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Contact: Walter Fields  
(646) 942-2788 (cell)  
(212) 614-5453 (office)

Tracy Munford  
(212) 614-5538 (office)  
(646) 483-6804 (cell)

## **CSS Survey of Poor New Yorkers Foreshadows Voters' Sentiment Across America**

### **Unheard Third Reveals Health Care & Economy Matter Most to Working Poor**

For the sixth consecutive year, the Community Service Society of New York (CSS) has issued its annual survey of low-income New Yorkers, "The Unheard Third." This year health care, income inequality, low-wage work, and policies to advance economic security and reduce crime are the greatest concerns among poor New Yorkers. The Unheard Third details the concerns of low-income New Yorkers and gauges their sentiments on a variety of public policy interventions. It is the only annual survey of its kind that measures the thoughts of this population in a major American city.

"This year's survey takes on added significance as we prepare to elect the next President of the United States," said David R. Jones, president and CEO of the Community Service Society, "New York City is a microcosm of Urban America. What happens here matters to the nation. We have a responsibility and tremendous opportunity to lead by example. Foremost are the recognition of the growing income disparity and the threat to our nation's long term economic security, and the importance of health care. Human capital is our most precious resource and we are squandering it by our failure to find meaningful ways to insure that the working poor will benefit from the city's long-term economic growth."

This year's survey reveals the poor's growing awareness of income disparities and the effect on their quality of life. At the top of those concerns are health care and the economy. In many ways the survey foreshadows what voters are expressing across the country in presidential primary states. Though respondents cited Iraq as the issue that will most influence their voting decision in the 2008 presidential election, health care and the economy are the top domestic priorities.

As in years past, health care rises to the top of specific concerns cited by respondents to the Unheard Third. Fewer New Yorkers have health coverage from their employers – only 33 percent of poor and 52 percent of near poor have employer sponsored health coverage down from 39 percent in 2002 for poor and 69 percent for the near poor. Even among the higher income, employer coverage has fallen sharply from 77 percent in 2002 to 68 percent today.

As the health care debate heats up in states across the nation, New York State has the potential to set the gold standard in this area. David Jones remarked, "Clearly the time has come to address the health care crisis and we intend to play a major role in doing just that in New York State." Both near-poor New Yorkers and high-income residents cite the same concerns over health care. CSS Director of Health Care

Initiatives Elisabeth Ryden Benjamin said, “The Unheard Third reveals that New Yorkers are deeply concerned about the health care crisis. The majority of New Yorkers think that a state health insurance program should cover all residents, regardless of immigrant status. This survey shows that there is a clear call for government action to provide affordable health care, even if it means raising taxes.”

The survey revealed that a majority of New Yorkers, regardless of income and across race see the growing income gap between the rich and the poor as unfair and that needs to be addressed immediately. The survey also revealed the vast majority of poor New Yorkers faced hardships in 2007. The number of poor New Yorkers facing food hardships increased from 38 percent in 2006 to 45 percent in 2007, while health hardships also increased from 30 percent in 2006 to 36 percent in 2007. Many New Yorkers (26 percent) fell behind on rent and mortgage with just as many (22 percent) having had their utilities turned off. Twenty five percent of New Yorkers received meals from family or friends due to a cash shortage and 31 percent of those surveyed indicated they had to cut back on buying school supplies and clothes due to financial hardships. This past year almost one third (32 percent) of poor parents were unable to fill a prescription because of lack of money or insurance. Even among the working poor, people working full time, 43 percent experienced more than three hardships in the past year.

David Jones warned, “We are witnessing a trend that our survey has captured over the last several years. The working poor are constantly robbing Peter to pay Paul. With little income and practically no savings, the working poor are forced to make choices that are unconscionable – food or rent, utilities or food, clothes or utilities – and, as a result, live on the brink of disaster every day. They are our family, friends, neighbors and co-workers. They work, pay taxes and contribute to all that makes our city great. Yet, they suffer in relative silence. We are destined for failure if we do not begin to listen to the voices of the Unheard Third.”

*“The Unheard Third,” conducted by CSS and fielded by the national polling firm Lake Research Partners, is a unique snapshot of the policy preferences and experiences of low-income New Yorkers. The survey is partially funded through the generous support of the Independence Community Foundation, The New York Community Trust, The Rockefeller Foundation, and United Way of New York City. CSS has used the survey to inform and guide its research, direct service programs, and policy recommendations. It has served to narrow the focus of the agency's agenda on the working poor and reinforce its belief that public policy aimed at this population must, in part, be guided by the life experiences and ideas of New Yorkers living in poverty.*

Learn more about this year's survey at, <http://www.cssny.org/research/unheardthird/index.html>

The Community Service Society of New York (CSS) has been the leading voice on behalf of low-income New Yorkers for 160 years and continues to advocate for the economic security of the working poor in the nation's largest city.

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