

La Nueva Mayoría

By David R. Jones



Latino Forum: “Addressing Barriers, Building Community”

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Last month, the Community Service Society (CSS) hosted a two-part forum exploring issues affecting Latinos in New York City, “Addressing Barriers, Building Community.” CSS is focusing on the issues of Latinos, the city’s largest – and fastest growing – ethnic minority, because they comprise more than a quarter of the city’s population – more than two million people - and a large portion of CSS’s constituency, low-income New Yorkers. One of the ways I have reached out is this column, where for the past two years I have dealt with issues concerning Latino communities.

The forums, led by Juan Cartagena, CSS General Counsel and Vice President for Advocacy, focused on barriers that Latinos face. During the first forum, there were panel discussions featuring several CSS staff members addressing how the city’s Latinos have fared during the recession, housing issues affecting Latinos, youth policies, and disparities in health care in Latino communities.

Among the findings from our annual survey, “The Unheard Third,” is the disturbing fact that Latinos as an ethnic group are worse off than any other population in the city. This includes employment and benefits on the job, such as paid sick leave.

Latinos also have the lowest rates of school enrollment and the highest rates of individuals without a high school diploma or GED. Our research also found that in some cases native born Latinos have a lower socio-economic status than foreign born Latinos even though they are better acclimated to New York City and more proficient in English.

Disconnected Youth

Latino youth comprise about 40 percent of the city’s disconnected youth. The major problem is less Latino youth enrolled in school - little more than half of all Latino youth ages 16 to 24 are in school. Conversely, among all groups, Latino youth are most likely to be employed – 28.2 percent against 23.9 percent of whites and 18.9 percent of blacks.

Health Coverage

CSS analysis has shown that 31 percent of Latinos in New York State ages 19 to 64 do not have health insurance – a higher rate than any other racial or ethnic group, although Latinos covered by health insurance do well in health studies as against other groups. The problem is getting coverage.

Housing Differences

Low-income Latino households need over 50 percent of their income to pay the rent. This is especially so for Mexicans; 44 percent live in unregulated housing. Puerto Ricans are most likely (33 percent) to live in public or subsidized housing, while Dominicans are most likely (60 percent) to live in rent-regulated housing. These findings are particularly important when Latino public officials are determining housing policies.

The second forum focused on political participation, civic engagement, and the implications of mass imprisonment of Latinos. Featured speakers included Lucia Gomez Jimenez, assistant to Governor Paterson for community affairs, and Jose Luis Morin, Professor of Latin American and Latino/a Studies at CUNY's John Jay College of Criminal Justice.

Political Activism

Among the issues discussed was possible training of City Council members on the importance of and impact of political participation. Also, Latino activists need more involvement in documenting recent election results by ethnic group and monitoring on Election Day, especially to prevent intimidation at the polls. It was pointed out that the Asian American Legal Defense Fund does the best Election Day monitoring job in the area.

After exploring issues affecting the Latino population and Latino groups, the next step is the need for policy solutions. The dialogue from these forums will help CSS and other advocacy organizations develop policies to improve the quality of life for Latinos in New York City.

David R. Jones is president and CEO of the Community Service Society (CSS), the leading voice on behalf of low-income New Yorkers for over 160 years. For over 10 years he served as a member of the board of directors of the Puerto Rican Legal Defense and Education Fund. The views expressed in this column are solely those of the writer.