



Recession Not Over for Many Latino New Yorkers

By David R. Jones

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More than 6 in 10 low-income Latino New Yorkers worry that they or someone in their households will lose their jobs or not work enough hours to make ends meet in the next year. This finding from the latest Community Service Society (CSS) survey of low-income New Yorkers, “The Unheard Third,” reveals the anxiety that pervades many sectors of the city’s working class populations in the wake of the worst recession in 80 years.

CSS designed this survey in collaboration with Lake Research Partners. It was conducted from July 7 to August 8, 2010.

In 2009, the share of working families who are low-income —earning less than 200 percent of the official poverty threshold - \$36,620 for a family of three — increased to 30 percent. This means that nearly 1 in 3 working families in the United States, despite working hard, is struggling to meet basic needs. Low-income working families remain mostly invisible to policy makers. It is for this reason that CSS conducts the annual “The Unheard Third” survey. These families are comprised of workers who form the backbone of our economy: working the cash registers, keeping our homes and businesses clean, preparing our food, and helping care for our children and elderly relatives. They are poorly paid and often receive little or no employer-sponsored benefits.

Since Latinos are the fastest growing segment of the city’s population, CSS conducted a forum in May exploring issues affecting Latinos in New York City. We found that Latino youth comprise about 40 percent of the city’s disconnected youth. CSS analysis has shown that 31 percent of Latinos in New York State ages 19 to 64 do not have health insurance – a higher rate than any other racial or ethnic group. Low-income Latino households need over 50 percent of their income to pay the rent. Latinos also have the highest rates of individuals without a high school diploma or GED.

The dire situation of many Latino New Yorkers was reflected in the survey CSS conducted during the summer. We found that almost half of low-income Latinos have experienced multiple hardships in the past year: 27 percent lost jobs, 28 percent could not fill a prescription because of a lack of money or insurance, 29 percent fell behind in rent or mortgage payments.

In the past year, 38 percent of low-income Latinos report either losing a job or having their hours, wages or tips reduced. As of the time of the survey, 22 percent of low-income Latinos were unemployed. As a result of these hardships, one-third of low-income Latinos report having no money whatsoever in savings in case of an emergency; 56 percent have less than \$500.

Latino workers - both native born and immigrant - are heavily concentrated in industries hard hit in the recession: construction, manufacturing, and retail and, in addition, they represent the group with the

lowest rate of unionization. As a result, low-income Latinos are less likely than low-income blacks or whites to receive most employer-sponsored benefits.

We need to increase the number of low-wage workers who enroll in skills development programs as well as take the GED test. There are about 1.1 million adults in New York City without a high school diploma or GED. Only a negligible percentage of them take and pass the GED test each year. We also should improve benefits and job supports for low-income workers. The government should be creating transitional jobs programs that put people back to work.

In the current economic climate, getting politicians to commit resources for job creation, including transitional work programs, is a difficult task. But if the city and the nation are to successfully compete in the new global economy, we will need the full contributions of the Latino population.

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. For over 10 years he served as a member of the board of directors of the Puerto Rican Legal Defense and Education Fund. The views expressed in this column are solely those of the writer.