by Lynda Crawford
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Youth Summer Jobs

Every year, advocates for youth in the city must go begging for money to support the Summer Youth Employment Program. After several rallies this year in Albany and at City Hall, as well as constant pressure from community groups like the Neighborhood Family Services Coalition and United Neighborhood Houses who together sponsor the Campaign for Summer Jobs, Governor George Pataki agreed in mid-June to release $25 million from the Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF) funding to be used for summer jobs for teens.

Sixty percent ($15 million) of that sum would go to New York City's Summer Youth Employment Program and counties around the state would receive the rest. State Assembly Speaker Sheldon Silver announced the governor's decision, crediting the state legislature, advocacy groups, and the teens that showed up for the rallies. Everyone was pleased.

And then something went wrong.

The governor's bill allocating the TANF money had other items attached to it that didn't go over with the legislature, so it was sent back and another bill was submitted. This one was approved by the senate, but by then the assembly had recessed for the summer, and the bill never passed. Both sides are blaming the other, but it is the teenagers who will suffer the consequences.

"It is possible that the state may fritter away $25 million" said Susan Stamler from United Neighborhood Houses of New York. "The governor could step in and pay for it out of the general funds and get the money back in the fall." That is the only way to save the situation, according to Stamler. If the governor doesn't act, the money disappears.

Most affected by the loss of these jobs would be younger teens, explained Stamler. "Eighteen- and nineteen-year olds can still go to places like McDonald's and get a job. But the fourteen-year old kids won't be able to do that. They will be shut out of the job market this summer."

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What would really satisfy Stamler and the Campaign for Summer Jobs is not just action to preserve the money for this summer and the 13,000 jobs for NYC teens that it represents -- although she is hoping the governor will come through -- but what she and other advocates for youth summer employment are really looking for is a permanent stand-alone program that would fund 40,000 summer jobs for NYC adolescents every year without the need to scrap for last minute deals and handouts.

Funding for the city's Summer Youth Employment Program comes from various sources this year: $16.2 million from the city (initially the mayor budgeted $6.2 million and then added an additional $10 million), $11 million from the federal Workforce Investment Act (participating youth must be enrolled in the program year-round), and the last minute and elusive $15 million from the state.

If all of the money is released and contractors are able to act swiftly to fill the positions, 40,000 New York City kids, ages 14-19, will be employed at minimum wage jobs this summer for a seven week period from June 30th to August 15th, giving them the opportunity to earn a paycheck, while gaining work experience and learning new skills.

Kids Count

The 2003 KIDS COUNT Data Book was released in June by the Annie E. Casey Foundation and New York has improved in seven out of ten indicators of child well-being, including reduced infant and child mortality rates, adolescent death rates (cut in half), teen birth rates, and a decreasing number of children without health insurance (although ten percent of children in the state still do not have health insurance). New York also scored better than the national average in all of these categories as well as in our immunization rate for children under two years of age.

Child well-being in New York declined, however, in three major areas: low birth weight babies are on the rise, as is the teen high school drop-out rate, and the percentage of children living in poverty is greater here than it was in 1990. In the latter category, New York is also higher than the country as a whole for children living in extreme poverty (family income below 50 percent of poverty level), ranking 43 (with 1 being the best). We ranked 47 out of 50 for children living in female-headed households and the median income for all New York families

with children is lower than the U. S. average.

New York State is failing in two out of four categories for reducing the hardships of poverty: 41 percent of households eligible for food stamps are not receiving them (in the city that number is 51 percent), and almost 70 percent of low income households are paying more than one-third of their income for housing.

Our overall rating compared to the other 50 states is 27, with 1 being the best (Minnesota, New Hampshire, Utah, New Jersey, and Iowa hold the top five slots for overall child well-being).

Asian-American Children and Poverty

Nearly one in four Asian-American children (24 percent) live in poverty in New York City. This is higher than the average poverty rate for all children across the country (17 percent), as well as higher than the average for all Asian American children nationally (14 percent). Based on an analysis of new census data by the Asian American Federation of New York (AAFNY), this news may finally dash the misconception that all Asian American families are affluent and self-sufficient.

Worst hit by poverty are Vietnamese (40 percent), Bangladeshi (39 percent) and Pakistani children (34 percent), followed by Chinese (27 percent) and Indian children (23 percent). By borough, Asian-American families living in Brooklyn are the hardest hit (34 percent), followed by Manhattan (30 percent), and the Bronx (29 percent); Queens fares the best (18 percent). By neighborhood, Manhattan's Chinatown has an alarming 40 percent poverty rate for its children.

City services often underserve impoverished Asian-American families, according to Asian American Federation of New York, and there is a great need for programs that will bridge language and cultural barriers, stimulate employment, and offer child care.