

A HUGE JOB FOR NEW YORK POLITICIANS: THEIR TASK IS TO GET THE EMPLOYMENT ENGINE GOING AGAIN

By Errol Louis
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With more than a million New Yorkers out of work — and many businesses likely to close for good as the coronavirus restrictions grind on — it is long past time for the city and state to build out a robust system to help people quickly pick up the skills, credentials and connections needed to find a job.

The good news is that New York boasts a great many job training organizations and seven community colleges where unemployed people can prepare for work and find it.

The bad news is that our cash-strapped city and state governments aren't going all-out to expand the reach and impact of these job-creation networks. That's a massive mistake and a missed opportunity: we should be doing everything possible to get people enrolled in programs with a solid record of successfully placing people in good jobs.

Up until now, New York's full focus has, understandably, been on reducing the horrific levels of infection, hospitalization and death from COVID-19. Economic concerns have been a distinctly secondary concern.

Under the federal Pandemic Emergency Unemployment Compensation program, Americans who have exhausted their 26 weeks of state unemployment payments can apply to receive another 13 weeks of benefits. Those benefits — plus the moratorium on evictions and city food programs that are delivering meals to more than 1 million New Yorkers every day — represent a safety-net approach to the current economic crisis.

But it's now clear that the disease will be with us for years to come (with or without a vaccine), and New York faces a long, hard march to economic revival. That means we have to think beyond unemployment checks and food pantries and start getting people ready to find new jobs.

"In January of this year, before the COVID struck, we had 300,000 job openings posted in New York City that were unfilled," Kathy Wylde, president of the Partnership for New York City business association recently told me. "Today, with a million people unemployed, we have 200,000 job openings posted. We've lost some jobs, but the problems are the same."

Linking jobless people with open positions isn't easy. Private sector businesses must work closely with colleges and training programs to make sure the skills being taught are aligned with what industry needs.

One important way to forge these public-private links is to change state and federal rules so that the mostly frequently-used sources of academic financial aid — state TAP scholarships and federal Pell Grants — can be spent on short-term courses that aren't necessarily tied to a degree program. At present, the money can't go for non-degree learning.

“Thousands of New Yorkers are going to need upscaling and re-skilling just to get back to work,” says Tamar Jacoby, president of Opportunity America, a Washington-based think tank. “Community colleges have the infrastructure, they have the reach and scale, but they’re going to have to do some things differently if they’re going to rise to the occasion.”

Jacoby recently convened a panel of experts — including Félix Matos Rodríguez, the new chancellor of CUNY — to discuss strategies for economic revival (the complete conference is online).

“Now we have a world that requires training opportunities and educational opportunities that are accessible, online, short-term,” said Rodríguez. “I think the crisis moment that we have in terms of the economy in New York and the country is a perfect time to invite some rethinking of those lines.”

But change doesn’t come easily to Albany. “It’s been very frustrating because of the force of the status quo not to change anything,” said Wylde. “The vested interest in the status quo is both enormous and irrational. We’re hoping, as a result of the crisis that COVID-19 presents, that this will be a unique opportunity to make some of those changes.”

Scholarships for short-term training, including online courses would go a long way to helping turn community colleges into employment hubs as New York struggles to get back on its feet.