

The Election Is Over – Now What?

Last week's congressional elections will probably be bad news for New York City and the nation's other large urban centers. When political conservatives gain power in Congress, they rarely bother to notice the problems of urban America. Still, high and chronic unemployment is a national issue that those in government cannot ignore. With the private sector afraid to take on any large-scale hiring and state and local governments straining to balance their budgets, only the federal government can provide relief in the form of public works programs, funding for job training, tax breaks for hiring, and credit easements to expanding small businesses.

But will there be cooperation between the parties going forward, or will the next two years be a study in gridlock? The millions of Americans desperate for work cannot wait another two years for Washington to sort itself out.

The Community Service Society strongly advocates for both the importance of available, quality GED programs for out-of-school youth as well as transitional workforce programs that help prepare young people to make successful transitions into either college or permanent, full-time employment.

New York's Congressman Jerrold Nadler introduced a bill (H.R. 2497) entitled the Transportation Jobs Corps Act that would create a career-ladder grant program within the Federal Transit Administration to help existing workers retain jobs in the public transportation industry, while also recruiting and preparing young people for jobs in the transportation industry. Diversity and serving underrepresented segments of the population will be particular priorities for these grants. Given the poor state of much of America's transportation infrastructure, a transportation corps could furnish many jobs for disconnected youth while providing a safer, more efficient, environmentally sound and sustainable transportation.

In addition, a bill introduced by Congressman Charles Rangel - amending the Work Opportunity Tax Credit (WOTC) to include low-skill youth who have been out of work and school for the past six months - was made part of the 2009 stimulus package, but it must be reauthorized by the next Congress.

The Work Opportunity Tax Credit provides employers with an incentive to employ certain groups of disadvantaged workers. For most eligible hires who are employed for a certain number of hours, employers can claim a credit against their income tax. Congressman Rangel's bill expanded the WOTC by including those youth aged 16 through 24 who are designated by a state employment agency to have been neither employed nor in school for the past six months and to lack sufficient basic skills for employment.

Poor GED Program

The woeful GED program in the city must be improved. In New York City, only 47.5 percent passed the test in 2007, the latest figure for the city. And the relatively few city residents who do

pass the exam and move on to college — the point at which they can truly enhance employability and earning power — have poor rates of retention and graduation.

Over the last several years, the Community Service Society has conducted in-depth research on the city’s GED system. The results of this research are captured in a report on the GED, “From Basic Skills to Better Futures: Generating Economic Dividends for New York City.”

Insufficient resources, lack of oversight, and a complete absence of coordination contribute to our system’s poor performance. The majority of programs that aim to support individuals in attaining a GED are funded at approximately \$1,000 per participant annually. Programs funded at this level simply cannot offer the supportive services they need to succeed. The underfunding of GED programs is matched by a near-complete lack of uniform standards and oversight. Individuals who wish to enter a program have no single resource to help them sort through all existing options to find the one that is right for them.

Council Speaker Christine Quinn, in her 2010 State of the City message, highlighted the need to overhaul the GED system. There is plenty of work to do here, and it can be done without waiting for help from Washington.

Help Those Hurting

As for the national context, the federal government should forget about extending tax cuts for the wealthy and concentrate on people who really need help. Middle- and low-income Americans, especially African Americans and Latinos, are hurting. President Obama must have the political will to strongly promote programs to help these populations, beginning with work programs and job training for industries, such as energy, which will be expanding in the future. And he must be able to explain the importance of these programs to the American people.

Also, many groups that have been especially hurt by the recession are the Democratic Party’s base. If President Obama is going to win a second term in office, he will have to address their needs.

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 165 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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