

Engaging Disconnected Youth

This nation is in danger of creating a generation of jobless Americans. A miserable economy is certainly one reason. But the long-term reason is a lack of education and job skills that have produced millions of “disconnected youth,” 16 to 24 year-olds who are neither in school nor in the workforce. This is especially true of young people of color. Nationally, and in New York City, only about half of black and Latino students graduate from high school. There are about 170,000 disconnected youth in the city, overwhelmingly black and Latino young people. Without even a high school diploma, their chances of employment in our labor market even in good economic times are next to zero.

Many of these youths have simply given up hope of ever getting a job that would pay enough to sustain a family and provide a stepping stone into the middle class. As usual, the problems of New York City are reflected in other large urban areas. Chicago’s Black Star Project, founded in 1996, is committed to improving the quality of life in black and Latino communities of Chicago and nationwide by eliminating the racial academic achievement gap. Its executive director, Philip Jackson, estimates that 75 to 80 percent of young black men in Chicago are unemployed. He points out, “It leads to violence, broken families and hyperincarceration.”

State Program/Tax Credit

The job of reversing this incipient disaster falls squarely on our elected officials. And it appears as though Governor Cuomo has taken up the challenge. The governor and legislative leaders recently agreed to create an inner-city youth employment program and a \$25 million tax credit for employers who hire unemployed youth between 16 and 24 years of age over the first six months of 2012. The program and credit would be available to employers in businesses such as clean energy, health care, manufacturing, and conservation.

Nearly \$37 million in funding will be provided to critical jobs programs for inner city youth. We are not sure how much of this is earmarked for New York City, but considering the city’s youth population and need, it should get the lion’s share of these funds. It includes \$12 million in support grants to youth providers for work and occupational training, job placement, workplace mentoring, and follow up services to increase job retention. An additional \$25 million is to be appropriated for workforce skills training and support programs, including digital literacy, basic education and occupational training, summer youth employment, job search and placement, and child care enrollment. This is a modest beginning but, given the economy and the pressures on the state budget, at least it’s a start.

The governor’s office also announced the creation of a new infrastructure fund. New York Works Agenda will hopefully provide tens of thousands of jobs through a \$1 billion targeted and accelerated investment in key infrastructure projects around the state including roads, bridges, parks, and energy and water projects. An additional \$300 million from the Port Authority would be directed towards funding for infrastructure projects in New York City. This could not only put many young people to work. It could provide jobs for some of the millions of New Yorkers who

lost jobs during the recession and are either still unemployed or underemployed. Of course, all of this must still be approved by both houses of the Legislature.

Other Ways to Help

There are other policies should be on the governor's radar. There is a need to strengthen career and technical education (CTE) programs with better funding and certified teachers working in classes that are serious about moving young people from school to a job or an apprenticeship. The state also should take a closer look at ways to help the formerly incarcerated, including the removal of statutory barriers to employment.

We should also consider expanding alternatives to incarceration for nonviolent youthful offenders. A prison sentence for a young person is a lifetime stigma that often leads to a form of "civil death" after incarceration – no job, no money, no place to live, no health care. And HUD officials in Washington and New York should be working to maximize employment opportunities at public housing facilities through the Section 3 provisions of the 1968 Housing Act. The unemployment rate for public housing residents in New York City has nearly tripled since 2008 when the recession struck the city, rising from 10 percent to 27 percent by 2010.

Policies that help the poor gain skills and jobs are vital to the future of the country. With such a large portion of our population unable to compete, we are in danger of falling behind other nations in the new global economy; turning into a second-rate economic power. In addition, there are other costs to our society, including ever expanding welfare and prison costs, the loss of billions in revenues through taxes, and the loss of the enterprise and creativity of millions of young people. All youth have great potential to succeed, and a fair society gives everyone a real chance to reach that potential regardless of race or class.

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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