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Christie, lawmakers can make N.J. affordable again by investing in housing | Opinion

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Assembly Speaker Vincent Prieto and state Senate President Stephen Sweeney applaud Gov. Chris Christie as he delivers his final State of the State address at the Statehouse. (Aristide Economopoulos | NJ Advance Media for NJ.com)

[Star-Ledger Guest Columnist](#)

By Staci Berger

In his latest State of the State, [Gov. Chris Christie](#) made promises of support to those who suffer from addiction. We're glad he wants to be part of the solution, but it's his animosity towards creating affordable homes that has been part of the problem.

Not once in his speech did Christie mention the critical need to make New Jersey more affordable to its residents, an issue creating challenges for numerous households.

Christie's attack on the Mount Laurel doctrine and unwillingness to adopt a sensible housing policy has made it difficult for our residents, including people suffering from addiction, to find a safe, decent, affordable home.

New Jersey remains number one in the nation for zombie and standard foreclosures, and is the fifth most expensive place to rent in the nation. We also top the nation in the number of millennials living with their parents. People here are still recovering from the cutbacks and layoffs from the last recession which continues to shackle our economy.

Not to mention, we are still rebuilding from Superstorm Sandy; thousands of households are still not home. In fact, there are people facing foreclosure because they are struggling to pay rent on a temporary home while paying a mortgage as their damaged home is rebuilt.

The state of our state is not as strong as it should and could be in comparison to the rest of the country:

Retirees are struggling because it's too expensive to live on their fixed incomes here.

Couples starting a family are competing for the few available quality starter homes in good school districts.

Recent college graduates can't find an affordable rental near employment.

The state of our state won't be strong until everyone can afford to call New Jersey home.

In order to build a thriving New Jersey, the governor, legislators and future state leaders need to support policies and invest in programs to get our economy back on track. Right now, Christie can begin by signing a bill ([S1821](#)) now before him that places a temporary moratorium on foreclosure for Sandy survivors recovering from the storm.

Going forward, we urge our elected officials to commit to invest \$600 million annually into homes we can afford so that all of us can call New Jersey home.

Over the last decade, state support for affordable home development, job creation and support services have been diverted or abandoned. The Affordable Housing Trust Fund, the Lead Hazard Abatement Control Fund and foreclosure prevention funding have been used to plug budget holes.

Other sources, like the Special Needs Housing Trust Fund, which is dedicated to providing supportive housing opportunities, many of which help people with addiction, and funding for housing counseling, have been exhausted. Efforts to expand the successful Neighborhood Revitalization Tax Credit program - which yields \$7.30 for every dollar investment - have been thwarted.

Putting \$600 million back into programs that have helped strengthen our communities is a financial investment certain to produce economic returns across the state and benefit all people who call New Jersey home.

Our families, friends and neighbors are the heart of our state and the backbone of our economy. If we can't afford to live here, we can't get our economy back on track. We encourage our state leaders to help build a thriving New Jersey by making investments that create jobs, boosts economic activity, and lifts everyone up who calls New Jersey home.

Only then can we say the state of our state is strong.

Staci Berger is president and chief executive officer of the [Housing and Community Development Network of New Jersey](#).

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