

**An Emerging Political Force
for New York City**

Remarks of David R. Jones

**President, Community Service Society
of New York**

**New York City Black, Latino, and Asian
Caucus Legislative Weekend**

May 20, 2006

Thank you for inviting me to speak at this first Black, Latino, and Asian Caucus Legislative Weekend. I'd especially like to thank Council Members Robert Jackson and Maria Del Carmen Arroyo, and the Legislative Weekend Chairperson, and my own Council Member Letitia James.

This caucus has the potential to bring a new dynamic to the politics and governance of New York City. You represent an emerging majority of New Yorkers. In the 2005 mayoral elections, Black, Latino, and Asian voters outnumbered non-Hispanic white voters for the first time in our city's history. Dramatic demographic changes are happening in our city.

Black, Latino, and Asian youth account for more than 75 percent of the city's under-18 population. More than half of all births in 2003 were to foreign-born mothers - meaning that this trend will only intensify in the coming years. The implications for this caucus are clear: with a well-articulated and informed policy agenda, you have an opportunity to make an enormous difference in the lives of most New Yorkers.

Two elements are necessary before this can happen. First, members of the caucus must come to a consensus on the needs of their constituents. Second, we need to reach a point where collective action by this caucus is not only possible, but is standard behavior.

We are meeting here during the Council's budget process, the allocation of the city's resources. To fully utilize this process and to respond effectively to the needs of constituents, Council members need to work from what I call the baseline data of their own districts - the number of constituents who are jobless, who have housing or health problems, the dropout rates in the high schools, the extent of access to local health facilities and youth facilities, the condition of the parks in your district. Only then can a reasoned decision be made as to the allocation of resources. Hard data - not anecdotal evidence - is necessary to set budget priorities.

Let me give some examples of what I mean.

We hear a lot about the crisis of affordable housing in New York. Even as we struggle to find resources to expand access to affordable housing, existing units are disappearing in the thousands. Apartment buildings developed under Mitchell-Lama and other federally subsidized housing programs are being converted to market-rate rentals at an alarming rate, or are facing the threat of foreclosure due to deterioration and neglect. In New York City, there are 92,000 privately-owned, at-risk housing units that were built with federal subsidies to serve lower-income renters.

The scope of the problem citywide is well known, but let's take a look at how this issue affects your district:

In Councilmember Charles Barron's district in Brooklyn, there are a total of 9,641 apartment units in at-risk housing developments.

There are 6,235 such units in Councilmember Joel Rivera's district in the Bronx, while the Queens district represented by Councilmember John Liu contains 425 at-risk Mitchell-Lama housing units alone.

In the 7th Council District in upper Manhattan, represented by your Co-Chairperson, Councilmember Robert Jackson, there are 1,700 housing units in the project-based Section 8 program.

The Community Service Society has mapped detailed data on the federally-subsidized housing stock for every Council district. It is our hope to expand this analysis to include many different categories of data for each district, for example, statistics on health coverage, employment, or the number of formerly incarcerated persons. We believe these data sets - and others developed by other not-for-profits - in the form of chart packs and visual tools, will enable you to determine the priority needs of each and every district.

Armed with real data - actionable information - about the experiences of people in your districts, you can be more effective at setting a legislative agenda that addresses the needs of your constituents and moves this city in a positive direction.

But as you all know, there is more to serving your constituents than knowing the problems that they face. We have to defend their interests against competing special interests.

Here is an example of how your constituencies' interests are in danger of being overtaken by other priorities. Starting on July 1, the Parks Department plans to charge fees of \$50 to \$75 a year at six previously free recreation centers located in low-income neighborhoods in the Bronx, Brooklyn, and Manhattan. In addition to sports and exercise facilities, these centers offer vital community services like tutoring and after school programs, computer literacy classes, and activities for seniors. These are public facilities, financed through our taxes. But now the city wants to charge New Yorkers an additional fee in order to use what they've already paid for.

So what's the big deal? \$50 - \$75. No sweat, right? Well, in our latest survey of low-income New Yorkers, we found that 65 percent have less than \$100 in savings. How can they possibly afford to pay \$50 or \$75 for fees to use public facilities?

This is the latest instance of publicly-financed facilities charging extra for admission. The effect will be to price many, largely minority working families out of the use of public facilities important for reasons of health, well-being and community.

This latest development follows a trend of increasing costs to use some of the city's most valuable public assets. It started with the city's museums. These institutions are owned by the city and receive city tax dollars in recognition of their service to the public interest. Once free, now some museums charge as much as \$20 to get in the door. To visit some of these institutions today looks more like a visit to pre-liberation South Africa than a majority minority city.

The City University was free to city residents not so long ago. New York was a model for accessible, high-quality urban education. Then, in the economic crisis of the 1970's - as it just so happens when black, brown, and Asian students poured in - CUNY started charging fees, which seem to increase every few years. Now the city wants to charge fees for the use of public recreation centers in some of our most disadvantaged neighborhoods. What's next, pay before the Fire Department puts out your house fire like they did before the turn of the century?

More and more, New York is moving toward a city divided by race, class, and income - where tax dollars are spent all too often to support amenities that are

only within reach of a progressively narrowing number of wealthier New Yorkers. This is unacceptable.

And as further evidence of the exclusivity of this city, our Fire Department - a venerable and respected institution in the wake of 9/11 - continues to exclude people of color. Less than 8 percent of firefighters are Black or Latino. Even as the department struggles to replenish its ranks, it maintains invisible quota system of legacy hiring.

Where are our elected officials on these issues? As members of the City Council, this caucus can and should halt discrimination in the form of prohibitive fees and exclusive public institutions. Recreation centers should not be turned into exclusive health clubs, the Fire Department should not be segregated, and New Yorkers should not be segregated on the basis of their income and race.

This is what I mean by protecting your constituents' interests. And they have many problems that must be addressed.

* 1.7 million New Yorkers - 20 percent of our city's population - live in poverty. Another 1.6 million New Yorkers are nearly poor, earning less than \$30,000 for a family of three.

- * 65 percent of poor households pay more than half their income for rent.
- * 40 percent of black men are jobless, according to our latest labor market report.
- * 65 percent of the city's working poor have less than \$100 in savings to fall back on in the case of an emergency.
- * More than 170,000 young people - ages 16 to 24 - are neither in the labor force nor in school, completely disengaged from any framework that would provide them with a future.
- * Nearly half of all students entering our high schools drop out before graduation. And only 10 percent of Black and Latino high school graduates get a Regents diploma.
- * 25 percent of adult New Yorkers are without access to health insurance.

When we asked low-income New Yorkers in our annual survey what government actions would be of most help to them, these are the answers we got: more access to job training and higher education, health insurance, housing assistance, and a functioning vocational education curriculum.

What does this mean in terms of actual policies? What can the members of this caucus do to prevent catastrophe for low-income families - and help them move to a more secure future? Let me leave you with a few ideas of where to begin.

First, New Yorkers need a *comprehensive housing policy agenda* to stop the loss of affordable housing units and protect low-income renters. Protection of NYCHA - the New York City Housing Authority - which operates our public housing facilities - has to be on top of our agenda. This caucus can take the lead by making sure that the council fully implements the stalled Tenant Empowerment Act, which would enable tenants to purchase subsidized apartment buildings at risk of reverting to market rate rents.

Next, your constituents need a renewed focus on jobs - training, education, and preparation to assure that New Yorkers of every stripe are able to share in their city's prosperity. The Council's NYC Works program was a great start, but it must be expanded and financed at a level that will have a measurable impact on the deep and long-term problem of chronic joblessness.

Funding mandated by the courts from the CFE lawsuit must be targeted to the schools and districts where it is most needed. Already there is talk about across-the-board funding that will serve to diminish its impact.

Our out-of-date technical and vocational education curriculum must be upgraded - to give students a reason to stay in school and the training necessary for a decent job after graduation. Thanks to the efforts of the mayor and Congressman Rangel, the city's Commission on Construction Opportunities has proposed a new school to give high school students training in the construction trades. But this is only a start. The council must consider industries that are poised for growth, like telecommunications, and invest in a vocational education system that provides a pipeline to good jobs.

But job training alone is not enough. Indeed, more New Yorkers are working harder than ever before, but millions of working poor still struggle to provide basic needs for their families. Low-income New Yorkers are facing falling wages and losing on-the-job benefits like health insurance.

CSS has a program, the New York City Managed Care Consumer Assistance Program, that has gone a long way toward assuring that those who are eligible for public health insurance get it, and are able to take advantage of it. MCCAP has helped over 40,000 New Yorkers, in some of the city's most hard-to-reach communities, to make better use of their health care.

Many of you - Councilmember Jackson and others - have supported this program over the years. Now is the time to preserve and expand the MCCAP program - and this caucus can get it done.

I take unique pride in speaking to you today about how you can make a difference in the lives of New Yorkers in need. The Community Service Society fought hard in the early 1990's for a redistricting plan that would allow this council to fully represent the diversity of our city. Looking around the room today, I can see that we have made enormous progress. I stand ready to support your efforts with the tools and research to build a strong agenda and a platform for future success. As a near majority of the Council - 25 out of 51 - you have the opportunity to influence government resources in this city as never before.