

La Nueva Mayoría

By David R. Jones



What's Important: Getting Back to Work

By David R. Jones
September 8, 2011

In the past year, the Community Service Society's (CSS) annual survey of New Yorkers, "The Unheard Third," reported that 27 percent of low-income Latino households lost a job, compared to 17 percent of low-income white households. The recession and jobless recovery have been devastating for young people trying to break into the labor market. The national unemployment rate for Latino youth – ages 16 to 19 – was 36.2 percent in July 2011. It is not surprising that more than 6 in 10 low-income Latino New Yorkers in the CSS survey worry that someone in their household will lose their job or not work enough hours to make ends meet in the next year.

For months, Americans have been telling pollsters that creating jobs and getting people back to work are far more important than deficits and budget cuts. But most Washington politicians cling to the outworn ideology that cutting back on spending will get us out of this jobless recovery from the recent recession. Spending money on job creation or public service jobs just isn't on the table. That policy didn't work in the Great Depression of the 1930's and it's not working now.

President Obama has said that he will soon unveil a jobs plan. The president should send a series of jobs bills to Congress and force its members to go on record either for or against job creation. Maybe Congress will surprise us and start to focus on unemployment – which now officially stands at 9.1 percent. But that statistic doesn't account for the millions of jobless who have simply given up looking for work in an economy where there are four or five unemployed workers for every job opening.

Not everyone in Washington is oblivious to the problem. New York's Senator Kirsten Gillibrand is sponsoring legislation – the Urban Jobs Act (S. 922) – that would distribute competitive grants to nonprofits - \$20 million nationwide in its first year - to provide 18 to 24 year-olds skills training, mentoring, and GED preparation. The legislation focuses on second-chance youth – those who have dropped out of school, have had a child, or have been caught up in the criminal justice system. A companion bill in the House of Representatives (H.R. 683) is sponsored by Brooklyn Congressman Edolphus Towns.

Even with 14 million Americans out of work, at least two million jobs remain unfilled because employers can't find workers with the necessary skills to do those jobs. The Urban Jobs Act would help close that gap by targeting federal funding to assist urban youth in obtaining the education and skills required for jobs in our labor market. This would help reduce youth unemployment, provide workers for open jobs, and strengthen the economy. Conversely, ignoring millions of unemployed youth has the potential of creating a vast underclass of the jobless for years to come, with all of the economic and social problems that would accompany it.

Although political gridlock has taken control of the federal government, Senate Majority Leader Harry Reid should force a vote on this and other job creation legislation that President Obama sends to Congress. Make senators vote on these bills. And if they pass the Senate and the House leadership won't allow a vote on them, then the American people will know who is concerned with their well-being and who is just playing politics.

At a time when many Americans are pessimistic about the future and 75 percent feel that the nation is going in the wrong direction (August 2011 AP/Roper Poll), job creation and putting people back to work must be recognized as indispensable to our economic security.

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.