

Who Will Advocate for Low-Income Families of Color?

It seems only yesterday that we were celebrating David Paterson becoming New York State's first black governor and Charlie Rangel becoming the chairman of the powerful House Ways and Means Committee at the same time of Barack Obama's presidency. There was reason to believe that we were on the eve of tremendous progress on a whole host of economic and social issues, particularly urban issues, which have been ignored in the public arena for decades.

Now, David Paterson is battling just to finish his term in office, his election campaign over practically before it started. In fact, his time is divided between issues concerning his survival and budget issues that he is constitutionally obligated to do.

As chairman of Ways and Means, Charlie Rangel was in a position to bring some semblance of sanity and fairness to the federal tax codes. He also had influence over the current health reform legislation and Medicaid funding, so crucial for New York's financial health. Rangel had worked diligently to gain the chairmanship of Ways and Means for 32 years, only to see it wrested from him – temporarily, he hopes - after just three years.

Power Diminished

But rather than focusing on the struggles of Paterson or Rangel, I am more concerned with the constituencies whose well-being depends in large measure on their clout in office. Who will represent low-wage New Yorkers of color as the power of these public officials is diminished?

Rangel might not regain his chairmanship; committee members – who vote for chairman – may be inclined to support someone less controversial. And if he does not return to the chairmanship, he might decide to retire. If Harlem elects a new congressman, he or she will start at the bottom of the House seniority pole. Unlike the Senate, where a new member can carve out a niche and become effective quickly, it will be years until a new representative has any real clout.

There are other influential members of the city's congressional delegation – Jerrold Nadler, Carolyn Maloney, Nydia Velazquez - but none are positioned to have the clout wielded by Rangel. It is quite possible that his potential loss of the chairmanship of Ways and Means will be one of the most politically catastrophic days in New York City history. Just look at the situation endured by the city's low-income residents, those who are most likely to depend on government funds and programs.

High Rates of Hardship

According to census data, in 2009, 3.1 million New Yorkers lived in low-income households – less than 200 percent of federal poverty guidelines or about \$36,000 for a family of three. That's about 37 percent of the city's population. The largest concentration of low-income households is among the city's communities of color. These are experiencing high rates of hardship, including lack of adequate health care and food insecurity. In addition, the Community Service Society (CSS) has

documented the alarming number of the city's disconnected youth – over 200,000 16 to 24 year-olds who are neither in school nor in the workforce. More than 70 percent of disconnected young men are African American and Latino.

And this is a constituency where – officially – black male unemployment is running at nearly 20 percent. We know from CSS research that the actual jobless figures are two to three times the official ones because so many of the unemployed have simply given up looking for work – in an economy where there is one job opening for every six unemployed persons – and are not counted in the official rate.

Yet the proposed state budget – which by law must be balanced – contains billions of dollars in cuts for those programs most needed in tough economic times – education, youth programs, job training, and homeless prevention. Cuts in education funding to city schools will mean both teacher layoffs and larger class sizes, increasing unemployment and endangering academic outcomes for the most at-risk students. And with less funding for affordable housing and New York's food banks and cuts in services – public transportation, garbage removal, police, fire – the city will quickly become a less pleasant place to live – and to do business.

Fortunately, a federal jobs bill expected to pass this week in Washington would bring \$2.3 billion in budget aid to New York State and another \$700 million to help counties and New York City. It could help the state avoid cuts in spending, layoffs, or increased taxes. But, historically, the city and state have been shortchanged by Washington, getting back far less in funds than we pay out in taxes. Without the influence and political will of a Charlie Rangel, we will continue to be hard pressed to get our fair share, a situation that threatens to damage the lives of millions of New York's low-income families.

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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