

Community Jobs:

Putting People Back to Work To Revitalize Our Communities

The labor market is bleak: though job losses last month were lower than anticipated, unemployment remains at its highest levels in 60 years, with 15.4 million people officially counted as unemployed, millions more underemployed or too discouraged to look for work, and very high unemployment expected to persist through 2010. Families and communities are being devastated by its effects: family incomes are at their lowest levels in a decade; one of every eight mortgages is in foreclosure; and one of every four children in the United States now receives food assistance. Once thriving neighborhoods are now riddled with vacant and abandoned homes, and storefronts once occupied by small businesses lie empty. Just as importantly, people—even those with jobs—have lost confidence in our economy, in our safety net, and in a positive future for themselves and their children.

A new, federally-funded community jobs program could put millions of people to work over the next several years to provide for their families, improve their communities, and generate income to help our economy grow. The Center for Community Change and partner organizations have developed a proposal to address the current crisis of unemployment immediately, as well as the longer term crisis of joblessness, crumbling infrastructure and disinvestment in vulnerable communities. **Congressman Ellison (MN-05) has introduced HR 4268, the “Put America To Work Act of 2009” that would create a Community Jobs program to reduce unemployment and help revitalize our communities.**

The Community Jobs proposal would:

- 1) **Provide up to \$40 billion a year by formula through the Department of Labor to larger cities, and to states to be passed through to smaller localities and rural areas.**
 - The program would allocate funds based on the CDBG formula modified to consider unemployment data. Local elected officials who are closest to our communities and needs on the ground would work with community groups and labor leaders to identify critical projects and connect workers to projects right away.
 - Jobs could be located in the public sector, community-based not-for-profit organizations, and small businesses that provide community benefits.
- 2) **Adopt a two stage approach to ensure immediate job creation and allow for a longer term planning process that involves community input and a focus on education and career development.**
 - **Stage 1: Fast Track Job Creation.** To put people to work right away, during the first 6 to 9 months of the program, job creation would be limited to a defined set of activities, such as: rehabilitating schools, community centers, and libraries; cleaning up vacant and abandoned properties to alleviate blight; expanding emergency food programs; expanding staffing in Head Start, child care and other early childhood education programs; and renovating and maintaining parks, playgrounds and other public spaces.
 - **Stage 2: Long Term Job and Community Development Track.** After the fast track, job creation initiatives will be selected through an open, competitive process that includes community participation and prioritizes projects that
 - Integrate education and job skills training;
 - Coordinate with pre-apprenticeship and apprenticeship programs; and
 - Maximize career opportunities in sectors with growth potential.

3) Employ one million people in temporary public and private sector jobs that deliver critical community benefits and services.

- The labor market will recover slowly even after the official end of the recession; it typically takes an average of two years before private sector employment returns to pre-recessionary levels, even under the best conditions.
- The program will be open to individuals who are either:
 - **Unemployed for at least 26 weeks.** 5.9 million people were in this category as of November 2009, representing more than 38% of the unemployed—a record high for long term joblessness. Even as the economy improves, these individuals are likely to be the last to secure private sector employment given their extended unemployment histories. A community job will provide these workers with opportunities to refresh their skills in anticipation of securing employment in the private sector once the economy recovers; **or**
 - **Unemployed for at least 30 days and low-income.** Low-income people are being hard hit by the recession and need immediate assistance. These workers are often without other forms of support; Unemployment Insurance is a critical program for unemployed individuals, but only about 57% of unemployed workers are receiving unemployment compensation, and low wage workers are a third as likely as higher income workers to receive benefits. A Community Jobs Program would create short term employment to provide critical financial support to these workers that is otherwise unavailable. Income from a community job will not only prevent families and communities from going into crisis, but it will also help to stimulate the economy. When individuals with little to no income receive a paycheck, their wages translate directly into increased spending in their communities, and will help to reinvigorate the economy. At a minimum, 35-40% percent of workers would be drawn from this category.
- Positions will be for up to 30 hours per week, for up to 12 months. They will pay comparable or prevailing wages, averaging \$12-15 per hour, as well as benefits. Appropriate safeguards and strong anti-displacement protections will help to prevent substitution and ensure that workers are placed in new positions.

Over the long term, an investment in a Community Jobs Program will (1) create job opportunities that foster participants' readiness to work and impart job-related skills that will make residents more employable once the economy has turned around, sustaining long term local economic development; and (2) strengthen the social and economic infrastructure of low-income communities—filling gaps in public services, providing the resources and workers to rebuild community infrastructure, and expanding the capacity of community-based non-profits, which will contribute to a more productive, stable national economy.

At other desperate times in our country's history, the government has instituted public jobs programs as part of the solution to extreme unemployment. Those programs put people back to work, restored their dignity and self-esteem, provided real and necessary income, and created some of our most lasting and noteworthy public assets. Now is the time to invest in our workers, and rebuild our communities.