates capitalism's inexorable and simultaneous creation of wealth and misery.

"After years of steadily declining food insecurity rates in our state, never did I expect that all of that progress would disappear in the blink of an eye, putting New Jersey in an even worse position than it was in after the Great Recession," wrote Carlos M. Rodriguez, president and CEO of CFBNJ, in a report on the first year of the pandemic. "A decade of progress in the fight against hunger was wiped out

overnight."

Atlantic City, which is known for its casinos and boardwalk, has been one of the worst-affected cities in the country. It has endured decades of economic crisis resulting from a decline in tourism. Even before the pandemic, residents suffered high levels of unemployment and food insecurity.

CFBNJ has held more than 40 large-scale food distribution events in 12 of the state's 21 counties. Lines of cars seeking assistance have stretched for miles. CFBNJ predicts that it will incur \$12 million in additional costs this year to maintain services at the current level.

Amidst the increase in food insecurity and an ongoing pandemic, the ruling class has begun closing nursing home facilities, which have been the sites of mass death during the pandemic. At least four New Jersey nursing homes have closed since the beginning of the pandemic. In contrast, only one nursing home closed in each of the two years before the pandemic.

In July, the Bergen County Health Care Center in Rockleigh, which has 110 beds, announced that it would close permanently. This announcement follows the closure or planned closure of the Alaris Health nursing home in Guttenberg, the Armenian Nursing and Rehabilitation Center in Emerson, the St. Francis Residential Community in Denville and the Villa at Florham Park.

For years, nursing homes had faced challenges such as inadequate levels of Medicaid reimbursement and aging buildings in need of major improvements. As home- and community-based services for the elderly have expanded, nursing homes have lost residents and revenue. Increased expenses for personal protective equipment (PPE) and other pandemic-related supplies have further strained the facilities' finances.

Nursing homes were left criminally unprepared for the pandemic. Understaffing was widespread and supplies of coronavirus tests and PPE were inadequate. Health Commissioner Judith Persichilli made the situation more dangerous by ordering long-term care facilities to take

residents back from hospitals even without negative coronavirus tests. Because of this combination of neglect and recklessness, at least 7,800 residents of long-term care homes have died from COVID-19. Residents of nursing homes have accounted for 40 percent of coronavirus deaths in New Jersey. Overall, New Jersey has the highest per capita death rate from COVID-19 of any state in the US, followed by Mississippi.

The wave of facility closures will further deprive the elderly of needed care. “The trend that I’m concerned about is that the public institutions and the nonprofit institutions are either closing or are privatizing,” Laurie Facciarossa Brewer, New Jersey’s long-term care ombudsman, told NJ Spotlight News. Many facilities are “going into private hands run by equity firms, hedge funds, other companies that have profit as their primary motivator,” she added. “The quality of care in the for-profit nursing homes is not as good as it is in the nonprofit nursing homes. You can see that in the CMS [Centers for Medicare and Medicaid Services] with federal data.”

Services for people who are struggling with drug addiction also are about to be curtailed in New Jersey. Atlantic City city council members voted in July to shut down the state’s largest needle exchange program, which is based in the city. Oasis, the harm reduction center that has provided syringes, testing services and recovery support to 1,200 clients since 2007, will be closed in early September. Public health officials warn that the closure could lead to an increase in overdoses and HIV and hepatitis infections.

The decision was made in the face of mass public opposition. The council held its vote after a public discussion that lasted two and a half hours. About 50 people spoke in opposition to the closure. “You are not cleaning the island,” resident Mike Nees testified. “You are sucking more people into the cycle of disease, stigma, addiction and instability.” The decision also goes against the advice of Dr. Wilson Washington, the city’s health director. Only two residents spoke in favor of ending the program.

Council President George Tibbitt and other councilmen argued heartlessly that Oasis is a blight on the city and upsets residents and tourists. Undercutting this argument, they blamed other nearby towns for not setting up similar programs.

“I understand that we probably need this, but don’t want it here,” said Jeffree Fauntleroy II, a councilman at large, without a trace of humanity. “These people [i.e., those who support Oasis] don’t actually live in Atlantic City so they don’t see what is going on on a daily basis.” These remarks are belied by the vocal support that Oasis received from residents.

Drug overdose deaths in the United States reached a record

high last year. In 2020, the number of such deaths increased by 30 percent to 93,000, according to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC). Furthermore, CDC data show that prevention programs such as the one Oasis provides are effective.

Atlantic City has been under state oversight since 2016, when former Republican Governor Chris Christie and the Democrat-controlled legislature used the city’s economic crisis as a pretext to take over the city. Earlier this year, Murphy signed a bill that extended state oversight by four years.

In a mealy-mouthed statement, Murphy expressed disappointment in the council’s decision and said that his administration would “assess paths forward.” He later claimed not to have authority to reverse the city council’s decision.

However, Assembly member Vincent Mazzeo, the lead sponsor of the bill that Murphy signed to prolong state oversight, told Politico that, “The governor can veto any action of the council of Atlantic City.”

Murphy, a multimillionaire and former Goldman Sachs executive, defends the interests of New Jersey’s financial elite, which is diametrically opposed to those of the working class. He has proved his willingness to sacrifice public health to keep share values high on Wall Street throughout the pandemic. In addition to presiding over the above attacks, he has refused to close schools to stem the spread of COVID-19 and allowed prison inmates to be held in abusive conditions.

Ciattarelli, Murphy’s challenger in the gubernatorial election, has had a long political career that includes service on the Financial Institutions and Insurance committee in the state Assembly. He is running a right-wing campaign that includes proposals to cut the state workforce by 5 to 10 percent and to terminate additional unemployment benefits from the federal government.

The record of the Murphy administration and Ciattarelli’s proposals make clear that the interests of the working class find no expression within the framework of capitalist politics.



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