

Housing Authority Could Connect Residents to Job Opportunities

The unemployment rate for public housing and Section 8 voucher residents assisted by the New York City Housing Authority (NYCHA) 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. In effect, the statute obligates the authority to go beyond its core housing mission and play a role in the development of its resident labor force —working-age residents who participate in the labor market either by holding a job or actively seeking work. Despite the challenge of an unfavorable labor market at present, there are opportunities to do so.

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.

Unemployment Tripled

But the CSS analysis estimates that, as of 2010, the combined unemployment rate for public housing and voucher residents was about 27 percent, nearly triple the 10 percent rate in 2008, two years earlier. An estimated 50,000 to 58,000 residents were unemployed and seeking work, from 30,000 to 34,000 public housing residents (compared to 13,000 in 2008), and 20,000 to 24,000 voucher residents (compared to 8,000 in 2008).

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, even in a favorable labor market, and should be targeted for special NYCHA workforce development programs, such as GED preparation.

What NYCHA Can Do

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.

NYCHA participates in the New York City Workforce Investment Board (WIB), which oversees local workforce development programs, now undergoing reform. The authority should use its leverage 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. The number of Section 3 job/training openings should be an active criterion in deciding awards to contractors.

With current high unemployment among residents, this is an ideal time to create a GED initiative to strengthen resident qualifications, particularly younger residents looking for work, for future work opportunities. Public-private funding sources should be solicited, possibly along with the mayor's Young Men's Initiative. 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, where capital improvement projects are readily visible to residents. 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, and promote their organization, possibly through a separate Resident Advisory Board (RAB).

The NYPD is not the only city agency receiving HUD funds that is required to comply with Section 3. The New York City Department of Housing Preservation and Development (HPD) receives annual HUD funds through the Community Development and HOME block grant programs, about \$300 million in 2010. In addition, NYCHA has made payments to the Sanitation Department since 2002, for special pick-ups, at an average \$1 million annually. Consideration should be given to consolidating Section 3 and other workforce development efforts among NYCHA and other recipient agencies, in order to widen the range of opportunities available to low-income New Yorkers.

These are some of the possibilities where NYCHA could help ease unemployment among low-income New Yorkers. Considering what has become a jobless economic recovery, NYCHA should be doing its best to expand workforce opportunities for 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. 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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