



David Jones And The Never-Ending Crusade

Seasoned anti-poverty leader uses campaign season to highlight need to respond to recession

By Andrew J. Hawkins

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At a candidate forum in February, Peter Colavito, the political director of 32BJ, told the audience that if they do not know David Jones, they probably should not be running for office in the first place.



But Jones is no kingmaker, and the organization that he heads, the 160-year-old Community Service Society is non-partisan, makes no endorsements and gives no donations.

Instead, Jones' political power stems from the moral force of his arguments and from the light he shines on the city's most disconnected residents—those 200,000 young people who have no job, little education and scant prospects for the future.

“I think he is one of the consciences of our city,” said Council Member Bill de Blasio (D-Brooklyn), chair of the General Welfare Committee and a candidate for public advocate. “He’s had a huge impact on policy and also on direct service to people in need.”

Jones says that a commitment to eliminating poverty should be a priority for anyone in public life.

“I think the question for many of the people who are elected or are looking to be elected, do they see the issue of the poor as essential to governance?” Jones said.

These days he is pushing local officials to adopt a tax incentive program that would encourage private companies to hire disconnected youth. At the state level, he is one of the strongest champions for expanding health coverage in poor neighborhoods. To ensure his issues get in front of the right people, Jones also spends tens of thousands of dollars on lobbying, mostly through top firms such as Wilson Elser Moskowitz Edelman and Dicker.

He is also working in tandem with groups like 1199 and the United Federation of Teachers in the creation of a wide-ranging anti-poverty agenda, combining his group’s brand of trusted, non-partisan advocacy with the strength and political reach of the city’s labor unions, in the hopes of applying extra pressure to government officials.

Mike Fishman, president of 32BJ, New York’s largest private sector union, said he became convinced of Jones’s expertise on poverty after serving with him on Mayor Michael Bloomberg’s (Ind.) anti-poverty panel. The union solicited a study from the Community Service Society on the socio-economic problems faced by security officers, which helped inform 32BJ’s position on poverty among its own members.

“It was very helpful, setting a tone and getting the facts together, for us to make a case that security officers should be paid better and treated better on the job,” Fishman said.

Jones traces his interest in social justice issues back to the influence of his father, Thomas S. Jones, who was part of a pioneering class of black lawyers, clergymen and other professionals who transformed Brooklyn politics in the post-World War II era, advocating for civil rights and urban development. As an Assembly member, and later as a civil court judge, the elder Jones was successful in challenging Sen. Robert F. Kennedy on the redevelopment of Bedford-Stuyvesant.

The younger Jones went on to intern for Kennedy, whom he fondly recalls as a committed man and a fiercely competitive touch football player.

“If I’d drop a pass, I’d catch hell,” Jones recalled, laughing.

Since then, Jones has worked with every New York mayor since Ed Koch, under whom he served as a special advisor on issues of race, urban development, immigration reform and education. Bloomberg appointed Jones to serve on several commissions, including his transition team and anti-poverty panel.

While the poverty rate has improved in New York over the years—one of only 12 states to record such a bump—the gap between rich and poor, already one of the highest in the nation, continues to widen. The number of people living below the poverty level has increased since Bloomberg became mayor in 2002, but so has the population.

Last year, Bloomberg successfully modified the formula for determining poverty, defined as earning less than 150 percent of the official federal poverty threshold, saying the federal equation fails to account for regional variances in housing costs. Jones applauds this move, but thinks they should go even further.

“One hundred and fifty percent is what the city has crept to,” Jones said. “But that puts you right on the cusp of homelessness.”

He cautiously approves of some of Bloomberg’s more radical anti-poverty schemes, such as cash incentives for poor families who take their children to the doctor.

But he warned the mayor against trying to oversell such programs. With the economy continuing to lag and unemployment rolls expanding, the time for action is at hand, Jones said. And this year’s election provides a unique opportunity to make some noise.

“There’ll be a huge surge every year of young people without adequate skills being poured into the lowest rung and competing with each other, driving down wages and creating their own challenges for the city,” he said. “We have some real challenges.”

ABOVE: David Jones cautiously approves of some of Bloomberg’s more radical anti-poverty schemes, such as cash incentives for poor families who take their children to the doctor, but warned the mayor against trying to oversell such programs. Photo by Andrew Schwartz