

A Hundred Days

Yesterday was President Barack Obama's 100th day in office. Few men have entered the office of the presidency under anything like the dire circumstances that the nation faces today. Only Lincoln at the time of the Civil War and F.D.R. during the Great Depression of the 1930's confronted national crises that exceed the problems – foreign and domestic – that President Obama has faced from his first day in office.

But the President's optimism and his ability to inspire confidence have lifted the mood of the country. The latest Associated Press poll found that more people believe that the nation is headed in the right direction (48%) than the wrong track (44%) for the first time in more than five years. Continued good numbers will depend on demonstrating that his administration can competently deal with our many problems.

The President's first order of business is the sinking economy, which has had a multiplier effect – job losses, loss of health insurance coverage, housing foreclosures and homelessness, and threats of hunger. We know from our research at the Community Service Society and from our annual survey, "The Unheard Third," that low-income New Yorkers are suffering multiple hardships during the recession. Even in good economic times, their lives are tough. Low-income families are always the first to suffer when state and local budgets are cut because they are the most likely to rely on government programs.

Joblessness

Unemployment does not affect all sectors of society equally. Black men, in particular, are being hard hit by the recession. Last month, the national unemployment rate for Black men was 15.4 percent, more than twice that of white men. And this statistic does not account for the millions of Black men who have been out of a job for so long that they are no longer counted in the government's employment statistics.

Young people, trying to enter the job market for the first time, have also found few job opportunities. More than five million workers have lost their jobs in this recession. Many laid off workers have moved into lower paying jobs that would normally go to young people starting out in the labor market. The unemployment rate for teenage Blacks 16 to 19 year-olds is 35.7 percent; for young Blacks age 20 to 24, it is 21.9 percent.

To turn the economy around, the administration has assembled an economic stimulus package of \$787 billion. It is a nationwide effort to create jobs and transform our economy. A national economic crisis is a good time to rethink the way that government does business. F.D.R.'s New Deal was able to permanently alter the place of government in American life in response to the depression. Many public initiatives that we take for granted today were adopted during that time. Government planning and spending put millions back to work.

President Obama's plan is no less ambitious. Its goal is to create or save 3.5 million jobs in a number of industries, including many new "green jobs" in energy.

Reflecting long-term priorities, the package directs funding towards health care, education, and energy. It includes tax credits for working families and expanded unemployment insurance benefits. The \$150 billion investment in the nation's infrastructure will create public service jobs, not just in rebuilding roads, bridges, and buildings, but also in public transit and high speed rail and upgrading the nation's electricity grid. This is an area

where many young people could find training and job experience that transition to the private sector in the future.

Health Care

The package also includes aid to states so there will not be deep cuts in Medicaid or SCHIP because of budget shortfalls. This will help protect nearly 20 million people in danger of losing health coverage and generate jobs.

President Obama is moving ahead with a planned expansion of health care. This is crucially important for communities of color. In New York State, more than 40 percent of African Americans under age 65 were uninsured at some point in the previous year - more than a million Black New Yorkers.

Housing

Along with the stimulus package, there is \$275 billion in housing aid – to ease the foreclosure crisis – and another \$1 trillion to strengthen the nation’s banks and allow credit to begin flowing freely again. Credit is vital; it allows businesses to expand – and hire new workers – and increases housing start-ups that add construction jobs. Any increase in affordable housing will help Black renters. Two-thirds of Black households in New York State – including 87 percent of low-income Black households - are rentals.

There are voices in the public sphere that say that the President is moving too quickly on matters of profound importance to the nation. But this is no time for “go slow” policies. The nation faces its greatest crisis in 70 years. The fallout from the plummeting economy goes to the heart of our nation’s security as much as any military operation overseas. No doubt, there will be tough times ahead, but we are fortunate to have a President who understands that government once again must be proactive in helping the most vulnerable members of society; those who are suffering through no fault of their own.

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/>.

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