

## NEW JERSEY: RESILIENT IN THE FACE OF ADVERSITY\*

*Senator Stephen M. Sweeney\*\**

Hurricane Sandy may have hit us very hard, but she didn't knock us out. Our state has shown the world the tremendous good, unbelievable kindness and never-quit spirit of New Jerseyans that sometimes can only arise after such a painful and devastating crisis.

I saw it with my own eyes in Perth Amboy, where I met a small business owner whose company suffered significant damage. But defiantly, she told me not only was she committed to rebuilding her business—Sandy wasn't going to get the best of her—she's going to move forward and expand her operation.

This is only one of the many incredible displays of strength and kindness that occurred in the wake of this disaster. In this moment of great adversity, New Jersey has shown the best this country has to offer. New Jersey is resilient, New Jersey is tough, and New Jerseyans are compassionate. Our residents have shown this as we stick together. They epitomized what President Clinton said last year: "we're all in this together" is a better philosophy than "you're on your own."

The commitment to helping our neighbors, however, should not begin, nor should it end, with tragedy; it should be something our elected officials strive for each and every day.

So as we recover from the storm, we need to be mindful that many of our neighbors face their own hardships each and every day in New Jersey. We must make choices to deal with our lack of jobs, cuts to social programs, war-torn urban areas, segregated communities, failing schools and unprecedented budgetary pressures.

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\* The views of Senator Sweeney do not necessarily reflect those of the *Legislative Journal* or of Seton Hall University.

\*\* New Jersey Democratic State Senator Stephen M. Sweeney serves as the Senate President and represents District Three. He has proudly served the state of New Jersey as State Senator since 2002, and previously served as the Director of the Gloucester County Board of Freeholders.

These issues cloud our future and undermine the promise of this great state. We cannot ignore these problems or wish them away. They must be confronted—and they must be confronted head-on. As Senate President, I have tried with my colleagues to improve the lives of every New Jerseyan through issues important to all of us. These include:

- Funding to our public schools
- Helping non-profits like Wynona Lipman’s House
- Women’s healthcare and Planned Parenthood
- Joblessness
- Foreclosures
- Our special needs communities
- Basic human rights issues such as same-sex marriage;
- Fighting efforts to obliterate the *Mount Laurel* doctrine, which requires every town to provide its fair share of affordable housing

We made many tough and politically unpopular decisions. It certainly would have been easier to shy away from many of those issues, but true leadership demands a willingness to move forward. There is much more to do.

Clearly, how we rebuild after Sandy will be an issue in the state for months and years to come. The billions of dollars in aid flowing into the state are helping the process, but that kind of money always invites bad behavior from those looking to take advantage of the misfortune of others. That is why I introduced and advocated for legislation that puts in place integrity monitors to oversee just how these funds are spent. These monitors will ensure that taxpayer dollars do not disappear because of waste, fraud and abuse. Their work was highly touted in the aftermath of September 11<sup>th</sup>, and I have no doubt they will bring the same kind of vigilance to New Jersey.

While Sandy is a crucial issue, we are all aware that our state is facing its highest unemployment rate in decades. We are constantly ranking as the 4<sup>th</sup> highest in the nation in terms of unemployment. As with all issues, I have been willing to set politics aside and work across the aisle on issues that put New Jerseyans back to work. But the Christie administration has not chosen to make the investments necessary to help the people in this state find a job or earn the wages

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they deserve

The people of New Jersey deserve better; they deserve a leader who is willing to look behind the numbers, like the unemployment rate, and recognize that they are not just numbers—they are people. I know how difficult it is to be unable to find work, because I have collected unemployment myself. In my current position as a labor leader, each day at my union hall I see the faces of those who still can't find a job. I have seen grown men and women in tears because they cannot support their loved ones. Their reality is here in New Jersey and they deserve a leader who will fight for their needs.

This is a serious matter; one of personal importance, and one no leader can ignore. Think about some of the rankings New Jersey has seen itself in over the past year:

- 2<sup>nd</sup> in the country in homes in foreclosure
- 47<sup>th</sup> in Economic Output
- 45<sup>th</sup> in Wage Growth

Moreover, the number of people living in poverty has increased from 8.7% in 2007 to 11.4% in 2011—a disgraceful statistic for a state as wealthy as New Jersey.

Those are our families—New Jersey families, falling into poverty and struggling to scrape by. These numbers are heartbreaking. But this does not have to be. New Jersey is lagging behind the rest of the region. We are outside of the norm.

With an unemployment rate nearly two points lower than New Jersey's, Pennsylvania chose to expand its education programs to make sure workers are trained for the jobs available and that will be available in the future. And in New York, where unemployment is nearly a percentage point lower than New Jersey, they have attracted 1,000 new pharmaceutical jobs because of their choice to invest in higher education. Recently, I met with Governor O'Malley of Maryland, and he shared with me how his state has made tough decisions and tough choices to create jobs. They chose to invest in the middle class and plant the seeds of opportunity—not to preserve privilege. Maryland is investing in education, not cutting it. They are investing in infrastructure that will lead them to economic prosperity, not walking away from projects that will move the economy and the region forward. And they stay committed to their workforce—a commitment that has resulted in more jobs, lower unemployment and the maintenance of a

triple-A bond rating.

While I like a lot of things about Maryland, the people across this great state are my priority, because I love New Jersey. That is why I am focused on new initiatives like “Jobs for New Jersey” that provide financial assistance to small businesses that hire people off the unemployment rolls. Without jobs, there is no progress.

Not only must we create jobs, but we have to boost the well-being of working families. That means raising the state’s minimum wage. In this day and age, it should not even be a matter of debate. That is why I proposed a constitutional amendment that would raise the minimum wage and tie future increases to the Consumer Price Index (“CPI”). Tying minimum wage to the CPI will take politics and politicians out of the process once and for all. It means working people can count on an increase in their wages as they experience an increase in their cost of living. But it also means businesses will have predictability in terms of an increase and will not have to face high increases every time politicians feel it is past due to raise the minimum wage. This is what taking care of our own is all about; putting them back to work and pulling them out of poverty.

And can anyone tell me why New Jersey’s millionaires and billionaires cannot contribute a little more to make sure New Jersey has enough resources to provide tax relief to our residents who need it most? Last time I checked, the state’s mega-wealthy made out pretty well with the establishment and then continuation of the Bush tax cuts; not to mention Governor Christie’s decision to veto New Jersey’s ‘millionaires tax’ not once, but twice. Let’s get real. New Jersey is not going to be able to get up off the mat without the resources we need, and the days of defending the wealthiest people on this planet while working people continue to struggle should have died long ago.

The path ahead is not easy, but it is a path none of us will go down alone; it’s a path we will go down together. Following the tragic events of Hurricane Sandy, progress is what we need. We desperately need the compassion displayed by Governor Christie in the wake of Sandy to continue, and not only continue, but to expand to all New Jerseyans—not just on the critical Sandy issues we face but on all of our state’s severe social and economic issues.

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So as we pull ourselves up from the destruction caused by Hurricane Sandy, we need to also pull ourselves out of this recession; and we need to be stronger, because together we will choose to make the tough choices that will ultimately build a better life for all New Jerseyans. And together we will get New Jersey back to work.