

Stimulus for Public Housing

More than 100 resident leaders, advocates, representatives from government, and public housing officials joined me and Congressman Charles Rangel last Saturday to discuss public housing in New York now that new policies have been put forward and the stimulus has funded more than \$13.6 billion for HUD programs nationally.

The forum, “Public Housing: Washington and New York Perspectives,” was presented by the Community Service Society, with co-sponsors Legal Aid Society, Citywide Council of Presidents, NYC Public Housing Resident Alliance, and Public Housing Residents of the Lower East Side (PHROLES). It was a rare opportunity for public housing resident leaders, housing advocates, and elected officials to weigh in on Washington decisions about the future of public housing – decisions crucial to the future of our city, where close to half-million New Yorkers live in public housing.

The event featured a panel on policy issues that included Ricardo Morales, chair of the New York City Housing Authority (NYCHA), Margarita Lopez, NYCHA Board Member, David Stoopler from Senator Charles Schumer’s staff, and Aixa Aleman-Diaz from Rep. Nydia Velazquez’s staff. A second panel focused on how to strengthen the voice of public housing residents in budget and policy decisions.

Congressman Rangel, chair of the House Ways and Means Committee, gave the keynote. He spoke about the importance of public housing residents forming an action group to secure the resources to preserve and expand affordable housing in the city and across the state. He also talked about the link between housing and education: “The kid who drops out of school cannot be productive unless he has an education. But you can’t tell a kid ‘study your homework’ if he doesn’t have a decent place to live. Learning is a process of environment. If a kid has to go to a homeless shelter, there’s no teacher good enough that is going to allow that student to learn.”

The voices of public housing residents are often silenced, particularly during these times when disastrous housing foreclosures are capturing the headlines. Given the \$423 million received by NYCHA in stimulus funds, there remains a great deal of work to link job and training opportunities to capital projects.

With our new president and a new majority in Congress, this is a time for hope and change on the public housing front. Yet there are good reasons for us in New York City not to be complacent. Here are some.

The president’s proposed 2010 HUD budget represents an 18 percent increase over FY2009 — the first time in eight years that deep cuts to HUD programs were not proposed by the president. But

the budget is silent on whether there will be full funding for public housing operating subsidies and capital subsidies. Proposals put forward by government experts and the housing industry point to a major course shift in the mission of housing authorities toward mixed public-private development initiatives.

Unpopular Program

Public housing is not a popular program with Congress or the voting public. In many large cities – Chicago, St. Louis, Newark - it is distressed and troubled. National media images are of concentrated, segregated poverty, degrading living conditions, high crime, and ultimate demolition. In addition, although almost all housing in the United States is subsidized to some extent, public housing is often the target of those who are worried about “socialized housing.”

In the midst of that imagery, New York City’s public housing is exceptional. We have the largest public housing program in the country, and widely considered the most successful. Low-income New Yorkers want the opportunity to move into public housing, not out. There is a 130,000 household waiting list.

Public housing in America started in New York City. We have good reason to be concerned that Washington recognize what public housing has achieved here and develop policies that will support and preserve its communities and allow us to expand affordable housing for low-income New Yorkers. Without public housing, many families could not afford to stay in New York City. The city would move closer to being a place where only the very wealthy and the very poor can live.

Job Losses Spike

The State Labor Department recently reported that the city’s unemployment rate jumped from 6.9 percent in January to 8.1 percent in February. But the official numbers don’t include those who have given up looking for a job. We know from research done by the Community Service Society that nearly half of all Black men in New York City were jobless when the official rates were lower earlier in the decade.

The Community Service Society has published reports revealing that about 200,000 young New Yorkers, ages 16 to 24, are neither in school nor in the job market. These young people are “disconnected” from any institution that would help them achieve a successful future. Nationally, there are some four to five million disconnected youth.

These numbers, however, do not reflect the economic downturn that began last year. The true number of disconnected youth is skyrocketing now, with the loss of jobs and the movement of older workers, once laid off, to lower paying employment that would ordinarily go to young workers entering the job market.

Funding Jobs

NYCHA, which operates public housing in the city, needs to implement Section 3 provisions of the 1968 Housing Act, which mandate that HUD funds should be used as much as possible to provide jobs for low-income workers and to support small businesses. NYCHA, which was forced recently to

lay off many workers, will be getting \$423 million in stimulus funds. It should hire young unemployed residents to help with the upkeep of public housing properties.

Since Mayor Bloomberg ended city subsidies for public housing six years ago, the city should use some of its federal stimulus funds for employment of public housing residents, especially disconnected youth. This would help NYCHA's physical plant, which has been neglected over the past few years; it would have the added benefit of cutting the jobless rate of young New Yorkers.

Join the discussion on how we can improve the lives of low-wage workers by making your voice heard on our Turnstile blog at <http://turnstile.cssny.org/turnstile/>.

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. The views expressed in this column are solely those of the writer. The Urban Agenda is available on CSS's website: www.cssny.org.

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