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Power To The Pockets

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City Councilman Al Vann - Photo Credit: William Alatrists

On Tuesday, June 24, 2008, the New York City Council's Committee on Community Development held its first oversight hearing as a full "Standing" Committee. It previously had been considered a "Select" Committee and functioned with limited oversight authority over city agencies. The Committee was initially established to primarily deal with the issue of poverty in New York City, and will continue with this same mission in its newly minted status.

Council Member Albert Vann, who is Chair of the Committee, took a novel approach in the Committee's initial hearing by inviting only poverty-reduction service providers and advocates to testify, whereas usually an agency of the Mayoral Administration testifies and is followed by non-profits and advocates. Councilman Vann explained the reasoning behind this approach in his opening statement: "I wanted to begin this committee's work with you and hear from you first, because you are on the frontlines in the fight against poverty." The hearing was well attended by service providers and advocates, many of whom gave testimony to the committee about their various experiences and perspectives on reducing poverty.

Joel Berg, the Executive Director of the New York City Coalition Against Hunger, gave passionate testimony on Mayor Bloomberg's anti-poverty initiatives and the fight against poverty in general. He laid bare the fact that poverty, homelessness and hunger were all greater today than the day Mayor Bloomberg took office, citing City and Federal government data. He also disputed the notion put forth by elected officials, such as Ronald Reagan and Mayor Michael Bloomberg, that dependency on government was a principal cause of poverty. Mr. Berg stated that "the greatest progress in fighting poverty occurred when the government enacted large-scale efforts", referencing the War on Poverty between 1960 and 1973 which cut the poverty rate in half (from 22.4 percent to 12.1 percent). While acknowledging his support of Mayor Bloomberg's decision to address poverty through the Center for Economic Opportunity (CEO), he stated his belief that the programs and initiatives of CEO would, at a high estimate, reach less than 3% of people living in poverty in New York City. In making recommendations for fighting poverty, Mr. Berg focused on making the food stamp application process easier and less wasteful and punitive, citing the fingerprint requirements for applicants among other impediments.

Community Voices Heard, a grassroots membership organization made up of welfare recipients and low-income individuals, was well represented and reflected those individuals actually living in poverty. The members of that organization, Anita Walton, Karen Ayee and Stephen Bradley, all spoke about the ineffectiveness of the Work Experience Program (WEP) and how it was an obstacle to their economic progression. The main recommendation that they put forth was to abolish WEP and expand the current Job Training Participants Program (JTP) through the Human Resource Administration (HRA).

Both the Citizens' Committee for Children and the Initiative on Financial Security of The Aspen Institute made recommendations on creating savings accounts for new-born children, which would provide them with assets upon turning 18 years old to be used for higher education, entrepreneurial activities, or other purposes.

Bobbie Sackman of the Council of Senior Centers and Services was the last to give testimony, but spoke poignantly about the senior population in poverty that is often underrepresented. She noted that Black and Latino senior citizens, especially women, often live in poverty with a stagnant income. She recommended an increase in the commitment and funding to meal programs and transportation as ways to alleviate poverty for seniors.

The hearing brought some specific issues regarding poverty to the forefront, providing some idea of what the City Council's Community Development Committee should begin to address in its oversight of city agencies. It also provided a number of recommendations to alleviate some of the problems that those living in poverty constantly face. The Committee on Community Development certainly faces a challenge in trying to address the issue of poverty, but it definitely got a good start in hearing from those directly involved in the struggle at a community and grassroots level.