

## **Ways to Combat Poverty**

New York City's poverty rate is now 20.1 percent – 1.6 million New Yorkers live below the federal poverty line, which the federal government defines as income of \$22,314 for a family of four. Thirty percent of the city's children live in poverty. The poverty rate for blacks is 23 percent. The poverty rate for adults without a high school diploma is 30 percent.

There are approximately 177,000 young people in our city – ages 16 to 24 – who are neither working or in school. There are 1.3 million New Yorkers (18 and older) without a high school diploma.

I know that some people expect the first column of the new year to be filled with optimism. I wrote a column this summer warning that the present trajectory of the city's economy, coupled with the lack of good jobs or opportunities for young people to get work experience, and no discernible sign that our political leadership understand the ramifications of doing nothing, would eventually lead to civil disorder. Nothing's happened since to change my mind.

The spectacle of Occupy of Wall Street was illustrative of the frustrations and disillusionment felt by many. The protesters saw inequitable tax policies, escalating corporate profits, and high unemployment, and said: something is very wrong with this picture.

### **Jobs and Skills**

The question is: what can be done? For starters, political leaders need to do more to spur the creation of jobs offering decent pay and basic benefits. Most importantly, we need to ensure that our young people have the skills to fill jobs and hold onto jobs when economic conditions improve.

We should invest in city infrastructure projects. Now is the time to take advantage of low interest rates to build and repair schools, roads, and parks. The High Line stands as a dramatic example of how much economic development can be generated by visionary public works.

We should target businesses for tax credits to help generate good jobs with benefits. And press large city banks that are sitting on top of mounds of capital to ease restrictions on small business loans and startup entrepreneurs.

We should adopt a program to convert some employment benefits into "re-employment benefits" so employers who hire workers receiving employment benefits would be permitted to convert the stream of weekly checks into a wage subsidy. It would serve as an incentive to hire the unemployed for permanent jobs, not part-time work, and not cost the public sector any more than if the worker remained jobless and drawing benefits.

We should leverage federal housing funds. The New York City Housing Authority should create jobs and training opportunities for its low-income residents. There are about 60,000 unemployed public housing residents – a number that has tripled since 2008.

Between 1.65 and 1.85 million working New Yorkers are without paid sick leave. This measure did not hurt businesses where it was adopted. The Paid Sick Leave bill has been languishing long enough in the City Council. Nearly every worker at some time will need to be away from the job to take care of their own health needs or the health needs of a family member. Unfortunately, the workers who can least afford to lose their pay when illness strikes are least likely to earn paid sick leave.

A recent CSS survey found that half of the low-income respondents had less than \$500 in savings in case of an emergency. In these circumstances, low-income working parents often must choose between their paychecks and caring for a sick child. Connecticut, Seattle, and San Francisco have all passed paid sick days legislation. Why can't New York City?

Why can't we support the living wage bill? Without fair wages, costs for basics like food and health care can easily get passed along to taxpayers when low-wage workers are forced to seek public benefits such as food stamps or Medicaid coverage for their children. Many other cities have shown that living wage legislation has created good jobs for low-income workers without adversely impacting economic growth. It's time to require fair wage guarantees for jobs created at developments receiving public subsidies.

### **Motivate Our Youth**

Where is the campaign to motivate our young people and show them that education and job-skills are their ticket to a brighter future in the 21st century? Just imagine if the same energy and creativity that is devoted to getting New Yorkers to quit smoking was applied to encouraging young people to finish high school.

We should bring back the Summer Jobs Program. The city sliced the summer jobs program from 52,000 to 28,000 this year. And we should expand GED programs. We have to do more to connect young adults to education, training, and decent jobs.

Our most recent "Unheard Third" survey found that most New Yorkers (67%) are willing to pay more in taxes to spend more on increasing graduation rates and on programs that give people another chance to get their diploma.

There are ways we can create "on-ramps" to jobs, training, education, and the type of skills needed to compete for jobs that provide a clear a path out of poverty. The first step is acknowledging that we are long past the crisis stage. What is desperately needed now is action and leadership.

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**From the New York Amsterdam News**  
January 3– January 9, 2013