by Lynda Crawford
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(Oct-Nov '00) A few dozen people gathered on the steps of City Hall recently to speak out against the current welfare policy that discourages and denies education and vocational training for those on welfare.

According to Bich Ha Pham from the Hunger Action Network of New York State, one of the organizers of the event, only two percent of people currently enrolled in Workfare are also in educational or training programs, a policy which can only result in continued poverty and low paying jobs. Unfortunately, you won't find this issue, Access to Education and Training for welfare recipients, on the list of issues the candidates are showcasing.

Other missing issues, according to the Hunger Action Network, include:

- Food stamp reauthorization, which would restore food stamp benefits to many people that were excluded four years ago, particularly legal immigrants
- An increase in New York State's welfare grant. "It hasn't increased in ten years," said Pham, "and is well below the poverty line." A single mother with two children receives six dollars a day (not counting rent) for food, clothing, transportation, etc.
- An increase in the Hunger Prevention and Nutrition Assistance Program, the major funding source for food pantries and soup kitchens in the city and state, where long lines are the norm and people have been increasingly turned away for lack of food.

The Hunger Action Network is presently surveying all local and national candidates on these missing issues and will post the results on their site .

HOMELESSNESS

Homeless people do have the right to vote and over 2,000 homeless voters were registered in New York City over the summer. It is legal to vote in New York even if your address is a shelter

or a street corner
. Nevertheless, the issues relevant to the homeless- affordable housing and mental health programs- are largely neglected.

"Neither Senate candidate has a comprehensive plan for affordable housing," said Patrick Markee of the Coalition for the Homeless .

"Hillary Clinton did say last year that she was in favor of doubling the number of new Section 8 housing vouchers annually," noted Markee. There were 60,000 vouchers last year, so that would mean 120,000 vouchers. "But if you look at her current list of issues , housing is not one of them."

"Lazio is trying to portray himself as a champion of housing," said Markee, "but look at the budget cutbacks under the Republican-controlled Congress that he was part of. There was zero new Section 8 assistance at a time when there has been a rising need across the country. This led to the freezing of Section 8 housing in New York City. Homeless people are being forced to live in shelters even after they have been approved for Section 8 housing because there is no housing available."

Rick Lazio does include affordable senior citizen housing among the issues on his web site and takes credit for restoring funding for emergency homeless shelters when it was threatened in Congress.

A press release on Al Gore's site , states that he supports an additional 25,000 housing vouchers for people making the transition from welfare to work.

George Bush does not have housing listed as an issue , but he does have home ownership, which includes support for tax credits for single family housing.

Bidding for the State Assembly and State Senate, a few candidates voiced support for affordable housing in profiles for the Citizens Union's Voter Directory for the Primary . Carl Heastie of the 83rd Assembly District in the Bronx advocates state and city assistance for new

low income and affordable housing. Adele Cohen in Brooklyn's 46th Assembly District took credit for fighting higher rents and income requirements for public housing. And Liz Krueger in Manhattan's State Senate race includes building more Section 8 housing in her platform.

The mental health side of homelessness turns out to be a housing issue as well: "We'd like to see the federal government fund the development of more supportive housing for the mentally ill," said Markee. "In the past there have been federal housing subsidies and tax credits, but the subsidies have dried up and the tax credits are harder to get."

While mental health is not included in Clinton's list of issues, she has reportedly said, without specifying any numbers, that she would favor more supportive housing for the mentally ill.

In a comparison of the candidates in the mental health area compiled by the National Association of Social Workers, Clinton fared best due to her support for the Patients' Bill of Rights which would allow for mental health care coverage for all, regardless of income level, and for her support of additional mental health research. Lazio is chided for not voting to pass the 1996 Mental Health Parity Act, which required health plans to provide parity for mental health and medical benefits. Gore was noted for his vow to work to eliminate discrimination and assure fairness for people with mental illnesses through mental health consumer protections and the patients' bill of rights. Bush's plan is to create a national commission to recommend reforms of the mental health service delivery system.

SENIOR CITIZENS

While it may appear that senior citizen issues get addressed more than adequately, with so much discussion about Medicare, Social Security and Prescription Drugs, there are neglected issues for seniors as well.

Affordable home care: According to Bobbie Sackman, Director of Public Policy at the Council of Senior Centers and Services, huge numbers of New Yorkers, mainly women, are now caregivers for their elderly parents. The financial strain of caregiving can be enormous, as documented by a MetLife Study .

"Over their lifetimes," the report states, "the caregivers studied lost $566,500 in wages, $67,000 in retirement contributions and $25,500 in social security benefits. Twenty-nine percent said they had passed on promotions, training opportunities and new assignments; 25 percent passed on transfers or relocation; 22 percent said they could not acquire new job skills. In addition, caregiving cost the respondents an average of $19,500 in food, transportation, assistance with rents and mortgages and the cost to retain home care professionals."

Bobbie Sackman recommends candidate support for adequate and affordable home care measures, as well as working with private industry to make it more friendly to this issue, like the old day-care issue, with flex time and working out of the home as accepted options.

The caregiver issue, although not highlighted, has actually gotten some bleeps on the election speech circuit. In her primary acceptance speech , Hillary Clinton indicated support for a tax credit for long term care for a disabled loved one or for aging parents in the home.

Gore too has lent his support to long-term care for an aging or disabled relative .

Ralph Nader spoke out in favor of the Medicaid Community Attendant Services and Supports Act, a proposed bill that would take funds away from nursing homes and make them available for in-home care.

Automatic eligibility for food stamps: Thousands of elderly in New York State are experiencing hunger and malnutrition. One way to help would be increasing the number of elderly receiving food stamps. New York State has just requested a waiver from the US Department of Agriculture which administers the food stamp program to allow elderly New Yorkers who are living alone to automatically become eligible for food stamps should they start receiving Supplemental Security Income (SSI), a benefit for people living below the poverty level. They wouldn't have to apply separately for food stamps but would be able to get the benefits directly through their Medicaid card.

"Over 125,000 elderly and disabled are currently receiving SSI and living alone," said Sackman. "I'd want to know from the Senate candidates, just how would you walk this waiver through?" So

far, the issue is not walking or talking.

Don't change formula: The Older Americans Act, enacted in 1965 with Medicaid and Medicare, is the major federal funding source for Meals on Wheels, Senior Centers, Frail Elderly Transportation, and a gamut of services. "This funding has eroded over the years," explained Sackman. "Ten years ago, the federal government provided 70 percent of the money for these services and the city 20 percent. Today they provide 23 percent and 70 percent comes from the city. (Less than 10 percent comes from the state, which does a miserable job, says Sackman.) To the city's credit, the mayors have put the money in, but the federal side has really eroded." However, the situation may get even worse. The Older Americans Act is up for reauthorization, but Congress wants to change the formula for how much each state gets. With the new distribution, New York, considered a rich state because of its tax resources, would get considerably less than we do now, which is already insufficient.

Lazio has spoken out indirectly on this issue , focusing on the fact that New York sends more to the federal government than it gets back in benefits, but his solution is a tax cut to rectify the situation, not a fight to keep the formula from changing.

IMMIGRANTS

The New York Immigration Coalition sent out three letters to Hillary Clinton and Rick Lazio asking them where they stand on issues of importance to immigrants. They also started a postcard campaign, sending out 500 postcards a week from member groups to the candidates' offices. "So far we have had no response," said Veronica Thronson of the Immigration Coalition. "Lazio's office did call saying they received all the letters and they would call back -- but they have not."

While it is true that only naturalized citizens can vote - people who are here legally but are not citizens cannot - the New York Immigration Coalition has a voter registration campaign and at recent naturalization ceremonies they have registered 115,000 new citizen voters in New York. "They may surprise the candidates," said Thronson.

Several important immigrant issues are on the table at the moment, including two bills in the House that would reinstate some of the safety net that was removed four years ago with welfare

reform bill. The Hunger Relief Act would restore food stamps to low-income legal immigrant families. The Legal Immigrant Children's Health Improvement Act would restore access to basic health care for pregnant women and children who are here legally.

There is also the Latino and Immigrant Fairness Act that would: a) Allow persons who are on the verge of gaining their immigration status to remain in the U.S. to complete the process. This procedure used to be possible but was allowed to expire in November of 1997; b) Correct unequal treatment among different groups of Central American and Caribbean refugees, granting them the same generosity as was granted Cubans and Nicaraguans by the 1997 Nicaraguan and Central American Relief Act; c) Update the "registry date" from 1972 to January 1, 1986, which would benefit hundreds of thousands of immigrants who were eligible for the "amnesty" program of that year, but have since been in legal limbo.

Bush has proposed reform of the Immigration and Naturalization Service to help change its character and to make America more welcoming to new immigrants but without specific references to any current legislation.

Gore has come out in favor of the Latino and Immigrant Fairness Act .