

**“Social justice should be the underlying goal of all humanity.”
-Alan V. Lowenstein, Institute Founder**



NEW JERSEY INSTITUTE
FOR SOCIAL JUSTICE

June 11, 2021

Patty Spango
Essex County Superintendent of Elections

Dear Superintendent Spango:

Thank you for your leadership and the work you and election officials did for the election this week – along with elections in the past. We are fortunate to have election officials who care about ensuring that voters have access to the ballot. The undersigned groups are committed to voter education, racial justice and community outreach. Some of our organizations also engage in nonpartisan Election Protection during every election cycle, which includes a hotline (866-OUR-VOTE), social media monitoring, field volunteers and, as needed, legal advocacy. It is because of our experience, and what we have observed during the most recent and past election cycles, that we are writing to you.

As you know, during the most recent election, the 2021 June Primary, multiple polling places in Newark did not have voting machines when polls opened. It took hours for machines to arrive. Ryan Haygood, the President & CEO of the New Jersey Institute for Social Justice, went to cast his vote at 7:30 a.m. at his polling place at the Nellie Grier Senior Day Care Center at 98 Maple Street in Newark (South Ward, District 46). When he arrived, there were no voting machines available. The poll worker informed him that he would have to come back later in the day. He had to ask for a provisional ballot in order to cast a vote at that time. Election officials on site informed him about the other districts in Newark that also did not have machines. In the interim, voters were forced to vote by provisional ballot – a vital backup option, but a backup nonetheless – or had to leave and come back later in the day to vote.

This is not the first time there has been a major Election Day issue in Newark. During the November 2020 General Election, multiple polling places in Newark were not open at 6 a.m., once again forcing voters in the city to accommodate for these issues. Unfortunately, we have observed similar problems in Newark in the past as well.

Voters in much of the rest of Essex County do not encounter these issues, but voters in Newark – the state's largest city and a majority Black city – regularly do. The unfortunate reality is that the election issues in Essex County are disproportionately felt by Black and Brown voters in Newark.

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do social justice.

We request that your office conduct a thorough investigation regarding the issues we saw during the 2021 Primary Election, but also those in previous years. While past issues occurred prior to your time as Superintendent of Elections, voters still deserve answers and remedies. We request a written accounting of what happened this June, last November, and other previous issues, and what measures the county intends to take to ensure these problems do not persist.

We do not make this request lightly. We understand how difficult it is to run elections, particularly during a pandemic. We work with counties and the state to ensure that our election system is strong and that voters can trust it. Our goal is to ensure all voters have easy and equal access to the ballot. However, voters in Newark do not have the same access as voters in other parts of Essex County and the State of New Jersey. Moreover, it has been difficult for advocates and the public to receive answers and accountability for election issues in Newark.

We think an investigation from your office and a public release of the findings and plans to remedy the issues are necessary. We are willing to work with you and offer any assistance that may be helpful.

We ask that you respond to this letter by June 17, 2021 with a plan of action.

Respectfully,

Abbott Leadership Institute
All of Us or None-Northern NJ
Brick City Peace Collective
CAIR New Jersey
Delaware-New Jersey National Lawyers Guild
Lawyers' Committee for Civil Rights Under Law
League of Women Voters of New Jersey
Muslim League of Voters
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Salvation and Social Justice
The American Civil Liberties Union of New Jersey

cc: Secretary of State Tahesha Way
Essex County Clerk Christopher J. Durkin
Clerk of the Essex County Board of Elections Linda Von Nessi