

A Young Adult Service Corps for Public Housing

The past year and a half has brought a crisis in employment to New York City, especially its Black neighborhoods. Black unemployment in the city is higher than at any other time in my life - from the first quarter of 2008 to the first quarter of 2009, Black unemployment in the city rose from 5.7 percent to 14.7 percent, an increase of 167 percent. But with stimulus funding coming into the city, new hiring in various areas is now possible.

In the last few weeks, I testified twice before the U.S. House Subcommittee on Housing and Community Opportunity on the future of public housing, particularly with regard to the New York City Housing Authority's (NYCHA) implementation of Section 3 of the 1968 Housing Act, which requires that HUD funds be used to maximize job and training opportunities for low-income residents.

NYCHA housing consists of over 180,000 households in 340 developments across the five borough of New York City. With a resident population of about 500,000, it is almost as large as other major cities, like Boston or Cleveland. Black households account for nearly half of NYCHA's resident population.

NYCHA receives more than a billion dollars in HUD funds each year, which are spent on management, operations, and capital improvements. And this year, NYCHA has already received \$423 million in economic stimulus funds, which opens up further opportunities.

But with over 20,000 NYCHA residents seeking work — this year the figure is likely closer to 30,000 — the authority's track record in linking residents with jobs and training is small compared to the scale of the need. Despite hundreds of millions of dollars committed each year to capital improvement projects, the highest number of NYCHA job placements in any one year is 461.

The latest research by the Community Service Society on public housing, "Making the Connection: Economic Opportunity for Public Housing Residents," found that NYCHA residents had the equivalent of a 17 percent unemployment rate – high, but not unusual for low-income Blacks across the city. Data from the 2005 New York City Housing and Vacancy Survey revealed that of the unemployed population in NYCHA housing, 39 percent were in the age group 18 to 24. That was four years ago.

Youth Unemployment

Within workforce population groups, none has been hit harder by the current recession than young people. The unemployment rate in June 2009 for Black youth ages 16-19 was 37.9 percent. From December 2007 through January 2009, employment of 16-24 year-olds nationwide dropped faster than that of any other segment of the population. Conversely, employment of those aged 55 and over increased during the same period, meaning that the jobs that might have been available for new, younger workers are even less likely to be filled by them.

Then there are those young people ages 16 to 24 that are not even in the labor market – unemployed, not looking for a job, and not in school or a training program. Even before the recession took hold, there were a growing number of these "disconnected youths" – four to five million nationally. In New York City, of 200,000 disconnected youth identified in 2005, Black youth comprised nearly a third of the males and more than a quarter of the females. Those numbers are certainly much higher today.

When we look deeper at the out-of-work population, we find that in addition to being disproportionately young, it includes those with low levels of education. High school dropouts were almost twice as likely to

lose their jobs compared to high school graduates between December 2007 and January 2009, whereas those with college degrees have been largely insulated from unemployment.

Building Skills

In response to this crisis – and in regard to the \$423 million stimulus funding received by NYCHA - the Community Service Society proposes a NYCHA Young Adult Service Corps program that would reengage out-of-school, out-of-work young adults who live in NYCHA housing into work-based programs that build their skills while they contribute to the improvement of the NYCHA environment.

A Young Adult Service Corps could follow much of the aspects of New York City Justice Corps and Green City Corps, while serving a population of young adult NYCHA residents. The programs could be based and conducted at NYCHA housing, operated by local nonprofits, who work in partnership with NYCHA administrators. Projects for a NYCHA Young Adult Service Corps could include work to improve housing, including painting, maintenance, gardening, renovation, and weatherization.

Considerable research has shown that early workplace experience is the greatest predictor of lifetime success in the workforce. Studies have shown that individuals who do not have a successful workplace experience by age 25 face sharply diminished chances of enjoying financial stability over their lifetimes.

Supported work such as a Young Adult Service Corps is a strategy that would simultaneously improve communities and the young people who live there. Through service, young people develop skills, knowledge, and abilities that are attractive to employers and enable them to confidently thrive as responsible, productive members of communities. It's worked before – in the 1930s during the Great Depression and with the current Service and Conservation Corps, which allow young people to accomplish important conservation, community restoration, and other service projects, while also developing employment and citizenship skills. Given that youth and young adult employment is at such historically low rates, we must act now.

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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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.

From the New York Amsterdam News
August 6 - August 12, 2009