

Focusing on Jobs - For a Change

Washington doesn't listen. 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. But, hey, don't confuse these guys with the facts.

On the Record

President Obama has said that he will soon unveil a jobs plan - better late than never. Many political observers believe that continued high unemployment will hurt the president's reelection chances next year. If that's what he is worried about, then he ought to send one jobs bill after another to Congress and force its members to go on record either for or against job creation. The president has nothing to lose by doing this. 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.

Job losses are particularly steep among black New Yorkers. In the past year, the Community Service Society's annual survey of New Yorkers, "The Unheard Third," reported that 22 percent of low-income black households lost a job, compared to 17 percent of low-income white households. Also low-income blacks are almost twice as likely as low-income whites to have experienced long stretches of unemployment. In 2009, only 9 percent of low-income blacks reported long stretches of unemployment. That figure increased to 16 percent a year later.

The recession and jobless recovery have been devastating for young people trying to break into the labor market. The national unemployment rate for black youth - ages 16 to 19 - was 39.2 percent last month. A recent Community Service Society report revealed that the unemployment rate for black males ages 16 to 24 in New York City averaged 33.5 percent between January 2009 and June 2010. By ignoring the millions of unemployed youth here and across the country, public officials are helping to create a vast underclass of the jobless for years to come, with all of the economic and social problems that would accompany it.

Urban Jobs Act

Apparently 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.

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 those senators stand up and 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 168 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.

From the New York Amsterdam News
September 1 – September 7, 2011