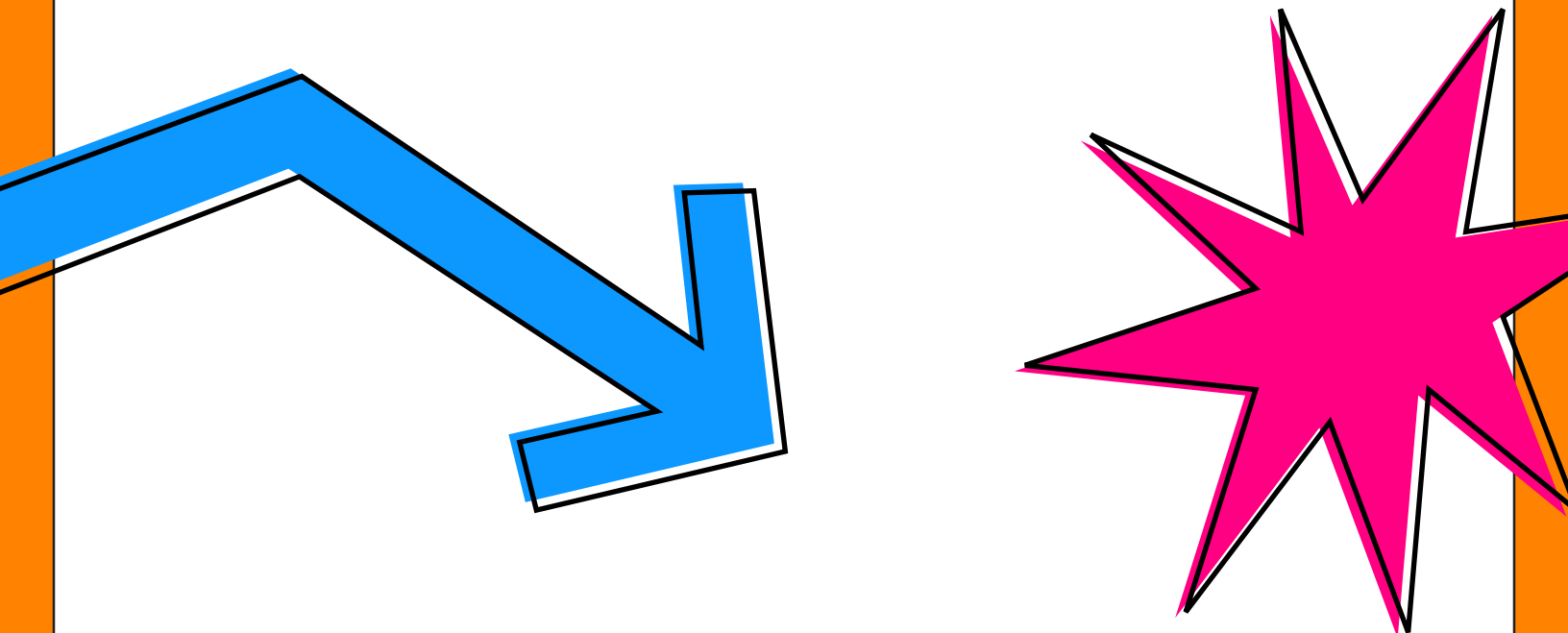




EPIC's Statewide Listening Tour:

Talent is Universal, Opportunity is Not



Introduction:

The people closest to the problem are also closest to the solution.

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This is a notion I've believed in since growing up in poverty and one that I've remained committed to throughout my life since then—as a student, educator, public servant, and citizen.

That's why as Special Advisor to Gov. Newsom for Economic Mobility and Opportunity I realized I'd need to build a team—through End Poverty in California (**EPIC**)—that would enable us to embark on a statewide listening tour in 2022 to hear what is top of mind for people living in poverty: About the challenges they face and the underappreciated strengths and assets of their communities; the ambitions and aspirations they have individually and for their neighborhoods; and their ideas for solutions to poverty.

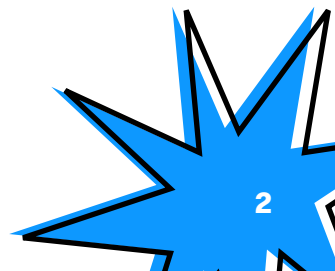
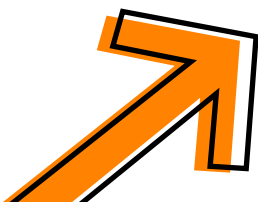
In less than a year we have partnered with local organizations to host listening sessions in Los Angeles, Fresno, Ontario, Antioch, Oakland, Compton, and Norco. We utilized these conversations to inform both our policy priorities and our narrative work—from our work with the California Assembly's

Select Committee on Poverty and Economic Inclusion, to engagement with **the press**, to my own **writing** and speaking, to **articles** by some of the folks we met on the road, **videos** of the sessions, and more.

Mackenzie Mays of the *Los Angeles Times* followed EPIC across the state and detailed our tour in a recent **front-page story**. But it is impossible for a single story to capture it all. In the pages that follow you will find a high level overview of themes that emerged from the listening sessions and then a detailed summary of each tour stop, accompanying media clips and videos, and specific policy takeaways.

We know that we can't change the system—what I call “The Setup” that creates and perpetuates poverty—without changing the narrative, which is to say, the story that we tell about poverty. And that story needs to come directly from the people with the highest stakes in this fight—the people who are living in poverty today. Together, we will **#UpsetTheSetup** to end poverty and create equal opportunity in the Golden State.

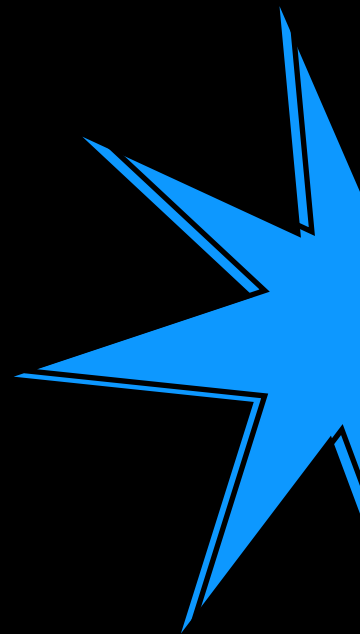
– **Michael Tubbs**



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2022 EPIC Listening Tour Summary:

Number of counties visited:

6

Los Angeles, Riverside,
Alameda, Fresno, Contra
Costa, and San Bernardino

Number of NGOs engaged:

18

Recurring issues/top takeaways:



Safety Net:

The current benefits system is inaccessible for far too many. Counties administering programs need help to improve uptake and recertification of benefits. Additional needs include streamlining of applications to hasten access to multiple programs; reforming benefits cliffs so programs phase out more like EITC; centering customer service and treating applicants with dignity; simplifying recertification processes; and making undocumented people eligible for all benefits.



Guaranteed Income:

Needed to survive unanticipated emergency expenses like a car repair to get to work; ability to find one good job instead of multiple low-wage jobs; reduce toxic stress and enhance familial relationships.



Housing:

Support for renters via right-to-counsel, rent stabilization, and rent control; frustration and fear regarding lack of affordable housing; threat of homelessness among all people and families with low-incomes, and too many students experiencing housing insecurity.



Support Workers and Entrepreneurs:

Need for family-supporting wages; workplaces free from fear with worker voice in decision-making; access to affordable childcare; predictable schedules so families can plan and manage their lives. Support CDFIs and educate communities about their existence; promote targeted microloans and grants.

Tour Stops:

Antioch – All Home & Monument Impact

Short Video on Listening Session



SF Chronicle Article



We visited with about 40 community organizers and tenants in the “**eviction capital**” of the Bay Area. At the time, there were 800 evictions in the pipeline in east Contra Costa County where Antioch is located.

It was clear that most **landlords are prioritizing raising rents and getting new tenants** rather than working with their current tenants so they can remain housed. There were stories of landlords not accepting state funds for partial payments, or refusing to work out payment plans.

There was a clear need for **rent control and right to counsel** in eviction court proceedings. In Contra Costa County from May to July, **only 3% of tenants** in local eviction courts had legal representation, compared with 87% of landlords. And the difference representation makes is clear: In New York City, for example, **84 percent of represented renters** facing eviction remained in their homes.

The county recommended allocating \$70,000 more for legal services to address the crisis, woefully inadequate. **Right to counsel should be considered a basic need.** Eviction not only increases homelessness, but **perpetuates** the cycle of poverty, harms the health and education of children as well as their long-term outcomes, and disproportionately harms Black and Latinx people, especially women and children.

We challenged the session’s attendees to become more involved in the political process to (hopefully) reduce the disconnect between people’s needs and what elected officials are doing to address them. We were thrilled that just a few days later many showed up at the Antioch City Council to voice support for a measure that would **cap rent increases** to a maximum of 3%. The measure was **approved**.

“My kids say, ‘Sorry Mom, no grandkids, because **we can’t even afford ourselves**.’”

- Antioch resident on the impact of housing costs on young adults



Top Policy Takeaways:

- **Right to legal counsel** for tenants with low-incomes who face eviction
- **Rent control**
- **Streamline process** to approve **affordable housing** projects
- **Repeal Article 34** which requires voter approval before public housing is built in a community

Tour Stops:

Ontario – Small Business Majority & AmPac CDFI

Short Video on Listening Session



We met with 30 small business owners and entrepreneurs along with our friends at Small Business Majority and AmPac Business Capital, a Community Development Financial Institution (CDFI) in Ontario. Most of these entrepreneurs were either in poverty now or had experienced it in the past.

Above all else, the biggest obstacle to establishing a business is **access to capital**. Historically, **and through today**, traditional banks are often not responsive to the needs of under-resourced communities, particularly if the communities are Black and Brown ones.

“The **5 c’s** that traditionally guide lending decisions—credit history, capacity, collateral,

Fortune op-ed



capital, and conditions—were written to keep some people out,” said AmPac founder and president, Hilda Kennedy, who grew up poor in



“We need to be honest about the policy decisions that we made and about what that means for the ability of folks to take the entrepreneurial plunge. Neighborhoods literally have all the talent they need to be successful. It’s just a lack of access to opportunity.”

- Mark Herbert, Chief Strategy Officer for [Small Business Majority](#)

South Central LA. “People need the opportunity to really tell their stories to partners like CDFIs in order to get a fair shot.”

CDFIs are Treasury-backed lending institutions that are key to investment and job creation in under-resourced communities. We need to do more to make them known to under-resourced communities and to support them, perhaps through a state CDFI fund.

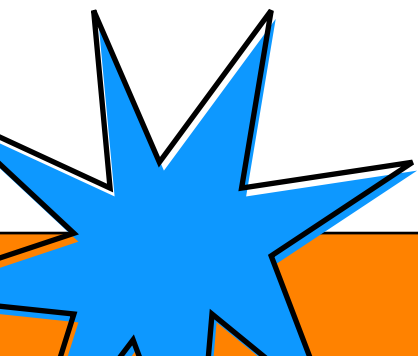
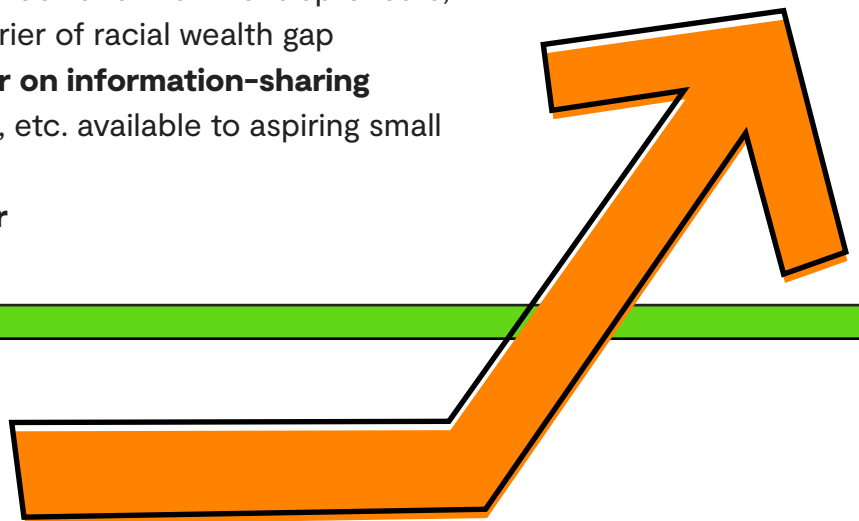
We also need to **reform state and federal contracting** so small, local businesses are better able to compete. “We need to make a way for small businesses that never had a contract to compete fairly with large

businesses that sit on contracts for 10–15 years and produce no successes,” said Jon Burgess, co-founder of **Burgess Brothers**, a family food service provider.

Entrepreneurs said we should **reduce red tape** as we did during the pandemic, streamlining applications for grants, microloans, and other resources. Moreover, we should create programs for Black and Brown entrepreneurs who face a unique barrier to entry due to the persistent, **man-made racial wealth gap**—the generational denial of wealth accumulation from slavery, to the barring of Social Security and GI benefits, to redlining, to subprime mortgage targeting, and more.

Top Policy Takeaways:

- **Access to capital**
- **Awareness and support of CDFIs**, including possible state CDFI fund
- **Reform state and federal contracting** so small businesses are better able to compete
- **Streamline applications** for grants and microloans
- **Financial assistance programs** for Black and Brown entrepreneurs, recognizing and reducing unique barrier of racial wealth gap
- State and local governments **partner on information-sharing** regarding people, resources, classes, etc. available to aspiring small business people
- Baby bond to **establish wealth floor**



Fresno – Faith in the Valley, et al.

Short Video on Listening Session



Fresno Bee article



We met with 35 Black and Brown residents in partnership with Faith in the Valley, Fresno State’s Center for Community Voices, Fresno Building Healthy Communities, Fresno Economic Opportunities Commission, and the Fresno Metro Black Chamber of Commerce.

All participants recognized that for too many people today **hard work guarantees nothing other than more hard work**, in stark contrast to the American Dream we all want to believe in.

In a city where **rents are increasing at a rate among the highest** in the nation, and renter protections are as scarce as affordable housing units, **too many are experiencing eviction and homelessness, and legal counsel isn’t available** to renters who need it.

In the Black community, there is a sense that repeated pleas for policies that would end generational poverty are ignored—policies such as bold jobs programs, workforce development, and affordable housing that



would reverse **racist divestment that has occurred with redlining, eminent domain, and other wealth-stripping policies like over-policing and targeted fines and fees.**

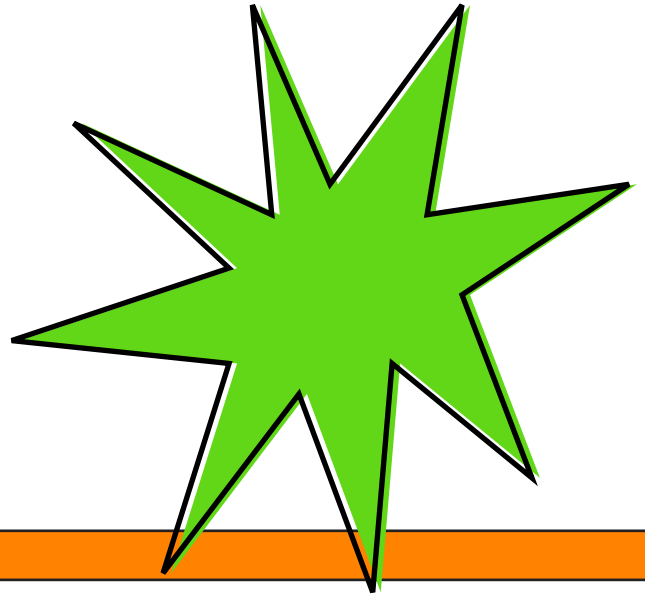
Among immigrants—particularly undocumented immigrants—there is a **fear of taking advantage of assistance that is available, and ineligibility for other forms of assistance.** It is clear that we cannot eliminate poverty in the Golden State without

“There are people that work in the fields. They keep on working and working. They’re pretty much living just to die.”

- Jessica Ramirez on her mother’s life as a farmworker.

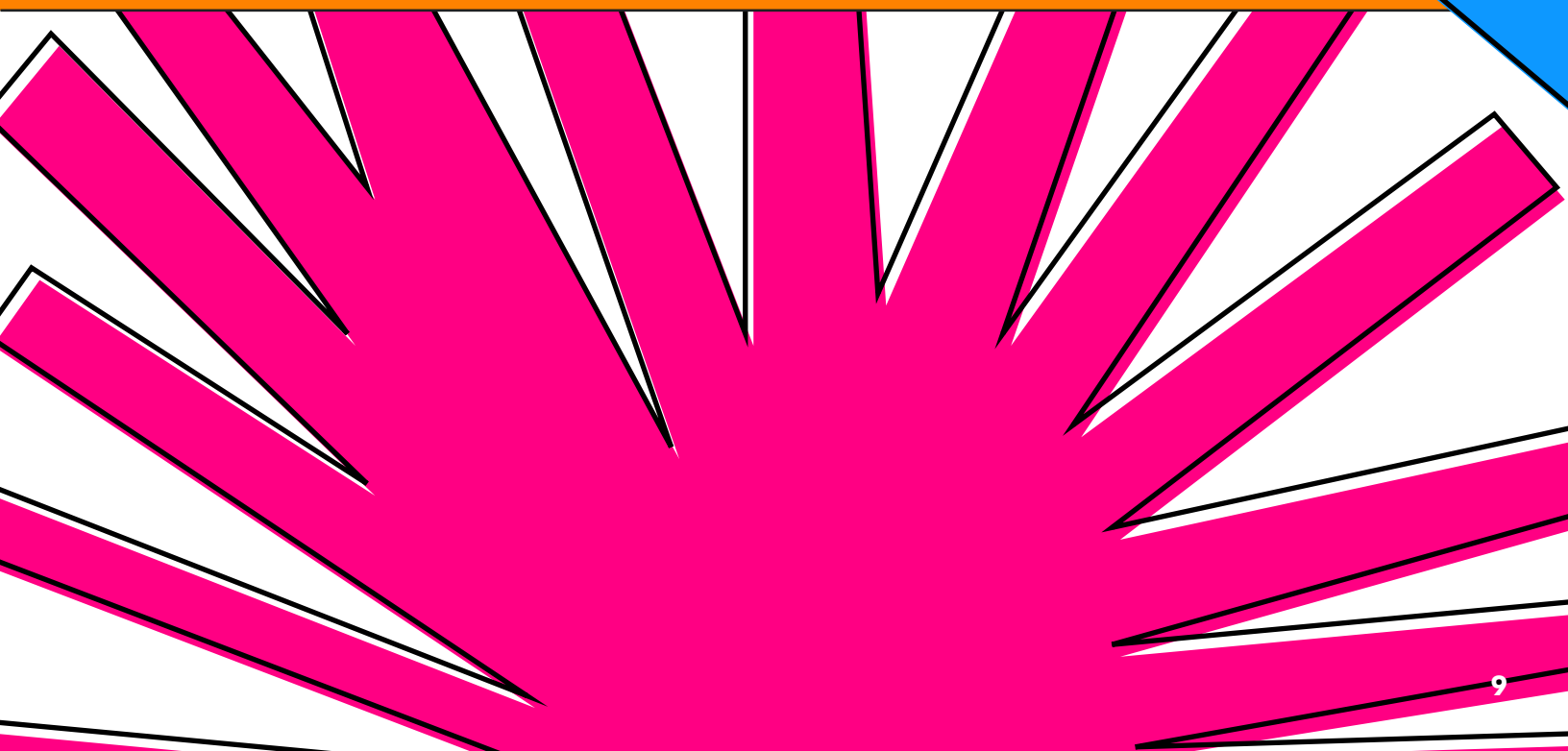
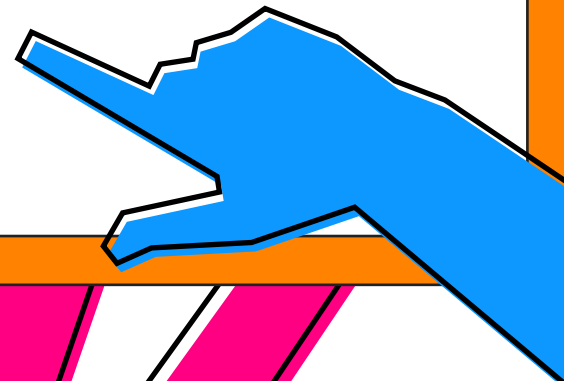
comprehensive immigration reform and we will need partners in Congress to achieve that. But we also need to **redouble outreach efforts** to ensure that people feel safe getting the help they need.

There is also a consensus that **benefits systems are too time-consuming and difficult to navigate**—that there is a lack of seamlessness between the programs, confusing documentation requirements, and other needless barriers to obtaining assistance.



Top Policy Takeaways:

- **Renter protections**, rent control, and right to counsel in housing court
- **Youth workforce development**
- **Living wage** for farmworkers
- **Guaranteed income** to establish income floor
- **Immigration reform**/pathway to citizenship
- **Benefits access reform**
- **#Food4All**



Tour Stops:

Los Angeles – Young Women’s Freedom Center

Short Video on Listening Session



CaIMatters op-ed



More than 60 attendees—“Sister Warriors”—joined us at the [Young Women’s Freedom Center](#), which for nearly 30 years has provided support, mentorship, training, employment, and advocacy for young women and trans youth who have grown up in poverty, experienced the juvenile legal and foster care systems, survived living and working on the streets, and have experienced significant violence in their lives.

There was general frustration with the amount of resources spent on incarcerating youth rather than prevention and creating opportunities. For example, San Francisco spends **\$1.1 million annually** per incarcerated juvenile, most of whom are Black youth from just a few neighborhoods. The Sister Warriors asked how families’ trajectories might change if these kinds of resources instead provided a guaranteed income floor to families in under-resourced neighborhoods?

The Sister Warriors spoke of **earning pennies or nothing for their labor while incarcerated.** If they were paid fairly, and involuntary

servitude were banned in the state constitution (it is a vestige of slavery), then families would not be driven as deeply into poverty while their loved ones are inside and reentry would be more successful. Additionally, we could do more to **offer education and apprenticeship opportunities** during incarceration which would reduce hardship and recidivism.

The Sister Warriors also talked **about the challenges of finding good work** for formerly incarcerated people, and the “benefits cliff” that penalizes folks when they are able to get ahead “just a little bit”, in terms of lost food and housing assistance, or childcare. Why can’t these benefits instead taper off gradually like the Earned Income Tax Credit?

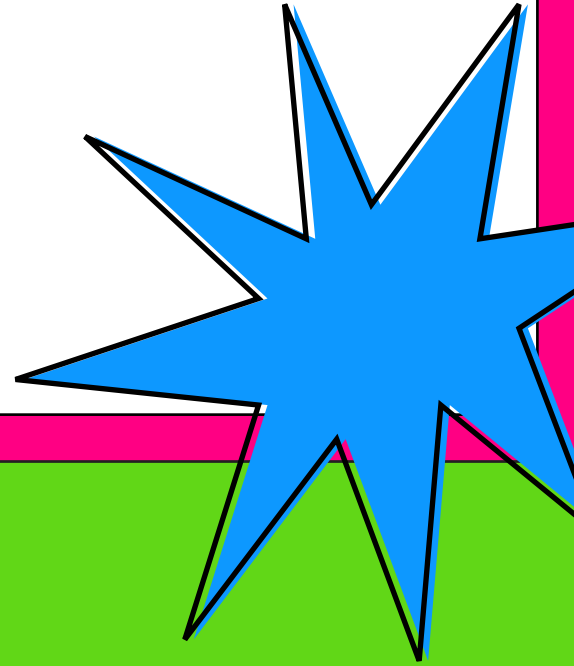
Finally, there was a sense that **people don’t want to share their personal stories just for the sake of sharing their stories—they want change.** EPIC shares that sentiment, and one Sister Warrior [joined us in Sacramento](#) to testify before the Select Committee on Poverty and Economic Mobility.

“We have conversations with legislators who say, ‘I’m so glad you shared your story!’ and then **they water down legislation [and] we have to wait years to revise it.”**

- Kred Gomez, Sister Warrior

Top Policy Takeaways:

- **Guaranteed income**
- **End benefits cliff**
- **Abolish indentured servitude**
- **Increase compensation** for work and provide education and apprenticeship opportunities during incarceration
- **Invest** in alternatives to youth incarceration



Tour Stops:

Oakland – SEIU & Fight for \$15

The Nation op-ed



In Oakland, we met with 20 fast food workers who had worked along with Fight for \$15, SEIU, and other partners to create the opportunity for Gov. Newsom to sign AB257, which gave more than 500,000 workers a seat and voice at the table to set wages and working conditions.

We heard about workers' struggles with rampant wage theft, workplace violence and abuse, denial of paid sick leave, and retaliation for speaking up about abhorrent conditions.

Across the board, fast food workers—who are twice as likely to live in poverty as other workers in the state and are mostly women and people of color—experienced cuts in hours when they tried to organize or voice concerns.

“We want to break a system that for years has been breaking us,” said a Jack in the Box worker.

To that end, workers were unanimous that AB257 would be transformative—**raising wages**

so they wouldn't have to work multiple jobs; **creating predictable schedules** so they can manage their families' lives; **ensuring benefits like paid leave** to take care of themselves or loved ones; and **preventing retaliation**.

With the fast food industry's well-funded ballot repeal effort, workers asked that EPIC help spread the word that this fight will be “a marathon”, and we will need all hands on deck to make sure people know the truth about this issue and justice prevails.

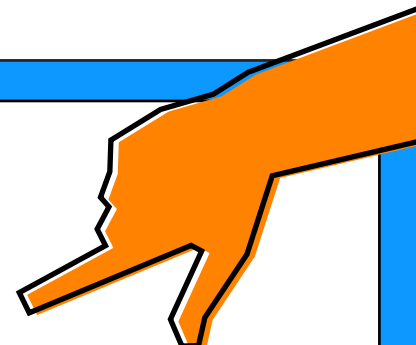


“They'll not be able to retaliate. They're not going to take away hours. We're going to have a better life.”

- Domino's worker on importance of AB257

Top Policy Takeaways:

- **Protecting AB257** from the Fast Food Industry's ballot initiative
- **Raising wages** and ensuring benefits
- **Preventing retaliation** from employers



Norco College and Compton College

At each of these two community colleges we met with about 35 students. They are a microcosm of the people in our state and the issues we face.

The multi-generational, racially diverse student bodies at these schools are composed of young people, parents, people attending school while working multiple jobs, people caring for extended families, former foster youth—all trying to get on a path to mobility while struggling to afford transportation, food, and, especially, housing. **Housing affordability and stability is a top concern for students**—not for a few of them, or half of them, but for all of them.

“It’s hard to focus on work when thinking, ‘Where am I going to live? What am I going to do?’” said Liz, a Compton College student.

A Norco College student who previously dropped out of a nursing school put it this way: “Help me with housing and I can stabilize.”

Students also shared stories about **struggles with turning to the safety net**:

Receiving conflicting information from government agencies about how to apply. Lost applications. Repeated requests and submissions of the same documents. Complex eligibility rules. Invasive questions about past relationships. Judgment about appearances.

We must **explore pilots that simplify our benefits systems, and ensure that people are treated with the dignity and respect we all deserve.**

Both schools were doing heroic work to help students obtain **basic needs**—with new, dedicated staff to help navigate the safety net, to finding emergency housing, to working with the state on new housing initiatives, and **more.**

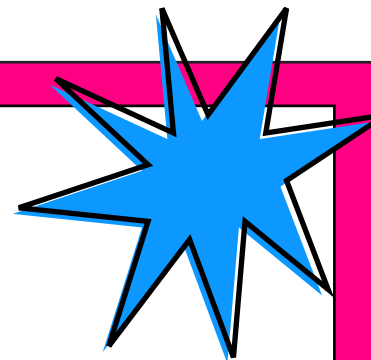
The **new budget** signed this year does expand cost of living grants for some community college students and spends \$1.4 billion to expand housing on 26 public colleges and universities. EPIC will continue to speak with students and administrators to keep abreast of what resources are available to them, and what needs remain.

“How can I focus on school when I might be homeless next month?”

- Compton College student

Top Policy Takeaways:

- **Family housing/affordable housing** for community college students
- **Expand grants** to help with non-tuition costs
- **Benefits access reform**
- **Center dignity** when people seek assistance



Conclusion:

Talent and intellect are universal, but opportunity is not.

We look forward to continuing EPIC's statewide tour in 2023, as we pivot to include visits to sites offering promising solutions to poverty.

We will continue to feature the voices and ideas of people we meet through our blog, videos, and other new initiatives like the community video project.

Stay tuned, too, for a mini-documentary about the Listening Tour in Spring 2023.

We welcome your constructive feedback, ideas, and other comments.

Talent and intellect are universal, but opportunity is not. With your help—and by listening to people—we will make opportunity universal and end poverty in the Golden State.

