



# IDEAS

**10<sup>th</sup> ANNIVERSARY**

*A Journal of Student-Generated Ideas from  
Across the Roosevelt Network*



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## ***Who We Are***

The Roosevelt Institute, working to redefine the rules that guide our social and economic realities, is home to the nation's largest network of emerging researchers, writers, and advocates. Our student members, organizing in 130 chapters in nearly 40 states across the country, believe it matters who writes the rules for our communities and work in coalitions to advance principled ideas and visionary, actionable plans. In the long-term, Rooseveltters seek to transform government to be reflective and responsive to the people it serves, advancing a policy agenda to combat corporate power and regain public control over public goods, such as water, transit, education, and health care.

## ***What You're Holding***

The 10th anniversary edition of *10 Ideas* stands as a testament to the vision set out by our founders over a decade ago and the strength of the Roosevelt Network today. From the most globalized cities, to rural communities, and everything in between, the *10 Ideas* journal features submissions that reflect innovative solutions to some of the most pressing issues of our time. Across geographies and issue areas, our members' work is aligned by the unified vision that to most effectively rewrite the rules that guide our social and economic realities, we must change who gets to write them.

## ***How You Can Join***

When we write the rules for our communities, we define their futures. If you're interested in starting or joining a Roosevelt chapter on your campus, visit our website at [www.rooseveltinstitute.org](http://www.rooseveltinstitute.org). Thank you for reading and supporting the work of Rooseveltters. Together, we will reshape our social and economic institutions and systems to ensure they are built by the many for the good of all.

Dear Readers,

Welcome to the 10th anniversary edition of *10 Ideas*! Over the last decade, this journal has elevated the ideas of young people across the country seeking to not only rewrite the rules for their communities, but to also foundationally shift who gets to write them.

This generation of Rooseveltians is facing a political and social reality that is profoundly different than the ones that existed in previous iterations of this journal: Across all levels of government, policies that openly target our most vulnerable communities are being promoted by political leadership; actions that dismantle our most venerable institutions are being taken by those in power; and during a time that requires unwavering vigilance, there is limited capacity to undo oppressive policies and practices and push forward a progressive, aspirational vision for a better society. Despite this reality, we're channeling emerging leaders' energy for resistance into policy change and long-term civic participation.

Young people are rising to the challenges of today and building their own rule book, so that government can be reflective of and responsive to the people it's meant to serve. At Roosevelt, we believe this starts at the local level, working in coalitions alongside partner organizations and seeding student-led campaigns to push back on privatization and corporate power. From eliminating commission payments for the use of prison phones, to improving accessibility to mental health services in public education, to expanding community-shared ownership of solar energy production, this year's journal embodies our commitment to regain public control over public goods. *10 Ideas* 2018 centers equity, inclusion, and a mission to strengthen the public goods that provide critical services and resources for us all.

The rules of our communities define their futures. Ultimately, we want our work to move the country toward a new economic and political system: one built by many for the good of all. We hope you enjoy reading these proposals and will join our fight to rewrite the rules.

In solidarity,

A handwritten signature in cursive script that reads "Nehemiah J. Rolle". The signature is written in black ink and is positioned above the printed name and title.

Nehemiah J. Rolle  
National Director

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# Addressing the Mental Health of High School Students: Expanding Training and Tools in North Carolina

By Shivpriya Sridhar, Rachel Despard, and Aditi Adhikari

Roosevelt @ University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill

## THESIS:

To address the increasing reports of anxiety and depression in North Carolina public high schools, state legislators and the North Carolina State Board of Education should charge the Department of Public Instruction with (1) providing Mental Health First Aid training to school educators and (2) integrating the free online screening tools of Mental Health America into the North Carolina Standard Course of Study health education curriculum.<sup>1</sup>

## BACKGROUND & ANALYSIS

The mental health of students in U.S. public high schools has worsened significantly in the past decade. The rise of adolescent anxiety can be attributed to the realities of being a teenager, including constant testing in school, homework, extracurricular activities, and the pressure to attend college. Anxiety, and the depression that often follows, has risen significantly in the past few decades, and even in the past few years. The average high school student today has similar levels of anxiety to a psychiatric patient in the 1950s.<sup>2</sup> From 2005 to 2014, the number of teens who had a major depressive episode jumped by 37 percent.<sup>3</sup> Even more concerning, 20 percent of high schoolers consider suicide every year, and 1,700 teens die from suicide each year.<sup>4</sup>

For public schools in North Carolina, these problems are just as prevalent. In the state, 26 percent of high school students suffer from symptoms of depression, compared to 30 percent of students in the United States at large. Of these students, 16 percent have seriously considered suicide, compared to 18 percent for the U.S. These statistics elevate the crucial need to identify and address student mental health across the state. In this paper, we will discuss policy actions North Carolina public schools as well as the N.C. state government can implement to better assess and address the mental health needs of students and to improve students' academic success and well-being.

## TALKING POINTS

- Over a quarter of public high school students in North Carolina suffer from depression and anxiety.<sup>5</sup> These issues can be created or exacerbated by school.
- Public schools in the state have very limited or ineffective resources available to address mental health issues among students.
- By providing educators with Mental Health First Aid training and encouraging public schools in North Carolina to incorporate mental health screening tools, high school students suffering from depression, anxiety, and/or other mental disorders may be less likely to be overlooked.

## KEY FACTS

- 26 percent of high school students in North Carolina suffer from symptoms of depression, and 16 percent of these students have seriously considered suicide.
- The average high school student today has similar levels of anxiety to a psychiatric patient in the 1950s.
- From 2005 to 2014, the number of teens who had a major depressive episode jumped by 37 percent.
- As of 2017, the North Carolina State Board of Education has prioritized school mental health through a charter school-based initiative.<sup>6</sup>

## THE POLICY IDEA

Mental Health First Aid (MHFA) training provides a way for adults to identify and address signs of mental health issues among students. The program has been implemented across the world and is recognized by the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA) as an evidence-based public health intervention.<sup>7</sup> The widespread implementation of MHFA would provide North Carolina public high schools with a framework for professionally addressing mental illness, such as depression, anxiety, and suicidality, while screening tools—i.e., surveys to check for mental disorders—would help students better identify their own mental health needs. The policy idea, then, is to encourage the state’s public school system to implement MHFA training as an integral part of preparing educators for their jobs and integrate Mental Health America (MHA) screening tools into standard health education courses of study and/or school climate, so that students may feel better supported in school.<sup>8</sup>

## POLICY ANALYSIS

North Carolina public high schools may utilize the established, efficient, and cost-effective training structure of Mental Health First Aid USA and the free online screening tools of Mental Health America, in order to increase mental health awareness and supports. MHFA training has exhibited marked success in the U.S. and countries across the world—most notably in Australia, China, and Sweden, where randomized control trial (RCT) studies have shown improvement in the inclination and confidence to assist distressed persons following training.<sup>9,10</sup> Because teachers, school nurses, administrators, coaches, and many other school employees have backgrounds in education or work extensively with students, they are well-positioned to undergo this training and subsequently provide students with adequate support and resource recommendations. In fact, following training, most U.S. employees report a 67 percent confidence increase in their ability to recognize signs of mental illness, 56 percent confidence increase to reach out to a struggling individual, and 47 percent increase in confidence to connect a distressed person with appropriate resources.<sup>11</sup> Within the context of school districts repeatedly plagued by state budget shortfalls and/or a lack of school psychological supports,<sup>12</sup> MHFA training is particularly cost-effective, inclusive of school employees, and specifically tailored to meet the needs of youth or adults. Implementation may also proactively mitigate the overwhelming scarcity of more than 4,000 child/adolescent psychologists the nation, as a whole, will incur by 2020.<sup>13</sup>

MHFA training instructors can be searched by locale, but if one does not exist in a particular area, a school official, teacher, community leader, or any adult may obtain certification over five days, for a fee of \$2,000. Training facilities can be searched for by locale on the MHFA website. Once certified, instructors must simply facilitate three trainings a year to maintain certification. A \$2,000 fee pales in comparison to the annual costs of employing more school psychologists.<sup>14</sup> By targeting not only teachers but all school employees who work extensively with students, MHFA enables students to foster diverse support networks and also demonstrates an institutional commitment to the intersectionality of a student’s identity in school, whether that identity be intrinsic or extrinsic—i.e., defined by extracurricular commitments—in nature. In order to suitably integrate the free mental health screening tools provided online (in English and Spanish) by Mental Health America,<sup>15</sup> the Department of Public Instruction (DPI) may issue a formal statement of support to encourage parents, guardians, and students to utilize these free resources. Additionally, or alternatively, the screening may be integrated into the state’s mandated health education curriculum, at little to no financial cost to school districts.

## NEXT STEPS

On April 7, 2017, the North Carolina State Board of Education (SBE) passed a school-based mental health initiative policy targeting local education agencies and charter schools.<sup>16</sup> While the policy did not specifically propose Mental Health First Aid training efforts or recommend screening tools, it serves as a precedent for prioritizing mental health in public schools. The N.C. Department of Public Instruction (DPI) is charged with implementation of policies from the SBE. As such, the SBE has the authority to push for the Center for Safer Schools—a DPI initiative that funds technical trainings to school teachers year-round in order to fund a mental health training initiative for public schools (similar to that already proposed for charter schools).<sup>17</sup> In addition to the SBE, another key mental health ally in the state is the North Carolina Department of Health and Human Services (NCDHHS).<sup>18</sup> By working with this department, the State Board of Education’s Charter School Initiative, and other mental health coalitions, Department of Public Instruction officials may better prioritize the need for training and increased resources in public schools.

The current state and federal political climate surrounding health care, alongside recent attempts by the North Carolina House of Representatives to cut mental health salary spending, is not conducive to our policy area; for instance, House Bill 403 recently intended to cut salaries of mental health professionals.<sup>19</sup> As such, we have proposed an initiative that would incur little to no costs, in contrast to the costly alternative of increasing the number of positions for mental health professional in schools.

# Seeing the Future: Establishing Transition Services for the Visually Impaired

By Veronica Lewis

Roosevelt @ George Mason University

## THESIS

By creating an interactive website detailing transition services for visually impaired students through the Virginia Department of Education and the Virginia Department of the Blind and Vision Impaired, high school students with vision impairments can learn about the resources available to them in the pursuit of higher education.

## BACKGROUND AND ANALYSIS

More than 8 million Americans report having some type of vision impairment, defined as vision loss not corrected by glasses; 62,528 of these people are primary and secondary school students.<sup>20</sup> This number is likely higher, as students with multiple disabilities, traumatic brain injuries, learning disabilities, and other health issues may also have vision impairments that are not reflected in these statistics.<sup>21</sup> As early identification of vision impairment increases, the number of visually impaired students is expected to grow.

While in school, students identified with disabilities receive services and accommodations through a federal document called an individualized education plan (IEP). Accommodations may include large print, Braille, extended time, test accommodations, and the use of assistive technology. Assistive technology is defined by the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act as “any item, piece of equipment, or product system, whether acquired commercially off the shelf, modified, or customized, that is used to increase, maintain, or improve functional capabilities.” Examples of assistive technology include blindness canes, screen readers, video magnifiers, and high-contrast markers.<sup>22</sup>

When preparing to begin post-secondary education, students are often unaware of the auxiliary resources they receive in high school or what resources may be available to them after high school. Some visually impaired students believe they cannot obtain any resources and thus drop out of school or do not pursue higher education at all. For working adults ages 21 to 64, the national unemployment rate for people with significant vision impairment is approximately 58 percent.<sup>23</sup>

## TALKING POINTS

- Because of a lack of services available to them, or the perception of such, students with vision impairments are at a high risk of dropping out of high school.
- Nationally, less than 0.5 percent of IEPs are issued to students identified with vision impairments, so there are few students who receive accommodations for vision impairment compared to other disability areas.<sup>24</sup>
- If students with disabilities, including vision impairment, are not provided with transition services, they may not know about or understand the resources available to them. Therefore, they may not pursue higher education at all.
- An online resource will allow students from any location to access information about post-secondary education, which they can also show to their parents, case managers, etc., to plan for their future.

## THE POLICY IDEA

Creating a website, that is accessible anywhere and anytime, with information specific to post-secondary education, would be extremely beneficial. Because there may be only one student in an entire school district who needs transition services, a website is a more cost-effective way to reach students from various geographic areas—rather than relying on assistive staff to visit students or schools individually, possibly interrupting class time.

By collaborating with the Virginia Department of Education to build a website that outlines transition services for students with vision impairments, these students can learn more about the services available to them post-graduation and document what services they will need. An online resource will also show students that higher education is accessible to them, despite vision impairment, which may help to reduce the high school dropout rate in Virginia.

Because students may rely on assistive technology to access information on the internet, ensuring that the website is responsive to devices like refreshable Braille displays and screen readers is crucial. Enabling students to use their own devices will provide a sense of familiarity and encourage the use of the online resource.

School districts with a low number of students who identify as visually impaired will benefit the most in Virginia, as these districts tend to have fewer resources available to students, especially for transition services. With an online resource, students can learn about what they can do after graduating from high school and make plans to pursue higher education. With 29 percent of people with vision impairments living below the poverty line nationwide, and 54.5 percent having a high school education or less, increasing resources for transition services will help students not only graduate, but plan for their future. Increased access to resources will better prepare visually impaired students to enter the workforce, pay taxes, and earn a living.<sup>25</sup>

## NEXT STEPS

The Virginia Department of Education, in conjunction with the Virginia Department of the Blind and Vision Impaired, should create an interactive website that allows students to explore transition services available to them leading up to and through post-secondary education. This can include information about government agencies, disability services, and assistive technology. Most notably, the proposed website would give students the opportunity to document the services they receive in high school and create a printout that they can bring to disability intake meetings, assistive technology assessments, and other crucial appointments that may occur during the admissions process.

## KEY FACTS

- IEPs expire the moment a student graduates from high school. Because visually impaired students cannot bring an IEP with them to college, a disability services file or other document is necessary to continue services.<sup>26</sup>
- 44 percent of visually impaired individuals between the ages of 21 and 64 have at least some college or a bachelor's degree.<sup>27</sup>
- Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act requires colleges to be accessible to students with disabilities.<sup>28</sup>
- The Virginia Department of the Blind and Vision Impaired serves 5,800 people a year.<sup>29</sup>

# Utilizing New Development for a More Affordable Ann Arbor

By Christopher Olson, Nick Guisinger, Krishna Motta, Hannah Bradshaw, Devan O'Toole, and Connor Reese

Roosevelt @ University of Michigan

## THESIS

Due to increasing market-rate housing development and declining socioeconomic diversity, the City of Ann Arbor should assess linkage fees on new market-rate development to supplement the Ann Arbor Affordable Housing Trust Fund and develop more affordable housing in Ann Arbor.

## BACKGROUND & ANALYSIS

Ann Arbor is the least affordable place to live in Michigan.<sup>30</sup> Property values in the city continue to rise, achieving the highest assessed value in the state last year, above the significantly larger city of Detroit.<sup>31,32</sup> In 2015, the median gross rent was \$978 a month, up by 5.84 percent over the past three years; as prices have increased, the rental vacancy rate has fallen to 1.88 percent.<sup>33</sup> For those making 30 percent of the area median income (AMI), in occupations such as baristas or wait staff, only 6.5 percent of Ann Arbor rentals are affordable.<sup>34</sup> As of 2016, Ann Arbor has only 1,070 affordable housing units, having added 16 committed affordable housing units in 2016.<sup>35</sup> Should that pace of construction continue, Ann Arbor would reach its county goal—adding 2,777 new units of committed affordable housing—in 310 years.<sup>36</sup> A housing-employment linkage fee assessed on market-rate development would create funding for new affordable housing in Ann Arbor.

Despite the need for affordable housing units, Ann Arbor has continued to see growth in market-rate housing—any rental space that lacks rent restrictions and is priced according to supply and demand forces.<sup>37</sup> In downtown Ann Arbor, there is demand for 1,525 new housing units.<sup>38</sup> A proposed development in the city, costing \$44 million to build, would add 267 market-rate apartments with rents between \$800 to \$1,800 a month, which is above what is affordable to those earning 50 percent of the AMI.<sup>39,40</sup> In order to make Ann Arbor affordable to everyone, affordable housing stock must grow with market-rate housing.

## TALKING POINTS

- Linkage fees—fees assessed on new market-rate housing development—will increase funding for the Affordable Housing Trust Fund. In turn, this will fund Section 8 housing used throughout the city, leading to a more diverse and inclusive community in Ann Arbor.
- Skyrocketing housing costs in Ann Arbor have priced out many families from moving to the city, deepening socioeconomic segregation in Washtenaw County.
- Growth of the City's Affordable Housing Trust Fund will extend the impact and reach of Ann Arbor's non-profit housing developers by increasing the pool of funding that can be distributed to support affordable development.

## KEY FACTS

- The median rent in Ann Arbor is approximately 22 percent higher than that of Michigan as a whole, elevating the need for affordable housing in the city.<sup>41</sup>
- A new resolution for affordable housing in Los Angeles, California, pushed by Mayor Eric Garcetti, is estimated to generate between \$75 million and \$92 million in revenue, which could pay for 1,500 new units annually for residents with lower incomes.<sup>42</sup>
- Linkage fees in Boston have assisted in the creation of 10,176 affordable housing units across 193 development projects.<sup>43</sup>

## THE POLICY IDEA

Ann Arbor continues to experience rapid growth in market-rate housing developments. This development attracts high-income families, increasing demand for services like stores and restaurants, which in turn require service employees. These employees need housing but cannot afford market-rate housing in Ann Arbor, showing the link between new market-rate development and increased need for affordable housing. For this reason, fees should be assessed on certain types of new market-rate development—similar to impact fees, or fees charged by a local government to cover the costs of providing public services (sewer, utilities, etc.) to the development—that would be used to supplement the Ann Arbor Affordable Housing Trust Fund.

## POLICY ANALYSIS

Linkage fees have been very successful in directing funds toward affordable housing in other localities: Boston's program has raised \$45 million dollars for affordable housing construction and preservation since 1986, and a linkage fee program in San Diego has brought in about \$30 million since 1990.<sup>44</sup> Berkeley, a city similar to Ann Arbor in population and also home to a major university, has operated a linkage fee program since 1993 and brought in nearly \$3 million to fund affordable housing and childcare services.<sup>45</sup> All three cities have operated linkage fee programs for at least two decades, and all continue to boast healthy, growing housing markets.

Specific fee rates and uses assessed should be determined by a nexus study, which uses city data and a complex software program to estimate the effects of a linkage fee program on the local housing market and uses these estimates to recommend which land uses to assess and at what rate. Without such a study of Ann Arbor, we can use Berkeley as a benchmark to observe what effects linkage fees might have in the city. There will be a demand for an additional 300,000 square feet of new downtown office space by 2021.<sup>46</sup> If office, commercial, and residential developments were assessed at \$4.00 per square foot, as is Berkeley's fee rate, the demand for office space alone would generate approximately \$1.2 million dollars in revenue for the Ann Arbor Affordable Housing Trust Fund.<sup>47</sup>

Under Michigan law, inclusive zoning and rent control cannot be implemented in the state. Though linkage fees have never been implemented in Michigan, they have weathered court challenges in other places with similar legal statutes surrounding inclusive zoning and rent control, such as California.<sup>48</sup>

## NEXT STEPS

In order to create impact, the linkage fee policy proposal must be supported by local affordable housing non-profits and implemented by Ann Arbor's city council. The city council established the supplementation of Ann Arbor's Affordable Housing Trust Fund as a key objective to address the increasing socioeconomic disparity created by rising property values and prices. City Councilman Zach Ackerman has even suggested an initiative to allocate a portion of the revenue generated by taxes to be put into the Ann Arbor Affordable Housing Trust Fund, which has had no dedicated funding stream in the past.<sup>49</sup> Non-profit developers, including Avalon, Habitat for Humanity of Huron Valley, and Housing Access for Washtenaw County, will benefit from a greater pool of funding and are potential allies in garnering support for this policy.

# Modern Mobility for All: A Universal Ticket for NYC's Subway System

By Leopold Aschenbrenner and Hannah Healy

Roosevelt @ Columbia University

## THESIS

New York City should provide universal public transit access, through a surcharge on residents and tourists in exchange for an unlimited MetroCard. This would sustainably fund urgent modernization efforts, give low-income residents access to essential mobility, and nudge New Yorkers towards more environment-friendly transportation.

## BACKGROUND & ANALYSIS

New York City's subway system transports more than 5.7 million people every day and is the lifeblood of one our nation's key economic hubs.<sup>50</sup> Yet much of the 1930s-era infrastructure is crumbling: New York's on-time performance is only 65 percent, the lowest of any major transit system in the world.<sup>51</sup> Across the board, independent analyses have concluded that the root of this decay is a chronic lack of investment.<sup>52</sup> After massive infusions of money in the 1970s to fix a similar crisis, Republican and Democratic leaders have repeatedly cut funding, and, most egregiously, redirected earmarked funds and dedicated taxes away from the subway system towards their own ventures.<sup>53</sup> These failures carry social and economic consequences: Subway riders miss everything from special occasions to job opportunities, potentially losing valuable time and earnings.

In addition, funding for the subway system increasingly comes from fares, which currently provide for a record 60 percent of funding. A one-time ride currently costs \$2.75, and the total cost for unlimited monthly passes over a year is \$1,452.<sup>54</sup> Without a reduced-fare option for the economically disadvantaged, these prices not only put an undue burden on low-income New Yorkers, who often rely the most heavily on public transit and have the least available funds, but they also prevent access to basic mobility.<sup>55</sup> According to the Community Service Society, transit expenses often exceed 10 percent of the overall household budgets for more than 300,000 working poor New Yorkers, especially low-income African Americans and Latinos.<sup>56</sup> High transit costs, and the resulting barriers to mobility, can force residents to forgo critical medical care or food and impede access to job opportunities, educational facilities, and even voting polls.<sup>57</sup> The decaying subway system in New York City is failing those who need it most.

## THE POLICY IDEA

To provide universal access to public transit, New York City should provide every resident with an unlimited MetroCard. In return, every adult resident would pay a yearly surcharge to the City, totaling \$250 per year for those earning between 133 percent to 200 percent of the federal poverty line, and \$500 per year for those earning above 200 percent of the poverty line (inflation-adjusted annually). Commercial lodging services, including hotels and AirBnB, would charge guests a \$10 per day surcharge in exchange for unlimited public transit access. Visitors staying in private lodging and New York State commuters would pay the existing fares.

## KEY FACTS

- The New York City subway system is in a “state of emergency,” with the worst on-time performance of any major rapid-transit system in the world. This costs billions in lost economic productivity and severely restricts the essential mobility of 5.7 million daily riders.
- While ridership has almost doubled in the past two decades, maintenance spending has stagnated since the 1990s, leading to a chronic lack of investment.<sup>58</sup>
- More than one-third of New York City's low-income residents said that subway fares were so high they prevented them from getting medical care or seeking a better job, with particularly high rates among African Americans and Latinos.<sup>59</sup>

## POLICY ANALYSIS

The surcharge on New York City residents would provide approximately \$3 billion in funding every year;<sup>60</sup> the surcharge on visitors in commercial lodging would provide approximately \$1.5 billion a year,<sup>61</sup> with an extra \$1.5 billion from those paying the existing fares.<sup>62</sup> Not only would the approximate \$6 billion per year cover the current funding provided by transit fares, but it would also provide an additional \$1.2 billion a year in funding for infrastructure investments.<sup>63</sup>

Crucially, and in contrast to Governor Andrew Cuomo's plan for \$1 billion in one-time investments,<sup>64</sup> this reform would provide a recurring stream of investment revenue—providing much-needed funds to not only fix the current crisis, but to also continually maintain and improve the system to avoid repeating the existing failure. By linking the unlimited MetroCard to a flat surcharge, as opposed to the current, highly misused system of earmarking taxes, our proposal can provide the accountability necessary to ensure that these funds are used as intended. Moreover, this simple surcharge provides consistent revenue, as opposed to widely fluctuating property taxes in the financial hub of New York City.

By broadening the payment base for transit fares, thereby significantly reducing costs to individuals, and providing universal access to public transport, this plan would reduce a massive burden on low-income New Yorkers and provide them with critical mobility necessary to access economic opportunity. This change would especially impact historically disadvantaged communities of color.<sup>65</sup>

Finally, the subway will become more reliable and significantly cheaper than other transportation options for residents and tourists in commercial lodging, likely leading many to utilize the environment-friendly subway system over ride-hailing and other transportation options that cause greater pollution.

## TALKING POINTS

- Universal access to the New York City public transit system would make the subway turnstile a door to opportunity, not a barrier to mobility.
- Fairer surcharges would enable a consistent, secure, and sustainable source of funding for investment in and upkeep of New York City's subway system, solving the current crisis and preventing a repeat of this failure.
- With a more reliable and cheaper transit system in New York City, more people will opt for environment-sustainable public transit over polluting cars and ride-hailing services.

## NEXT STEPS

This proposal could potentially be completely undertaken at the local level, with the City levying the surcharge and distributing the MetroCards independent of the Metropolitan Transportation Authority (MTA), the state-level agency that currently manages the subway system. However, the most efficient solution would involve cooperation among the City, New York State, and the MTA.

In order to fully illustrate the benefits of this plan, the MTA and advocacy groups should collaborate to create a comprehensive cost analysis of the policy and model the economic and environmental outcomes.

As New York City's transit system continues to deteriorate, pressure by disgruntled commuters will force lawmakers to consider innovative proposals, thus providing a prime opening for our idea. Commuters would be encouraged by improved reliability, as well as cheaper fares for most residents; progressive organizations and communities of color would welcome significantly improved access to crucial mobility; and environmental advocates would also embrace efforts to significantly decrease pollution. These common interests could provide fertile ground for a broad-based grassroots movement.

# Reducing Recidivism: Cutting the Cost of Prison Phone Calls in Georgia

By Nina Reddy

Roosevelt @ University of Georgia

## THESIS

In order to reduce exorbitant calling rates for inmates and foster family contact during incarceration, Georgia's General Assembly should enact legislation that mandates both state prisons and local jail systems to phase out the commission payments they generally receive from telephone service companies.

## BACKGROUND & ANALYSIS

The prison telephone industry is one of the most lucrative businesses in the United States today. Prison phone companies have a complete, state-sanctioned monopoly over the prison market—90 percent of incarcerated individuals live in states where phone services are controlled exclusively by three companies: Global Tel\*Link, Securus Technologies, or CenturyLink.<sup>66,67</sup> Prison phone companies gain these monopolies when they submit contract proposals to the state prison system, contracts that include a “commission” back to the state. Thus, prison systems are incentivized to choose the company that provides the highest commission, as opposed to the one that offers the lowest rate.<sup>68</sup> The market especially exploits socioeconomically disadvantaged persons who are left with no affordable method of communicating with family.<sup>69</sup>

A variety of stakeholders maintain that there is a clear link between family contact during incarceration and reduced recidivism. Even Congress has acknowledged evidence suggesting that inmates who are connected to their families are more likely to have reduced sentences.<sup>70</sup> The Federal Bureau of Prisons (BOP) maintains that telephone privileges are an important means of maintaining this connection, which contributes to inmates' personal development. In many states, however, the exploitative market structure means that a 15-minute phone call can cost over \$15.<sup>71</sup> These steep calling rates can deter family communication. One study focused on individuals released from Illinois prisons, for example, shows that phone call pricing was one of the two most significant impediments to family communication during incarceration.<sup>72</sup>

## TALKING POINTS

- The prison phone market currently exploits socioeconomically disadvantaged individuals, as prison phone companies maintain an exclusive monopoly over state prisons, resulting in exorbitant call pricing.
- Legislation that prohibits state prisons from receiving commissions, or “kickbacks,” from phone companies would result in lower call rates for incarcerated individuals and their families, opening up lines of communication.
- Literature establishes an evident link between family contact during incarceration and reduced rates of recidivism. Increased communication could also foster relationships with incarcerated parents and their children.

## KEY FACTS

- A four-minute call made to a Florida inmate in 2014 cost a whopping \$56.18.<sup>73</sup>
- The prison phone system is now a \$1.2 billion-a-year industry dominated by just a few private companies.<sup>74</sup>
- A variety of stakeholders maintain that there is a clear link between family contact during incarceration and reduced recidivism.
- The Federal Prison System can charge comparatively low rates at \$.06 per minute for local calls and \$0.23 per minute for long-distance calls, while still generating immense profit.<sup>75</sup>

## THE POLICY IDEA

The Georgia General Assembly should enact legislation under Title 42 of the Official Code of Georgia Annotated that (1) prohibits Georgia state prisons, county prisons, and contracting authorities from accepting any type of commission, or “kickback,” from contracts with prison telephone companies—as they inflate call rates—(2) requires all correctional facilities to carefully assess contractual fees in order to deem them legitimate, and (3) prohibits correctional institutions from contracting with telephone companies that are not fully transparent about how they calculate the fees proposed in their company contracts.

## POLICY ANALYSIS

The barriers exorbitant calling rates pose to society, particularly for low-income individuals least able to sustain additional expenses, underscore the need for new legislation. The proposed legislation would greatly curb call pricing by incentivizing correctional facilities to choose telephone companies that offer the lowest rates. Though prison phone companies defend high rates, claiming they are needed to cover the costs associated with providing secure telephone service, reality demonstrates that the high rates are unnecessary. New York State law bans kickbacks and requires that the lowest cost option be utilized for users.<sup>76,77</sup> Currently, incarcerated individuals in the New York prison system are charged approximately \$.05 per minute for local and long-distance calls, while call monitoring and other security measures remain intact for the state.<sup>78</sup> The Federal Prison System (FPS) also charges comparatively low rates at \$.06 per minute for local calls and \$0.23 per minute for long-distance calls, while still generating immense profits that provide for prison amenities. In 2010, federal phone rates covered prison costs and generated an additional \$34 million in profit, a financial structure that would extend to the state prison system if the proposed legislation were implemented.<sup>79,80</sup> Additionally, any short-term revenue generated by extortionate phone rates would be offset by the high costs associated with maintaining the livelihood of larger prison populations in the future, due to increased cases of reoffending that would result without regulation. With legislation, future prison costs would decrease, consistent with reduced recidivism. Additionally, 52 percent of individuals incarcerated in state prisons report having minor children.<sup>81</sup> While reducing rates of recidivism, lower call rates would also increase contact between the incarcerated and their children, fostering important parent-child contact before release.<sup>82</sup>

## NEXT STEPS

The Georgia General Assembly passed House Bill 349 in 2013, a resolution creating the current Georgia Council on Criminal Justice Reform—a bipartisan, interbranch special council that is mandated to deal with criminal procedure, sentencing laws, better management of the prison population, and other issues related to criminal proceedings and court accountability.<sup>83</sup> One key task addressed by the council is strategizing ways public safety can be improved by reducing crime and rates of recidivism.<sup>84</sup> The council makes yearly recommendations and yields significant influence over the Georgia General Assembly.

Targeting council members for support would enhance the likelihood of obtaining a policy recommendation, which would prove critical in enacting actual legislation. Lobbying Steve Teske—Chief Judge of Clayton County’s juvenile court and a strong advocate for juvenile justice reform—for instance, appears promising.<sup>85</sup> Garnering influence from a key council member would open up lines of communication with the council and help build overall support.

# Combating Discrimination and Reducing Jail Populations: Eliminating Bail for Low-Level Crimes

By Finntan Storer, Isabelle Bogojevic, and Logan Niswander  
Roosevelt @ University of Michigan

## THESIS

To reduce overpopulation in jails and combat subjectivity during arraignment proceedings, Michigan should pass a state law that requires anyone who is arrested and held for a non-violent misdemeanor or low-level felony—with an exception for DUIs—and has no criminal record be released pretrial.

## BACKGROUND AND ANALYSIS

The failed “War on Drugs” transformed American jails and prisons into institutions that go beyond punishing perpetrators of crime; inmates today are targeted for inherent characteristics, such as race, mental health, and economic status. Beginning in the 1960s, the political push for “law and order” resulted in the implementation of harsher drug sentencing laws at the state and federal level, including the use of mandatory minimum penalties.<sup>86</sup> Urbanites, who were predominantly minorities and residents of impoverished neighborhoods, bore the heaviest burden for such laws—a trend that continues today.<sup>87</sup> Take Detroit, for example: more residents of the city were in detention centers in 2010 than were union workers.<sup>88</sup> The impact of a biased, ambiguous criminal justice system is not only apparent in racial and geographic disparities, but it is also made evident within the system itself—specifically, in pretrial release decisions.<sup>89</sup>

The pretrial decision process is typically highly subjective due to equivocal bail laws—the rules that judges follow when they set the monetary amount, or bond, that a person charged with a crime must pay to be released before their trial.<sup>90</sup> While racial bias has a strong presence in pretrial release decisions, other pertinent factors include a defendant’s record and the level of his or her offense.<sup>91,92</sup> Most people detained across the country are charged with misdemeanors and are practically forced into jail because of their inability to afford bail.<sup>93</sup> If Michigan laws were reformed to ensure that those convicted with misdemeanors aren’t charged with unreasonable bail fines, the number of inmates in county jails in Michigan—which are at or exceeding capacity—would be significantly reduced across the state.<sup>94</sup>

## TALKING POINTS

- There are racial disparities in current jails and prisons, and the ambiguity of bail laws means that the potential for discrimination is even higher. African Americans, for example, serve nearly 20 percent longer sentences than their white counterparts who commit similar crimes.<sup>95</sup>
- Nationally, two-thirds of prisoners in county jail are awaiting trial.<sup>96</sup> Pretrial detention costs U.S. taxpayers \$13.6 billion each year.<sup>97</sup> With bail supervision costing, on average, only \$7 a day compared to \$75 a day for imprisonment, it is far cheaper to release detainees before trial and supervise them until.<sup>98</sup>
- In Washington D.C., a bail-free pretrial release system has proved to be incredibly effective, with only 10 percent of those released pretrial reoffending. Only 2 percent of those released reoffend by committing a violent crime.<sup>99</sup>
- Given that the median annual income for county jail inmates is \$15,109, people in jail are the poorest members of the prison population. Not only is the average bond of \$10,000 unfeasible, but bail alone also reinforces a crushing cycle of poverty and desperation.<sup>100</sup>

## POLICY IDEA

Due to the subjectivity and ambiguity surrounding how bail is set, the State of Michigan should implement a law requiring judges to release defendants pretrial—provided that the criminal charge is a misdemeanor or class H felony, the accused is a first-time offender, and the charge is non-violent.

## POLICY ANALYSIS

Given the racial disparities in jails and prisons, this policy aims to prevent discrimination in setting bail and to reduce pretrial jail populations, which have risen significantly since 1978.<sup>101</sup> African Americans, for example, serve nearly 20 percent longer sentences than their white counterparts who commit similar crimes.<sup>102</sup> The ambiguity of bail laws, the cash bail system, and the criminal justice system in general—the 8th Amendment has fostered such creation of ambiguous laws—means that the potential for discrimination is even higher. By setting specific guidelines and eliminating judges' ability to arbitrarily set bail, our policy reduces the likelihood of subjective sentencing from happening at the lower level.

By releasing first-time offenders back into the public, our policy would also help to prevent employment termination and give the accused time to build a criminal defense with their counsel. A 2005 Department of Justice study found that 67.8 percent of state prisoners were arrested within three years of their release.<sup>103</sup> Allowing these offenders to be released pretrial could lead to more successful defenses and result in little to no jail time, potentially lowering both the rate of recidivism and prison populations. Washington D.C., for example, has largely eliminated their cash bail system. Under this policy reform, only 10 percent of offenders out on release pretrial have reoffended—committing crimes that are largely non-violent, as well.<sup>104</sup> This policy does not propose a measure as drastic as D.C.'s bail system, but the example shows that the most drastic measures carry little risk to public safety. In order to be more actionable, implementable, and politically appealing, our policy targets low-level crime.

## NEXT STEPS

Prison overpopulation, caused by a biased bail system and extensive pretrial detention, is a serious issue in Michigan. In order to change the system, the Michigan state legislature would have to pass new legislation. To effectively push for policy change, it is necessary to build agency and cooperation with other advocates. Such agents of change include the American Civil Liberties Union (ACLU) undergraduate chapter at the University of Michigan (UM), other Roosevelt Network members at UM, the Michigan Collaborative to End Mass Incarceration (MI-CEMI), and the State of Michigan. Michigan Supreme Court Chief Justice Bridget Mary McCormack, who leads a working group on cash bail reform,<sup>105</sup> will be key to the success of the campaign. Additionally, we will work with and lobby the Criminal Justice Policy Commission. Specifically, we will connect with State Representative Vanessa Guerra, who can push our policy in the Michigan House of Representatives by introducing legislation.<sup>106</sup>

## KEY FACTS

- Because of the inability to afford bail, pretrial detainees account for 95 percent of the growth in jail population size in the United States over the past 20 years. As a result, these inmates comprise approximately 67 percent of the total jail population.<sup>107</sup>
- Michigan has seen its pretrial population increase threefold since 1978.<sup>108</sup>
- Given that the median annual income for county jail inmates is \$15,109, people in jail are the poorest members of the prison population, making the average bond of \$10,000 unfeasible.<sup>109</sup>
- Because of the unprecedented increase in detainees, county jails in Michigan are either at or exceed operating capacity.<sup>110</sup>

# From Risk to Rehabilitation: Promoting Drug Court Programs in Pennsylvania

By Michael Gormley

Roosevelt @ Carnegie Mellon University

## THESIS

To reduce recidivism rates, increase access to treatment, and reduce costs to taxpayers, the State of Pennsylvania should establish drug court programs in its counties. This initiative will also help to reframe drug abuse as a health care issue.

## BACKGROUND AND ANALYSIS

High incarceration rates for drug crimes in the United States create a significant strain on the American justice system and economy. Research shows that drug incarcerations disproportionately affect communities of color, especially black Americans.<sup>111</sup> Mass incarcerations strip a significant portion of the population of their right to vote,<sup>112</sup> alongside the ramifications of possessing a criminal record. Drug-related arrests, having grown by more than 90 percent over the past three decades, also affect lower-class families at higher rates.<sup>113</sup> Both trends exacerbate socioeconomic stratification nationwide. Prison sentences also fail to treat the addiction itself, leaving the root cause of drug-related crime unaddressed.

With the emergence of the opioid abuse epidemic, trends involving drug crime have undergone a dramatic shift over the past 15 years. Classified as a national public health emergency by the federal government,<sup>114</sup> the opioid crisis took root in the over-prescription of pain medication. Sales of opiates nearly quadrupled over the last two decades.<sup>115</sup> With increased access to these drugs came increased abuse by those to which they were prescribed, and even the development of black markets to re-sell the drugs. Increases in tolerance following the release of stronger drugs have led many abusers to turn to heroin,<sup>116</sup> along with criminal activity to fund the increasingly expensive habit. Government response has largely consisted of incarcerating addicts for these crimes, instead of providing treatment for the addiction epidemic as the cause. With its high recidivism rates and costs of incarceration, U.S. drug and prison policy has collectively failed to serve the country's interests.

## TALKING POINTS

- Criminal sentencing for drug crimes disproportionately affects the most marginalized, including minority communities and the poor.
- Drug courts promote rehabilitation more effectively than normal prison, with lower recidivism rates and at a lower cost to the public.
- Juvenile drug courts give children and teenagers access to treatment without the drawbacks of criminal records or prison sentences.
- Successful implementation of drug courts helps to reframe drugs from a criminal issue to a health care issue, further destigmatizing drug treatment.

## KEY FACTS

- As of 2017, recidivism rates nationwide are approximately 49.3 percent,<sup>117</sup> while recidivism rates among drug court participants are approximately 25 percent.<sup>118</sup>
- For each participant in a drug court program, the public saves \$6,744 on average over five years.<sup>119</sup>
- Drug court participants, on average, report 20 percent less drug use and test positive for drug use 17 percent less than non-participants.<sup>120</sup>
- Out of the 67 counties in Pennsylvania, 40 have access to a drug court. Only 7 have access to a juvenile drug court program.<sup>121</sup>

## POLICY IDEA

The main goal of this policy is to promote the propagation of “drug court” programs in district courts across Pennsylvania. Drug courts offer non-violent offenders the opportunity to defer prison sentences in exchange for taking supervised drug tests and attending rehabilitation programs, alongside additional measures designed to reintegrate individuals into society. Expanding the drug court program to encompass the judiciary statewide provides these opportunities to otherwise neglected at-risk populations. This includes juvenile drug courts, which serve a specialized need for communities with young offenders.

## POLICY ANALYSIS

Drug courts are alternative-sentencing programs used in state courts. First established in Florida in 1989 as a means to proactively combat the crack epidemic, drug courts hold trials that give judges a wider array of options during sentencing. Judges can opt to defer punitive measures like imprisonment in favor of mandates toward recovery, and they personally oversee the recovery processes to deem when individuals are fit to return to the public. Empirical evidence supports the use of drug courts as a means to reduce recidivism and to improve the overall prison system. Studies have found decreased recidivism rates from 10 percent<sup>122</sup> to 25 percent<sup>123</sup> in different observed jurisdictions that use drug courts. Specifically, drug courts nearly halved the recidivism rate among former participants compared to non-participants, with 13 percent reporting fewer criminal acts overall.<sup>124</sup> Drug courts also have specific branches to serve juvenile delinquents. Juvenile drug courts are effective in rehabilitating minors,<sup>125</sup> though there are few dedicated programs for juveniles; only seven exist in all of Pennsylvania.<sup>126</sup>

Drug courts are a cost-effective policy measure. Analyses of the costs associated with maintaining a drug court, including the specific upkeep with individuals in treatment that the program requires, find that drug courts cost more to maintain on a per-capita basis. However, with the positive externalities of the program factored in, including a reduced prison population and increased social benefit from more healthy and productive members of society,<sup>127</sup> research has found there to be an overall economic gain from participation in drug courts. Specifically, each participant in a drug court, who would otherwise serve a prison sentence, would save the state \$6,744 on average over five years.<sup>128</sup> While the intended purpose of drug courts is not to act as a cost-cutting measure, the economic feasibility of the program strengthens its sustainability.

## NEXT STEPS

The next phase of this policy proposal is to build a coalition of fellow advocates with an interest in drug court reform to target stakeholders involved with the Pennsylvania judiciary. To actualize this policy, identifying key state legislators assigned to judicial committees and developing a case to motivate legislative action is crucial. To develop that campaign, interest groups associated with prison reform, drug policy reform, and health care reform should be consulted for their expertise in how to best expand the drug court system, while accounting for the various perspectives associated with the program. Proponents of state drug court systems outside of Pennsylvania, in both government and the private sector, can serve as influential allies during the lobbying and legislative processes, and they should be connected with their relevant Pennsylvania equivalents when appropriate.

# Same-Day Voter Registration: Increasing Voter Turnout and Democratic Access in Michigan

By Hayley Padden, Claire Galligan, Noah Harrison, Elise Rometsch, and Usha Yeruva  
Roosevelt @ University of Michigan

## THESIS

To increase voter turnout, the State of Michigan should implement same-day voter registration systems for local, state, and national elections. This measure would reduce barriers to voting and increase participation without incurring significant costs to Michigan's electoral system.

## BACKGROUND & ANALYSIS

Increasing voter participation has always been a crucial goal of democratic nations and states. In order to combat low voter turnout, the State of Michigan must reduce barriers to voting. Voter turnout is particularly low among racial minorities, millennials, and people of a lower socioeconomic standing.<sup>129</sup> In order to increase voter turnout rates among these groups of people, it is important to understand what barriers stand in their way. One of the biggest barriers to voting in Michigan is the arbitrary deadline for voter registration. Under current Michigan law, residents must register to vote 30 days before an election.<sup>130</sup> Voters' applications must be mailed in or submitted to a city clerk in-person, which can be inconvenient for some people. Additionally, there is a lack of publicity regarding these deadlines, so some residents may not even be aware of what steps they have to take toward becoming a registered voter. To ensure that more Michigan residents are able to exercise this fundamental right, it is important to address this issue by implementing a same-day voter registration system as soon as possible.

## TALKING POINTS

- Registering to vote should be made easier and more accessible to all citizens in Michigan.
- Studies show that same-day registration leads to increased voter turnout.
- Thousands of eligible Michigan residents are unable to vote because they fail to register before the deadline.<sup>131</sup>
- Voting is the most basic right in a democracy, and reducing barriers to electoral participation will protect it.

## THE POLICY IDEA

The State of Michigan should pass a law enacting same-day voting registration systems for local, state, and national elections in Michigan. This legislation would eliminate arbitrary registration deadlines, allowing potential voters to register at their polling location before casting their ballot on Election Day. With this system, every polling location in Michigan will have one or more staffed booths available where eligible, unregistered voters can present identification and proof of residency and immediately be added to voter registration lists that day.

## POLICY ANALYSIS

Fifteen states have already implemented same-day registration (SDR) systems; all had a higher voter turnout rate in the 2016 national election than the national average of 60.2 percent.<sup>132</sup> However, state-by-state comparisons have limited utility given the variability amongst the states in terms of region, demographics, and election law. Therefore, stronger evidence is found in intrastate analyses that compare turnout rates before and after the implementation of same-day registration. One such analysis in Wisconsin found that SDR increased turnout by an average of roughly 3 percent in each county.<sup>133</sup> Other estimates have shown increases in voter participation of up to 5 percent.

Same-day registration systems have proven to be especially effective at increasing turnout among the least-represented groups in society: the groups, including minority and low-income communities, where increased participation is necessary in order to improve equal representation in government. In North Carolina, for example, which allows same-day registration for early voters, African Americans make up 35 percent of same-day registrants, even though they compose only 22 percent of the electorate.<sup>134</sup> Furthermore, one nationwide study found that SDR significantly reduces the income-class disparity in voter turnout, and could be more effective than convenience-voting measures and motor-voter programs.<sup>135</sup>

Additionally, SDR systems have relatively low costs, most of which are incurred by increasing staff capacity at polling locations in order to process incoming registrations. In order to accommodate the implementation of same-day voting registration, some costs would be associated with the swift update to Michigan's current registration lists. No credible research suggests that same-day voter registration increases voter fraud; according to the Minnesota Secretary of State, it likely makes voting more secure.<sup>136</sup>

## NEXT STEPS

Michigan was once a leader in increasing voter accessibility, but the state has since fallen behind others. In order to implement a same-day voter registration system in Michigan, a bill must be written that outlines the proposed SDR system. This bill would have to be introduced and passed in both Michigan's House of Representatives and Senate, with subsequent approval by Governor Rick Snyder. Successful completion of this process would establish same-day voter registration law in the state. This process could be initiated through a petition to the state legislature or through introduction by a legislator in Lansing, the state capital. Either method requires allies from advocacy groups, public support, and a draft of the proposed statute that is informed by legal expertise. Upcoming state elections in 2018 create an opportunity to elevate Michigan's restrictive voter laws—a critical issue that limits democratic participation.

## KEY FACTS

- 15 states and the District of Columbia offer same-day registration, and all of them had voter turnout rates higher than the national average for the 2016 national election.<sup>137</sup>
- Intrastate analyses show that states have higher voter turnout rates after implementing SDR systems than they did prior to implementation.<sup>138</sup>
- In order to verify eligibility, every state with same-day registration requires identification and proof of residency for registration.<sup>139</sup>
- Implementing same-day registration systems incurs little cost, and maintenance costs virtually nothing.<sup>140</sup>

# Democratizing Green Energy: Expanding Community Shared Solar in New York State

By Zachary Frieden and Brianna Cea

Roosevelt @ Binghamton University

## THESIS

To prioritize local and equitable community-owned energy production—over a corporate-controlled utility system—New York State should reform the Affordable Solar Predevelopment and Technical Assistance program in order to make community shared solar projects more accessible.

## BACKGROUND & ANALYSIS

New York State’s Reforming the Energy Vision (REV) initiative is a comprehensive plan for the state to achieve 50 percent renewable energy generation by 2030. To accomplish this goal, the REV initiative includes \$5 billion for market-based initiatives, encouraging private sector involvement in renewable energy development while neglecting local, sustainable energy development projects.<sup>141</sup> REV’s reliance on market-based incentives concentrates wealth into the hands of “clean energy barons”—corporate executives who profit from monopolizing clean energy development.<sup>142</sup>

REV operates at the detriment of New Yorkers because it supports privatization, or corporate control, of utilities and boxes out low-to-middle income (LMI) populations. Since only 1 in 5 residents are able to go solar-on-site,<sup>143</sup> and the proportion of renters who can’t is higher among populations of color,<sup>144</sup> many New Yorkers lack access to the energy reform promised by REV. This is alarming given that 40 percent of households in New York State (NYS) are LMI,<sup>145</sup> the energy burden for LMI households can reach up to 30 percent of income,<sup>146</sup> and LMI areas are often sites for traditional polluting power plants.<sup>147</sup> Private corporations do not prioritize community shared solar projects due to project risk and a lack of financial resources in LMI communities.<sup>148</sup>

Community shared solar (CSS), which was introduced in New York in 2015, is an effective solution to the pitfalls of REV’s market-based strategy. CSS projects involve municipalities or community organizations hosting off-site panel farms that allow individuals to join together and invest in or subscribe to community-controlled clean energy production. CSS boasts many advantages over traditional corporate-controlled energy projects, including increasing solar access to millions of New Yorkers,<sup>149</sup> putting communities in control of their energy,<sup>150</sup> lowering energy bills,<sup>151</sup> and supporting the local economy.<sup>152</sup>

## TALKING POINTS

- REV’s privatization of clean energy development concentrates wealth into the hands of “green energy barons” as a replacement to traditional oil barons.
- Community shared solar is the solution to a corporate-controlled energy system, making renewable energy local, accessible, and equitable.
- High pre-development costs are the number one barrier to solar development; reforming the way that NYS assists municipalities and local organizations with their pre-development costs is key to making CSS projects feasible.
- Energy projects funded by private corporations are less likely to prioritize LMI communities.

## THE POLICY IDEA

In order to expand CSS projects—and therefore make green energy production local, accessible, and equitable—the New York State Public Service Commission should: 1) reallocate funding from REV’s market-based programs to the Affordable Solar Predevelopment and Technical Assistance (ASPTA) program, 2) guarantee ASPTA coverage to 100 percent of pre-development costs, 3) expand coverage of pre-development activities to help address other soft costs, such as early interconnection study fees,<sup>153</sup> and 4) provide ASPTA costs up-front as part of a grant program, modeled after California’s Multifamily Affordable Solar Housing (MASH) upfront rebate program.<sup>154</sup>

## POLICY ANALYSIS

CSS projects make up the largest portion of backlogged solar initiatives in REV.<sup>155</sup> The number one barrier to solar development is the very high upfront cost,<sup>156</sup> and pre-development spending is also very risky.<sup>157</sup> For example, a potential CSS project with Southern Tier Solar Works (STSW) had \$40,000 in fully at-risk pre-development costs, and an additional \$125,000 may have been necessary for interconnection (connecting the project to the energy grid). STSW, a non-profit organization based in Binghamton, New York, doesn’t have the risk tolerance or cash flow for this project, and ASPTA doesn’t cover many of the necessary costs.<sup>158</sup>

New York State’s Affordable Solar Pre-Development and Technical Assistance (ASPTA) program provides some pre-development funding to LMI projects. The program, however, doesn’t cover many important pre-development costs, such as interconnection study fees and permits.<sup>159</sup> It also provides capital at benchmarks, not upfront.<sup>160</sup> Most detrimentally, the program lacks funding: ASPTA received only \$4.4 million,<sup>161</sup> compared to the \$782 million Green Bank—a state-sponsored financial entity that works with the private sector<sup>162</sup>—received for market-based incentives.<sup>163</sup>

Expanding pre-development support would help initiate projects serving LMI communities.<sup>164</sup> The few programs in operation are successful: For example, California’s MASH, which provides upfront incentives to offset the costs of solar for multifamily affordable housing, has successfully led to the installation of 23 megawatts (mW) across 360 solar projects from 2008 to 2015, serving 6,500 LMI households.<sup>165</sup> Ontario, which reduces application fees for and prioritizes projects with aboriginal, community, or municipal ownership, awarded contracts for 241 mW of new generation across 936 projects in its fourth quarter of 2016 alone.<sup>166</sup>

## NEXT STEPS

To make community shared solar accessible to a greater number of New York residents and to prioritize CSS projects for LMI communities, the New York State Public Service Commission (PSC) must remove the barrier of pre-development costs for CSS projects. The Energy Democracy Alliance (EDA), an active statewide coalition with over 22 member organizations and 100 allied groups, should lobby the PSC to reform ASPTA and increase awareness for CSS projects throughout LMI communities in New York. Since the EDA has successfully lobbied the Public Service Commission to support CSS reform, the coalition should influence important stakeholders such as PSC Chair John Rhodes, New York State Research and Development Authority (NYSERDA) President Alicia Barton, and Chair of Energy and Finance Richard Kauffman. Moreover, since Governor Andrew Cuomo directly appoints PSC commissioners, the EDA should pressure Governor Cuomo through a public campaign for ASPTA reform.

## KEY FACTS

- Only 1 in 5 New Yorkers are able to go solar-on-site.<sup>167</sup>
- CSS projects have substantial pre-development costs, with one Southern Tier Solar Works CSS project requiring a fully at-risk \$40,000 in feasibility studies alone, and a potential \$125,000 to simply begin interconnection.<sup>168</sup>
- The ASPTA program has only \$4.4 million in funding,<sup>169</sup> compared to \$782 million in subsidies to private corporations through the New York Green Bank.<sup>170</sup>
- Community energy projects have local employment impacts which are 1.1 to 1.3 times higher during construction and 1.1 to 2.8 times higher during operation, compared to conventional projects.<sup>171</sup>

# Protecting Refugee Resettlement in Michigan: The Private Sponsorship Solution

By Clara Harter

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## THESIS

To protect refugee resettlement from federal budget cuts, Michigan's Department of Health and Human Services should establish a private sponsorship system, allowing willing citizens to provide the funding and local knowledge to effectively integrate refugees into their community.

## BACKGROUND & ANALYSIS

The current administration is actively working to limit refugee resettlement in the U.S. One key indication is the refugee admission ceiling, which has been cut from 110,000 admissions in Fiscal Year (FY) 2017 to just 45,000 in FY 2018—resulting in a \$218,000,000 decrease to the Department of Health and Human Services's (HHS) resettlement budget.<sup>172</sup> Resettlement in Michigan works in a private-public partnership where the federal government provides funding to the Michigan Department of Health and Human Services (MDHHS), which in turn funds six private resettlement agencies who manage local integration.<sup>173</sup> Though resettlement agencies will have a smaller incoming demand, budget cuts will affect refugees already living in the Michigan who still rely on these agencies' services. In the long run, program downsizing could destroy resettlement infrastructure, leaving Michigan ill-equipped for any influx of refugees in the future.

In Michigan, federal support alone—which provides Medicaid, food stamps, and a one-time fund of \$1,125 per person—is insufficient to meet new families' needs.<sup>174</sup> Additionally, many MDHHS caseworkers are overloaded and may also lack the local connections necessary to help refugees form relationships in their communities, find the best jobs, and enroll in the best schools.<sup>175</sup> To support education, housing, employment, language services, cultural integration, and more, private agencies are essential.<sup>176</sup>

Historically, the people of Michigan have long welcomed refugees. Michigan has the second-largest Arab American population and Syrian refugee population in the U.S.<sup>177,178</sup> Despite the state's relatively small population size, Michigan was ranked as the fourth most popular state for refugee resettlement in FY 2016.<sup>179</sup>

## TALKING POINTS

- The federal government has slashed the refugee resettlement budget,<sup>180</sup> leaving the future of funding for resettlement agencies uncertain and the long-term resettlement infrastructure at risk.
- Private sponsorship is an alternative to state-level resettlement agencies. Because it is funded by private citizens, this option is resistant to the current administration's anti-refugee stance.
- Private sponsorship has been shown to reduce the time needed for refugees to reach self-sufficiency, help resettled families attain higher household incomes, and provide invaluable local connections.<sup>181</sup>
- With a long history of supporting refugee resettlement, a large volunteer community, and informal sponsorship networks, Michigan is an ideal state for launching a private sponsorship program.<sup>182, 183</sup>

## THE POLICY IDEA

Michigan's Department of Health and Human Services, which manages refugee resettlement services, should launch a private sponsorship program. Through such a program, groups of Michigan residents would be assigned a new family and would work together to integrate them into their community. Private sponsorship would protect funding for refugee resettlement, and the program would help ensure that refugee families receive personalized attention, local connections, and easier integration.

## POLICY ANALYSIS

A private sponsorship program would allow concerned citizens to preserve resettlement infrastructure by providing the funds and local expertise to resettle refugee families into their communities. This is not a new idea: Since 1978, Canada has successfully resettled over 195,000 refugees through private sponsorship.<sup>184</sup> In Canada, these families typically reach self-sufficiency faster than those supported by the government and collect, on average, \$6,000 higher in income in their first year.<sup>185</sup> A U.S. movement for private sponsorship already exists, and organizations, including Human Rights First, the International Refugee Assistance Project, and the Urban Justice Center, have voiced their support.<sup>186</sup>

Michigan's precedent of accepting refugees, as well as its large volunteer population, makes the state an ideal community for a sponsorship program. In response to President Trump's travel ban and the new refugee admission limits, Michigan residents have expressed their support of refugees through protests, petitions, fundraisers, and initiatives against xenophobia.<sup>187, 188, 189</sup> Some citizen volunteers have already organized informal private sponsorship networks.<sup>190</sup> Former U.S. Assistant Secretary of Labor Doug Ross and his team of eight, for example, were able to provide services for a new family through local connections that their coordinating agency could not. They used a friend at a law clinic to waive the family's \$7,500 green card fee, utilized a connection at a local preschool to enroll the children halfway through the school year, relocated the family to a better school district, and made sure someone was always available to provide immediate support.<sup>191</sup>

## NEXT STEPS

Because most funding would come from private citizens rather than the state government, this policy should be attractive to policymakers and easy to implement. The system for private sponsorship would be established through MDHHS, which is responsible for refugee assistance services.<sup>192</sup> By elevating Michigan's willingness to support refugees, the success of Canada's private sponsorship program, and the voices of refugees currently living in Michigan who struggle under federal funding limits, a strong case can be made to state legislators as to why private sponsorship is a pertinent solution. The expertise of informal private sponsors in tandem with private resettlement agencies would be the foundation for developing the training program for new private sponsors, again illustrating the simplicity of this solution and the ability of the state government to institutionalize it.

## KEY FACTS

- The federal government has proposed a \$218,000,000 cut in refugee resettlement funding for FY 2018.<sup>193</sup>
- Refugees in Michigan only receive funds from the federal government for the first 30 to 90 days they are in the country and are expected to reach self-sufficiency after this point.<sup>194</sup>
- By collectively contributing \$8,000, private sponsorship teams can provide the funding necessary to support a newly resettled family in Michigan for a year.<sup>195</sup>

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