People deserve a second chance

by Marc_H._Morial

Nathan Williams, a 20-year-old Washington, D.C. native, lived a life of instability from the age of 2. His mother was a drug addict. His father was behind bars. Nathan struggled to adapt to his constantly changing living environment and even managed to keep up his grades in spite of tremendous obstacles and distractions at home.

However, by the age of 16, he dropped out of school and struck out on his own - which meant moving from place to place with relatives or friends and selling drugs to support himself.

Baltimore resident Jonathan Calabrese faced a similar fate. Born in Duval County, Fla., he first moved to Baltimore at the age of 5 and then to Virginia, where he struggled to adjust. He loved school but loathed being teased over the way he dressed and his family's lack of money so he stopped going to class, failed out of seventh grade and just lost interest in education.

When he returned to Baltimore at age 15, he attended high school briefly only to drop out in the 10th grade. He resorted to life on the streets - running with the wrong crowd, selling and using drugs, drinking and robbery.

Both these young men at one point in their lives became part of a class of black youth - author Harry J. Holzer called the "disconnected" in his essay in the National Urban League's The State of Black America 2007.

They are not temporary "idle" but fully disconnected from the worlds of school and work. "They may be incarcerated or on parole or probation; they might be aging out of foster care or still attached to their nuclear families. But, overwhelmingly, they come from low-income families and often grow up in poor and relatively segregated neighborhoods," Holzer writes.

Young black men are by far more likely to become "disconnected" than whites and black women. In 2000, when the economy was still strong and labor market tight, 17 percent of all young black men between 16 and 24 years old were disconnected. At the end of the 1990s, the lesser-educated ones had employment rates barely over 50 percent, nearly 30 percentage points below those of young whites and Latinos of comparable credentials.

A dramatic rise in the incarceration rate in the 1980s and early 1990s, thanks to zero-tolerance policies, has done little to help young black men thrive in society. With up to 30 percent of them saddled with records, it has been more and more difficult for them to find jobs, especially if they lack the skills needed to flourish in

an increasingly high-tech economy, Holzer notes.

Fortunately for both Nathan and Jonathan, they had relatives who took them in and gave them work, pointing them in the right direction. Both young men ended up enrolling in the National Urban League's Urban Youth Empowerment Program, which helped both get their general equivalency diplomas and put them on the road to higher education - engineering school for Nathan and Bible college for Jonathan.

To date, our Urban Youth Empowerment Program (UYEP) has helped thousands of "disconnected" and re-entering individuals get second chances at a better life with educational assistance, skills training and on-the-job experience.

In 2005, the program achieved significant results: 1) 25 percent of participants earned GEDs and/or high school diplomas; 2) 40 percent saw improvement in reading and math scores; and 3) average earnings of participants rose by 12 percent over the targeted goal of $7 an hour.

Both Nathan and Jonathan stand as shining examples of the effectiveness of second chance programs in getting disadvantaged individuals back on track.

That is why the National Urban League has called upon the lawmakers to put more federal monies into programs like UYEP in areas where they are needed the most - inner city America.

It's something that is desperately needed for the 650,000 prisoners who re-enter society every year - nearly 50 percent of them black - and tend to return to communities woefully unequipped to handle them.

According to a Re-Entry Policy Council report of former prisoners returning to Chicago, only 24 percent of organizations with programs to help them were located in the communities with the highest number of re-entering individuals.

Not only are communities ill-prepared, so are ex-offenders, especially black ones. According to a 1997 Bureau of Justice Statistics report, black prisoners tend be less educated than their white counterparts: 44 percent had less than a high-school education compared to 27 percent of white state prison inmates.

The good news is that Congress is finally making greater federal funding of second-chance programs a priority - at least for ex-offenders. The so-called Second Chance Act aims to reduce recidivism, which affects tends black ex-offenders at higher rates than their white counterparts, by authorizing $181 million a year for

fiscal 2008 and 2009 for prisoner re-entry programs administered by the U.S. Justice Department, among other provisions.

In a Bureau of Justice Statistics recidivism study of prisoners released in 15 states in 1994, 73 percent of black ex-offenders were rearrested, compared to 62.7 percent of whites, and 54.2 percent were sent back to prison, compared to 50 percent of whites.

Second Chance Act sponsor Rep. Danny Davis, D-Ill., has described the proposal as "an excellent beginning" but hardly a panacea because it doesn't go nearly far enough in terms of resources. It does, however, "open the door and creates opportunities for seriously coordinated work" at the local, state and federal levels.

I must concur. More needs to be done to reduce recidivism facing many urban communities in this nation. This is a good start to help a portion of the "disconnected" sector.

The House Judiciary Committee approved the legislation in late March. At our Legislative Policy Conference in mid-April, Majority Whip Jim Clyburn, D-S.C., gave assurances that it would be hitting for full U.S. House floor soon.

It's something the general public - at least in New York City - as well as the White House seems to support. According to the Community Service Society's latest poll on issues affecting low-income residents in New York City, 75 percent of New Yorkers polled favored programs designed to help get disconnected and re-entering residents back on track.

A White House statement from 2004 in favor of a previous Congress' version of the bill reads: "America is the land of second chances, and when the prison gates open, the president believes that the path ahead should be an opportunity for a better life."

The White House's support behind the legislation makes its prospects for passage strong. But I would urge the Congress to approve this legislation as quickly as possible and consider expanding the commitment outside ex-offenders to other members of the "disconnected" class of Americans.

We must get these young men the education, job training and housing services they need to eventually obtain jobs that will keep them off the streets and away from dodgy "professions" that promise big dividends but could also land them behind bars or worse yet - lead them to an early grave.

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