

Developing a Blueprint for Unemployed New Yorkers

New York City's unemployment rate is approaching 10 percent. The unemployment rate for Black men is now 26.7 percent, greater than the highest rate in the Great Depression. Over 200,000 young people 16 to 24 years of age – most of them Black and Latino youth - are neither in school nor working. Record numbers of families are living in shelters. Food banks and soup kitchens are running out of food; demand for food has increased by 35 percent over last year. More than 1,360,000 New Yorkers are getting by on food stamps.

This is New York City today. A recent conference, co-sponsored by the Community Service Society and the Center for an Urban Future, explored these facts through an examination of New York's human capital.

Nearly 400 advocates, government officials, and philanthropists turned out for the second in a two-part series on how New York City will ensure that all workers have the education and skills they need to access family sustaining jobs and to help employers retain their economic preeminence. The conference, entitled, "New York's Human Capital – Ensuring Shared Prosperity and Economic Competitiveness," explored the gaps and options for public assistance recipients, the formerly incarcerated, immigrants, and young adults. The goal was to examine how policy makers can address the challenges of individuals with limited education and work experience; discuss job opportunities for New Yorkers; and identify workforce development strategies that will benefit these populations.

New York has maintained its economic preeminence over the years thanks in large part to the productivity of its workforce. Employers choose to locate to New York City because of our unparalleled pool of highly talented, creative, and skilled workers. But large segments of the city's workforce currently lack the skills to fully participate in the labor market, advance in their careers, and achieve economic security. This is not only a threat to their livelihood; it is a threat to the economic well-being of the city.

Alarming numbers of New Yorkers are stuck in low-wage jobs with little opportunity for advancement. Addressing these skills gaps and creating more pathways to prosperity will be critical for New York City in the years ahead if the city is to maintain its competitiveness in a global economy.

Conference panelists – from Year Up, UPROSE, ROC-United, the Fortune Society, the Center for Employment Opportunities, and the New York Immigration Coalition - maintained that workforce services need to be coupled with efforts to improve job quality, such as passing a paid sick leave law in New York City and raising the minimum wage. They also stressed the importance of expanding transitional job opportunities and better alignment between the workforce system and high job growth areas. The city's Human Resources Administration should be a stronger partner in the workforce development system, coordinating its efforts with the private sector and nonprofits to achieve these goals.

Several areas of concern for low-income New Yorkers are of immense importance – education, employment, and job benefits, among them.

Education

In the area of education, CSS will soon be issuing a report on the importance of the GED, especially for those too old or too far behind to earn a conventional high school degree. More than one million working-age New Yorkers without a high school degree or equivalency — nearly a quarter of the working-age population - find themselves on the fringes of the labor market, stuck in low-wage jobs with little chance of advancement at best, and out of work at worst. The single biggest reason why is their lack of basic skills.

To have any hope of success in today's labor market, individuals must demonstrate an ability to read and perform math operations at a reasonably high level. Those who cannot are unlikely ever to enjoy job security.

Employment

As for employment opportunities, I recently testified before the U.S. House Subcommittee on Housing and Community Opportunity on the future of public housing with regard to the New York City Housing Authority's 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.

With close to 30,000 NYCHA residents seeking work, the authority's track record in linking residents with jobs and training is small compared to the scale of the need.

NYCHA has just received \$423 million in stimulus funds. The city needs to create an interagency task force to work with NYCHA on the design and targeting of Section 3 programs that provide access to opportunities for job-seekers in public housing.

Job Benefits

In the area of job benefits, CSS produced a report in 2006 on New York City's security guard industry, an important source of employment for New Yorkers who do not have a college education. We found that over a quarter of the city's guards have not completed high school. Non-unionized security guards are poorly paid. The median hourly wage for these guards in the New York City area is only about 55 percent of the median for all workers in the metropolitan area. Few guards receive employer provided health insurance or paid sick leave. Turnover in the security guard industry nationally is as high as 300 percent.

But it doesn't have to be this way. Unionized security guards get decent pay and good benefits.

In a few weeks, the Community Service Society and the Center for an Urban Future will be releasing a Human Capital Blueprint – based on what we heard in these two conferences – which will outline actions New York City can take to ensure that employers have the skilled workers they need and job seekers have the education, training, and work experience needed to fuel economic growth and shared prosperity in the years ahead.

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.

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