

La Nueva Mayoría

By David R. Jones



Creating Jobs for Disconnected Youth

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Nationally, and in New York City, only about half of black and Latino students graduate from high school. A lack of education and job skills have produced millions of “disconnected youth,” 16 to 24 year-olds who are neither in school nor in the workforce. There are about 170,000 disconnected youth in the city; about 40 percent are Latino young people. Without even a high school diploma, their chances of employment in our labor market are next to zero.

Many of these youths have simply given up hope of ever getting a job that would pay enough to sustain a family and provide a stepping-stone into the middle class. The job of reversing this incipient disaster falls squarely on our elected officials.

The governor and legislative leaders recently agreed to create an inner-city youth employment program and a \$25 million tax credit for employers who hire unemployed youth between 16 and 24 years of age over the first six months of 2012. The program and credit would be available to employers in businesses such as clean energy, health care, manufacturing, and conservation.

Nearly \$37 million in funding will be provided to critical jobs programs for inner city youth. Considering the city’s youth population and needs, we should get the lion’s share of these funds. They include \$12 million in support grants to youth providers for work and occupational training, job placement, workplace mentoring, and follow up services to increase job retention. An additional \$25 million is to be appropriated for workforce skills training and support programs. This is a modest beginning but, given the economy and the pressures on the state budget, at least it’s a start.

The governor’s office also announced the creation of a new infrastructure fund - \$1 billion targeted and accelerated investment in key infrastructure projects around the state including roads, bridges, parks, and energy and water projects. An additional \$300 million from the Port Authority would be directed towards funding for infrastructure projects in New York City. This could put many young people to work and provide jobs for some of the millions of New Yorkers who lost jobs during the recession and are either still unemployed or underemployed.

There are other policies that should be considered. There is a need to strengthen career and technical education programs with better funding and certified teachers working in classes that are serious about moving young people from school to a job or an apprenticeship. We should also consider expanding alternatives to incarceration for nonviolent youthful offenders. A prison sentence for a young person is a lifetime stigma that often leads to a form of “civil death” after incarceration – no job, no money, no place to live, no health care.

HUD officials in Washington and New York should be working to maximize employment opportunities at public housing facilities through the Section 3 provisions of the 1968 Housing Act. The unemployment rate for public housing residents has nearly tripled since 2008 when the recession struck the city, rising from 10 percent to 27 percent by 2010.

With such a large portion of our population unable to compete, we are in danger of falling behind other nations in the new global economy. Then there are other costs to our society, including expanding welfare and prison costs, the loss of billions in revenues through taxes, and the loss of the enterprise and creativity of millions of young people. Our society should give everyone a real chance to succeed regardless of race or class.

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 165 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.