

La Nueva Mayoría

By David R. Jones



Mayor's New Program to Aid Youth

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Earlier this month, Mayor Bloomberg took a bold and unique step forward in underscoring the need to help over 300,000 young men of color in our city in the areas of education, employment, health, and the criminal justice system. The focus on the economic recovery and other policy matters has meant that this issue has not received the attention it deserves. As a result, a large segment of our population – hundreds of thousands of Latino and black youth – are at risk of becoming a “lost generation,” with all the economic and social problems that come with it.

With his announcement of this campaign, the mayor acknowledged that the city has a responsibility to help these young men obtain job skills, complete their education, and choose paths other than those that lead to incarceration. To do so, in these harsh economic times, the mayor is relying on spending nearly \$130 million - \$30 million from the mayor's own foundation, \$30 million from billionaire George Soros, and the remainder paid for by the city.

More than 173,000 youth in the city – 16 to 24 years olds - are neither in school nor in the labor force; the overwhelming number are Latino and African American. The public high school graduation rate for Latino and black males is about 50 percent compared to 70 percent for white and Asian males.

Through our own research and policy recommendations, the Community Service Society (CSS) has continually attempted to call attention to this issue and what it means for all New Yorkers. “The Unheard Third: A Profile of Low-Income Latino New Yorkers” (October 2009) is a sample of CSS research that focused on this crisis.

We applaud the mayor's leadership in making this issue an administration policy priority going forward, committing his own personal resources in the effort, and elevating the public discourse on disconnected youth. Specifically, he has singled out rethinking the city's approach to probation, expansion of youth programs at public housing sites, and GED preparation.

Some criticism of the mayor's initiative in the media has referred to earlier efforts that have failed to provide solutions to these problems. But the crisis is too great to wring our hands and say there is little we can do. Undoubtedly, any effort must take into account the breakdown of so many families of color and the great many female-headed families. Nevertheless, it is imperative that we invest in efforts that move disconnected youth onto a path toward economic independence and responsible social behavior.

It is hoped that this initiative will approach the problem with a variety of ways to help disconnected youth. Some have little education and need help in literacy and numeracy in order to acquire job skills. Others are being held back only because of a felony record. Also, job losses in construction and manufacturing because of the recession have hurt young people looking for that first job.

We hope that the city's efforts will lead to a robust discussion of other areas that deserve policy reform. These include using public assistance through the Human Resources Administration as a way to reconnect youth to education and using federal housing funds under a requirement known as Section 3 to further expand job/training opportunities for youths in public housing and Section 8 voucher-assisted housing, where unemployment has tripled since the onset of the recession.

We look forward to supporting Mayor Bloomberg's campaign. The success or failure of this initiative will have a significant impact on the lives of all New Yorkers.

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.