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LEGAL SERVICES OF NEW JERSEY CALLS FOR ENDING BLANKET BAN ON PEOPLE WITH PAST CRIMINAL RECORDS FOREVER FROM BEING JURORS

EDISON — Legal Services of New Jersey (LSNJ) says it is long past due to remove the shackles barring more than half million formerly or currently incarcerated New Jerseyans—mostly people of color—from serving as jurors anytime in their lifetimes.

LSNJ advanced that position in letters to the governor and legislative leaders, making clear its unequivocal support for pending legislation, a bill, known as S-292. In the New Jersey Senate, that would end the long-standing prohibition on jury service for people who committed any indictable offenses.

Citing state statistics that 59 percent of inmates in New Jersey are Black even though Blacks make up 14 percent of the state’s overall population, LSNJ’s Senior Vice President Akil Roper said the “unnecessary and hurtful” jury duty ban effectively perpetuates “racial discrimination and bias” by the “overwhelming disproportionate exclusion of Black people.”

Roper said LSNJ’s unwavering support is focused on S-292 in the upper house and not a companion bill, A-834 in the state Assembly. He emphasized that is because the Assembly version of the ban’s elimination includes what’s known as “carve outs,” leaving in place the jury

service ban for people convicted of two indictable categories—murder or aggravated sexual assault.

“It is our position that once individuals are no longer incarcerated, they should have the right to sit on a jury—with no carve outs, impositions, restriction, or roadblocks.”

He said it’s a matter of basic fairness and further coincides with various recent efforts in the Garden State to give past offenders a “second chance” at putting their lives back together and reentering society.

Currently four states—Maine, Indiana, North Dakota, and Washington—have some form of laws ending jury duty bans for felons. Governor Philip Murphy already has announced his general support of the change, which has the recommendation of the New Jersey Supreme Court. Additionally, LSNJ plans to join a coalition of the New Jersey Institute for Social Justice and some 50 organizations soon to announce support for S-292.

Legal Services of New Jersey (LSNJ), located in Edison, heads the state’s Legal Services system, a network of six independent nonprofit corporations that provides free essential legal aid in civil matters to low-income people in all 21 counties.

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