

Governor Phil Murphy

On Martin Luther King, Jr. Day, Governor Murphy Signs Juvenile Justice Reform Legislation


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ELIZABETH – On Martin Luther King, Jr. Day, Governor Phil Murphy today signed landmark legislation to reform New Jersey’s juvenile justice system. This legislation marks a major accomplishment in the Governor’s efforts to ensure a more humane, just, and equitable criminal justice system.

“Our Administration is committed to ensuring that New Jersey’s youth get the second chance they deserve, and today we’re taking a critical step toward creating a criminal justice system that is just, fair, and truly rehabilitates young lives,” **said Governor Murphy**. “I am proud to sign sweeping legislation to reform our juvenile justice system and ensure that our young people have the opportunity they deserve to turn their lives around and build a better future for themselves, their families, and their communities.”

S48 integrates several reforms to New Jersey’s juvenile justice system concerning incarceration and parole by incorporating the Juvenile Detention Alternative Initiative principles into the Juvenile Justice Code. Among those reforms include the elimination of fines as a penalty for juvenile offenders; limitations on when juveniles may be incarcerated; and the replacement of the mandatory post-incarceration supervision period with one that is discretionary. The bill also transfers the responsibility of parole decisions from the State Parole Board to a panel made up of at least two members from the Juvenile Justice Commission and one member of the State Parole Board. Under the bill, the panel is responsible for making determinations regarding parole eligibility, supervision, revocation and post-incarceration supervision for juveniles. Further, the panel will be responsible for determining the conditions of parole and ensuring that the conditions are appropriately tailored to the juvenile and the least restrictive necessary for the juvenile’s successful return to society.

“Over the last fifteen years, the Juvenile Justice Commission has implemented a number of groundbreaking reforms that have, among other things, resulted in an over 85% reduction in the number of youths in state custody,” **said Attorney General Gurbir S. Grewal**. “We are committed to using the additional tools included in the legislation signed today to continue this great work and to reduce the racial disparities that still exist in the system.”

“Legislation that allows eligible incarcerated juveniles with a chance to assimilate back into society through an equitable framework can provide these young people with an opportunity to create long-lasting, positive changes to their lives,” **said New Jersey State Parole Board Chairman Samuel J. Plumeri, Jr.** “Redemption through reentry does happen and augmented with the proper support, young offenders can begin living their lives again.”

“I am pleased that the Governor is signing this important juvenile justice reform into law,” **said Public Defender Joseph Krakora**. “It reflects a national recognition that juveniles should be treated differently



than adults by our criminal justice system. I hope we can continue to lead the way in juvenile justice reform.”

Primary sponsors of the legislation include Senators Nellie Pou and Shirley Turner, and Assemblymembers Benjie Wimberly, Annette Quijano, and Verlina Reynolds-Jackson.

“This law is meant to build a fairer, more just and less racially biased juvenile justice system,” **said Senator Pou.** “It took over two years of incredibly hard and tireless work by advocates, judges, organizations and experts and I am grateful to have worked alongside so many thoughtful and dedicated people because without them these landmark reforms could not have been possible. Currently, if a juvenile gets caught in our antiquated justice system they can spend decades trying to get out. This law makes it less likely for a juvenile caught in adolescence to spend a lifetime in the justice system, having a major impact on the individual’s life, their family and the entire community.”

“Although we have made improvements over the years, New Jersey still needs to do more for the adolescents who go through our court system. Our current justice system places more of an emphasis on harsh, mandatory sentences than on finding ways to reintegrate juvenile offenders back into society,” **said Assemblymembers Wimberly, Quijano, and Reynolds-Jackson.** “Many of these children and teenagers come from complicated backgrounds and may not have fully understood the repercussions of their actions. In order to successfully rehabilitate them, we must give these young people the opportunity to learn and improve from their missteps, rather than incarcerating them for extended periods of time with little hope of release. That’s why this bill introduces a number of changes to the Code of Juvenile Justice by incorporating principles of the Juvenile Detention Alternatives Initiative. These principles will place restrictions on who can be incarcerated while replacing subjective decision-making processes with more objective methods of determining sentencing suitability and parole eligibility. Community-based alternatives to imprisonment, collaboration between court officials and other interested parties – such as lawyers and advocates, improved conditions in secure facilities and data collection on racial disparities would all be promoted as well, in an effort to reform our current system. We cannot let a child’s mistake determine the rest of their lives. They deserve a chance to grow from their mistakes and create a new path for their lives.”

“We commend Governor Murphy for signing this important piece of legislation which, among other things, will eliminate unjust fines, modernize the parole process, and decrease the number of youth who are incarcerated,” **said Ryan P. Haygood, President & CEO of the New Jersey Institute for Social Justice.** “A Black child is 21 times more likely to be locked up than a white child in our state, the highest racial disparity rate in the country. This law will help bring New Jersey one step closer to transforming its youth justice system from one that produces this unacceptable injustice to one that treats kids as kids.”

“Because this groundbreaking legislation will help combat the gross racial disparities that persist in New Jersey’s juvenile facilities, it is especially fitting that Governor Murphy will sign it today, as we celebrate the work and legacy of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.,” **said Laura Cohen, Director of the Rutgers Criminal and Youth Justice Clinic.** “We applaud the commitment of the Governor and the bill’s sponsors to continuing our state’s progress toward a more equitable, safe, and effective youth justice system.”

“Signing this bill moves New Jersey forward on the path to reforming our country’s overly punitive, racially disparate juvenile justice system,” **said ACLU-NJ Executive Director Amol Sinha.** Mandatory minimums, along with fines and fees imposed on families, can particularly wreak havoc on the lives of low-income juveniles and their families. This law acknowledges that neither should have a place in sentencing decisions for young people. We look forward to working with the Legislature and Governor Murphy to ensure that no young people are incarcerated unless absolutely necessary.”

“New Jersey has led the nation with a drastic decline in the rate at which youth are locked up, but disparities remain. We applaud Governor Murphy and members of the New Jersey Legislature, who are working with advocates and stakeholders across the state to create a stronger, fairer and more effective juvenile justice system,” **said Mary Coogan, Vice President of Advocates for Children of New Jersey.**

“This is a huge step forward to build on gains in juvenile justice reform across New Jersey. While young offenders should be held accountable for their actions, the goal is to return them to their communities, equipped with the skills they need to stay out of trouble and mature into productive adults. To do this, we need to construct a juvenile justice system that is truly therapeutic rather than punitive. We need to provide youth with better alternatives, diverting those who have committed minor offenses into more constructive enterprises, and rehabilitate serious juvenile offenders with the support they need, providing a path for successful re-entry once they are released.”

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