



Housing Authority Should Aid Unemployed Residents

By David R. Jones
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The New York City Housing Authority (NYCHA) owns and manages 180,000 public housing units in 340 developments; it also provides Section 8 Housing Choice Vouchers that assist 97,000 households living in private rentals across the city. Between the city's post-9/11 economic downturn and its growth cycle through 2008, NYCHA's resident labor force grew to over 204,000 working-age individuals and unemployment declined to a low of 10 percent.

But the unemployment rate for these residents has nearly tripled since 2008 when the recession struck the city, rising from 10 percent to 27 percent by 2010. This is one finding revealed in the latest housing report from the Community Service Society (CSS), entitled "The Housing Role in Workforce Development: Challenge to the New York City Housing Authority."

In the midst of a jobless economic recovery with sustained, high rates of unemployment, NYCHA faces an unprecedented challenge. Under Section 3 of the 1968 Housing Act, it must use its HUD funding to maximize job and training opportunities for low-income New Yorkers and develop the capacity of its resident workforce. Despite the challenge of an unfavorable labor market at present, there are opportunities to do so.

During the "good times" of the growth cycle before the recession of 2008, those most likely to be left behind were younger residents, particularly those under 25, most frequently black and Latino men rather than women, and particularly those who had not obtained a high school diploma. These residents were most likely to experience the greatest ("structural") obstacles to employment and should be targeted for special NYCHA workforce development programs.

There are a number of opportunities for NYCHA to engage in meaningful workforce development. HUD recently ruled that the New York City Police Department must comply with Section 3, in return for the \$73 million it receives annually for special police services in public housing. The NYPD compliance agreement should include restitution for lost opportunities since 1994, when NYCHA first agreed to the payments, in the form of appropriate NYPD pre-apprenticeship and apprenticeship programs, possibly a community policing approach that will decrease wrongful arrests of residents for criminal trespass.

The authority should use its leverage as a participant in the New York City Workforce Investment Board to strengthen resident access to local resources for job training and placement. Also, more should be done to monitor NYCHA's many contractors providing construction or other services to assure compliance, make residents aware of opportunities, and promote long-term rather than temporary jobs.

This is an ideal time to create a GED initiative to strengthen resident qualifications, particularly younger residents looking for work, for future work opportunities. GED preparation programs could be sited at

NYCHA's many community and senior center facilities. In its enforcement of the community service requirement, NYCHA should proactively urge residents, particularly younger residents short of a high school diploma, to further their education.

At present, NYCHA's Section 3 and workforce development efforts focus largely on its public housing communities. Voucher residents are more dispersed, less in contact with their peers, and as a result less vocal and organized. NYCHA should do a better job of outreach and communication with its Section 8 resident constituency, particularly about job and training opportunities. The NYPD is not the only city agency receiving HUD funds that is required to comply with Section 3. The Department of Housing Preservation and Development and the Sanitation Department both receive annual HUD funds.

These are some of the possibilities where NYCHA could help ease unemployment among low-income New Yorkers, especially among its large resident constituency.

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. For over 10 years he served as a member of the board of directors of the Puerto Rican Legal Defense and Education Fund. The views expressed in this column are solely those of the writer.