New York's Youth Employment Problems and Policies: A Conversation with the NYC Commissioner of Youth & Community Development

by Gregory DeFreitas

New York City has the largest youth population in urban America. Unfortunately, it also has the unenviable distinction of the lowest youth employment rate in the country: a smaller fraction of New York teenagers manage to find and hold a job than in any other major city. How is the government addressing the worrisome employment problems of young people today? Jeanne Mullgrav is the Commissioner of the New York City Department of Youth & Community Development (NYCD). Prior to that appointment, she was Vice President for External Relations at the After-School Corporation, worked on intergovernmental relations at the office of New York State Attorney General Eliot Spitzer, and held a senior position at Safe Horizon (formerly Victim Services) where she oversaw family court and criminal court programs throughout New York City. She grew up on the Lower East Side, attended Henry Street Settlement, and earned degrees at Swarthmore College and NYU Law School.

In January, Gregory DeFreitas spoke with Commissioner Mullgrav at her William Street offices in lower Manhattan.

Q: Could you tell us a bit about the background and history of your department?

JEANNE MULLGRAV: Initially it was the New York City Division of Youth Services (DYS). Then, in 1996, it was merged with the Community Development Agency to become the New York City Department of Youth and Community Development. The DYS primarily had a focus, obviously, on youth programming; while the Community Development Agency is derived from the Johnson era's self-sufficiency and antipoverty programs.

And then, more recently, about a year ago, the youth workforce portfolio of Department of Employment merged with this agency. And so we continue to focus on self-sufficiency as well as promoting youth development.

We are primarily a funding agency. We don't offer direct service. But we have about 2,000 contracts with mostly not-for-profit providers who carry out the work.

Q: Could you break down the major components of what you're funding?

JM: Well, we fund everything from workforce preparation to after-school programs, including recreation, cultural enrichment to even senior programs in certain communities. We certainly have a very rich literacy portfolio and immigration services as well, so that we really do fund a full gamut of social services and human services programming.

Q: And how is a determination made in any given year how much of your money and effort is going into the literacy versus the after-school versus WIA and so on?

JM: Well, some of it is specific funding streams and so I'm not so much in charge as much as our state and federal partners are, in terms of what those funding streams contribute. And, in other instances, I think we've tried to, most recently, look to see where we can get the most bang for the buck. And so, in some instances, rather than spread our resources thinly and give sort of a few dollars to each community, we know that if we concentrate our funding that we will yield the outcomes that we're looking for.

Q: What have you been concentrating on recently?

JM: Most recently, we've been looking at after-school and how that can really serve a complementary role to the goals that we have for academic success during the day. And how that can piggyback in terms of project-based learning that could be tied to our goals, again, for the school day. It starts at age 5 or 6, depending on when a young person might enter school. Actually, we're allowed to serve through the age of 21. But, obviously, the first goals are keeping young people safe and also trying to support working parents, but, beyond that, our goal is to engage young people productively during the time that they're currently not supervised.

Q: Where does the Education Department's role end and yours come in? Why doesn't that fall under the purview of the Education Department instead of Youth?

JM: Well, I think, when we started, you noted how the mission of this agency is very, very broad and I think that's one of the reasons why we're well-positioned to lead that effort, in that we know that, to the extent that young people are exposed to a breadth of activities, that we can expect more positive outcomes. That rather than just sort of hitting them over the head with one area—we obviously have concerns about child obesity in New York City and so, we're keeping them active and promoting nutrition at the same time. But we're reinforcing academic skills enhancement at the same time that we're exposing them to things outside of their neighborhood. We know that we are really promoting the development of that young person.

But that's not to say that we're not partnered with the Department of Ed. In fact, in this last solicitation, which was released at the end of last month, a $64 million solicitation to provide after-school, the Department of Ed is very visible in that RFP, in terms of offering school-based sites, in terms of offering snacks and security and curriculum support and technical assistance in all the ways that we should be working together to promote a more coordinated system.

Other partners include the New York City Housing Authority, Department of Parks and Recreation, libraries and all of the obvious city agencies have joined together to leverage those public resources to promote that common goal.

Q: Can we talk about youth employment? New York City economy's improved in the last year. Unemployment was officially about 8.1% a year ago, then fell sharply to under 6%. But now it's just jumped up again, to 6.2%. And youth unemployment is much higher. In research that we've done on government data, we found that New York City youth have the lowest employment rate in the country among major cities. Less than 1 in 5 of the city's teenagers has a job – less than half the national rate! You may know there's a new study out, based on the government's Current Population Survey data, that found that about 170,000 New York City youth 16 to 24 are neither in school nor in the labor force. That is, they're not even looking for jobs. And the number has been increasing, at least among males, and it seems to be higher here than in other cities in the country.

So, given all of that, what is your and your department's take on the youth employment situation? And what are some of the major factors that you think need attention to try to bring that youth employment rate up?

JM: First of all, we are very, very concerned as well. It's one of the reasons why—at least, in our Summer Youth Employment Program, we did several things. One is, of course, to ask: How do we target our resources? How do we make sure that, in this time of limited funding, that we use all of the available census data, so that our services are going to places that have been traditionally underserved? And that we have done, both in the solicitation that I just mentioned, and in terms of our Summer Youth Employment Program. For the first time, for example, we looked at unemployment rates in deciding where we would allocate slots. And we will continue to do that kind of targeting as we go forward.

Q: You looked at unemployment rates in terms of, what? Areas of the city?

JM: Adult and youth unemployment, yes, in the city. But, again, in the past we never tied our Summer Youth Employment Program to looking at unemployment at all. I mean, it was never connected in that way. And the out-of-school time solicitation, we looked at that disconnected youth figure as well to determine how we were going to target ZIP codes. And we will continue to use that census data to help guide us in terms of where funding should go. So that's one way.

The other way is by strengthening what we do offer and in some specific ways. In the Summer Youth Employment Program, for example, it was a real missed opportunity for us not to have an educational component that also accompanied their work experience. Because we find that one of the things that young people are experiencing today is a real skills deficit, unfortunately. And one of the ways that we can make them more competitive and make employers really feel more comfortable in hiring them is to really begin to work on that -- to work on promoting literacy and to work on some of the soft skills that we know that not only help a young person get a job, but help that young person keep the job.

We know that from looking at, for example, many of the welfare-to-work initiatives, that many of the reasons why people weren't successful in those venues were that there were attitudinal issues. They weren't able to mediate conflict in the work environment. And so to the extent that we can help prepare young people to sort of navigate the world of work, I think we're doing our job in helping

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them stay competitive.

So we implemented seventeen hours of an educational component which was mandatory, which included exposure to career development, to post-secondary opportunities, and how to be healthy and be at work. All of these things that we think really make them more competitive.

The other thing, in addition to literacy and in addition to the soft skills, is that we really need to think about how our job programs can be more relevant to young people. And, in the past, most of our job placements were in the social services arena and we know that we contribute a lot by assisting those nonprofit organizations. But we also know that, sometimes we should also try to incentivize those providers who come in with job placements that are part of emerging and growth industries and try to steer both providers and young people in that direction. Because, at the end of the day, we want to make sure that they are getting experience that is going to yield and put them on a path to a career and to a real job. And we perhaps weren't as cognizant of that in the past.

So this year, for example, we had, I think, about sixty or so people placed, for example, at JP Morgan Chase. And many, after the summer, were able to become part of the bank teller training program and were able to be considered for full-time jobs. And, actually, the figures are pretty impressive in terms of how many people were actually picked up because of that summer experience. And those are the kinds of opportunities that we want to create.

Q: About how many summer job placements were there last year?

JM: Last year, we had 34,000. The other thing that we did was to use technology more effectively in our program. This had two impacts. One is that, clearly, you're exposing young people to technology and this is the way of the future and we want to make sure that young people are financially literate, know how to use a debit card and so that's how we paid them was through the use of debit cards.

But, secondly, by us becoming more efficient and using technology to administer the payroll, that translated into a 1,000 more jobs over a summer, because we were able to—instead of hire the usual 211 or so administrative staff, we were able to do it with fifty and pour that money back into the direct services. So that's nothing but a win-win, we felt, for a community. But, most of us have an ATM card in our pockets and what we really want to do is make sure that we expose young people to what most of middle-class America experiences on a day-to-day basis.

Q: How many slots do you expect for the coming summer?

JM: Well, as you know, there's legislation that was passed that increased the minimum wage. And so, we know, obviously, there's a tension between how much we pay and how many people we can have work this summer. At this point, the city is evaluating that policy, because I understand there is an exemption for municipalities. But one of the things that we are weighing is how the

community feel about that tradeoff, in terms of less jobs or more jobs and paying the higher wage. Clearly, we would not want to create a two-tiered system and we would not want to encourage young people to pursue jobs that may not have all of the youth development and ancillary services that we're able to provide because they're going to get, perhaps in a retail-type position, that higher wage.

And so, we are, at this very moment, working with our counsel, working with our labor relations' folks and, obviously, with lots of input from the community, to figure out what the policy should be. We know that it could impact as many as 4,000 summer slots.

Q: You mean what you hear from the nonprofits is that they might not be able to offer those 4,000 jobs this year versus last year? Because of the small state minimum-wage increase?[i]

JM: Yes. And many of them know what the value is of this job and many have come out on the side of paying the lower amount and having more jobs. Now, there are others who feel like this would, again, create a two-tiered system and are very much opposed to it. So I think, at this point, we are evaluating all of that feedback and, again, also working internally with counsel and with those who handle more of the labor issues. But these are all serious considerations.

Q: Could you talk about the Workforce Investment Act and your funding of that? How do you think that's going, and what numbers you have in terms of the outcomes?

JM: We are hearing that there will be a shift, a significant shift, as was proposed before, in the number of out-of-school youth and that will decrease, of course, the number of in-school youth. And I think that will speak to some of the concerns that have been raised around disconnected youth, because it will allow us to really promote programming for that population.

We are issuing an RFP (Request for Proposals) for next fall and we've postponed this because we are cognizant of the impending federal legislation and didn't want to do anything contrary to that legislation. And so, we hope that those issues will be resolved on the federal level and that will give us some guidance about how to craft the RFP. But you will see a focus on the things that I mentioned, which is more of a focus on literacy, more of a focus on soft skills, more of a connection to industry and to growth areas.

Q: How many one-stop job search centers does the city have now?

JM: The one-stop centers are not run by this agency. The one-stop centers are run by the Department of Small Business Services.

Q: Do you have some sort of partnership with the agency that does this?

JM: We do serve on the Workforce Investment Board and we are connected to them, first and foremost, through our technology system through which we share reporting to the state. The Department of Employment was dissolved and the adult portfolio went to the Department of Small Business Services and the youth portfolio went to this department. So we're continuing to work on how we develop programming for that shared population. And, of course, with the legislation that promises to increase the one-stop centers to 24, that will even be more of an opportunity for collaboration.

Q: In terms of the Workforce Investment Act, you are mainly responsible for administering that, right?

JM: For the youth, right.

Q: And what is the number of people now in training through that?

JM: We have, in our in-school program, about 7,000 and that age range is 14 to 18. We do that through 51 contracts and that's a year-round programming model.

In our out-of-school program, we expect to serve about 1,700 and the age ranges are 16 to 21. And, as you know, the focus on this out-of-school population is for those young people who are skill-deficient, who may have dropped out, homeless, offenders and we do this with approximately fifteen contractors.

Q: There have been some studies showing that New York State has been having much less success in terms of getting training for people. That is, nationally, something like 40% of the unemployed are getting WIA training versus something like 20% in New York State. Do you have plans to make that expand?

JM: Right. And, I mean, now that's why we again postponed our WIA-funded RFP because so much of what we do is defined more by funding stream than other sources.

Q: Do you do the evaluations of how the program is doing in terms of certain standards?

JM: We do all of the contract oversight.

Q: Given the situation in New York, where we have this severe youth employment problem, does your office or do you advise the mayor's office to communicate with Washington and with Albany in any way to say, "Well, thank you very much for this funding stream and this number of slots, but here's the gap between what we are receiving and what we need?"

JM: Oh, absolutely. I mean, we have a staff in Washington and we have a staff in Albany and we are constantly in touch with the intergovernmental staff who are promoting not only our goals around Workforce Investment Act, but all the things that impact the constituents in New York City. And so, in fact, maybe about a week or so ago, we met with federal representatives who are keeping us abreast.

We also will continue to not only be advocates for state and federal funding, but also for private funding. And we are meeting with representatives of the private sector to see to what extent they are willing to craft the programs that speak to the needs of young people. We, in the past, have had very exemplary models of private-sector cooperation in this area. I think, now, we've lost some ground in terms of youth employment, but I think that now that we can demonstrate that we've made some significant changes to the way we're administering the Summer Youth Employment Program and have taken leadership on this issue, I think. I don't foresee that the private sector will be reluctant to really help us.

Q: What do you mean when you say, "We've lost some ground, in terms of youth employment"?

JM: It's been a while since we've had an initiative that really targets and focuses on meeting the needs of the private sector.

Q: And what about in terms of the public sector, in terms of what Washington's doing, Albany's doing?

JM: Well, in the public sector, we initially saw that the federal government underwrote a considerable amount of the Summer Youth Employment Program. Today, we don't have federal support, except for the in-school WIA, which is a very small portion. But, overall, we don't have federal support for summer programming and we also sustained some state cuts in the Summer Youth Employment Program. Last summer, we received approximately $6 million less in state funding in New York City.

Q: So what are some of the things we should do about moving young people into the work world? Would you just say training or what?

JM: Yes, we would say training. But it's not training for training's sake. How many times do we hear about the program that's still teaching young people Microsoft Word and things like that? I mean, we want to make sure that it's relevant training, that it's training that's geared toward the industries that we know that we can project are going to be hiring in the future. Obviously, we've moved away from being a manufacturing economy and we just want to make sure that it's relevant training, that it supports people in gaining those literacy and numeracy skills. And that we also have some component and, you know, it can be done by our nonprofit sector. That helps young people also integrate themselves more fully into the world of work, socially.

Q: The mayor in his recent State of the City address said, "We want to give all young people the opportunity to succeed." And he said, "We're going to get a job for everybody that wants to work here." And then he proposed this Learning To Work idea that would serve, I think, about 2,600 high school dropouts, with about $14 million-dollar mix of classroom and work experience. But the latest numbers I saw were there were about 13,000 dropouts last year in New York and about 18,000 at risk of dropping outs.

Also, in terms of what you were just saying about relevant jobs, he proposed a Commission on Construction Opportunity, to advise industry on how to allocate those jobs in construction. With all these new construction projects that seem to be on the horizon —expanding the convention center, rebuilding the World Trade Center site, the Brooklyn stadium and on and on, do you see any possibilities there for trying to have creative programs again? If you were to advise this new Commission on Construction Opportunity, what kinds of things might you suggest in terms of getting more of those jobs to youth? Because, of course, a lot of those construction jobs need apprenticeship training. There are only so many union

apprenticeship slots and we've been pretty weak in terms of apprenticeship training in the United States relative to European .Are there some means by which some of those construction jobs could find their way to youth?

JM: Absolutely. The plans are at the very initial stages. I was just briefed on the initiative. The one that you refer to that's focused on dropouts is really being led by the Department of Education and so I just met with Michelle Cahill [Advisor to NYC Schools Chancellor Joel Klein] to see what kinds of synergy there could be created between our programs and this new initiative.

But this is very, very exciting because at least we do anticipate that there will be some job growth and one of the things that I know that we can offer is that we have access to the young people. We know where the young people are, we have some contact with the young people and can think about a way to channel the young people into those positions, because outreach is going to be a very key component and the other piece is going to be how do you support the young people to be successful in those jobs. It's things that we may take for granted, showing up on time and those kinds of things are learned behaviors and things that our nonprofits are very, very good at and so, again, we want to make sure that they not only get a chance and an opportunity, which we know many want and—but we also want to support them in being successful at those positions.

Q: What are the main forms of outreach that you use to try to get young people to know about your department and your programs?

JM: Well, most recently the Summer Youth Employment Program is a good example of that. We didn't really do a lot of public promotion in the past around the program and I think that's wrong. I think that public resources shouldn't be a mystery. And what we were able to do this year is have our application downloadable and have young people be able to apply and learn of their status online and that was very, very important. And many young people are more proficient and use the computer as a way of communication more than older adults and so this is a very natural thing. And, as a result, we got, I think, about 70,000 people applying and we also used effectively our youth phone line and really promoted our youth line as a way to answer questions about the Summer Youth Employment Program and our youth line is staffed by young people. So many of our young people feel uncomfortable and may think that, you know, "Well, maybe this a stupid question." Or they may be afraid to ask, but when they hear that the person on the other side is a peer, really those barriers disappear and they're able to relate. And those are the primary ways.

And then, also, through, again, our very comprehensive not-for-profit network that's really in the community and connected to the community and able to get the word out.

Q: And, in the after-school programs, are they in the name of your department or of the nonprofit that you're working with for each school? Do students see only the particular not-for-profit running that after-school program or do they see the DYCD logo there and the hotline and so on?

JM: Well, hopefully, a little bit of both, but probably more connected with the not-for-profit that's actually physically in the school or community center. But, for example, we have eighty Beacon programs and the Beacon programs are after-school programs, but they also provide services in the evenings and on weekends and they are physically located in the schools. And so each not-for-profit has its own distinct mission and relationship with the school, but there is an overarching network that meets on a regular basis and we communicate policies with them and e-mails and so we do both.

But part of that structure is not only to be connected with young people, but also with parents. And so, for example, part of the beacon program might be that the adults might be engaged in ELL [English Language Learner] classes alongside the kids who might be in a drama class and putting together a production so that you're really connected to the community.

Q: You mentioned the immigrant issue. There's a new study by the New York City Planning Department indicating a worrisome increase, a 30% increase in the number of immigrants in the city without adequate English-language skills -- 1.5 million people. How does what your department does help to try to deal with this problem? And do you see this as something that will put increasing demands on the department's efforts in the future?

JM: Well, the article in the *Times*, both today and last week, was the result of work that we're doing with the *New York Times* Foundation to really bring more attention to this issue. We know that government can't do this alone. We, as a municipality, really are out front in terms of promoting a model of family literacy. We put out a solicitation—actually, the program is about a year in operation-- to really think about a model that will support children learning but also help the parent's learning. Because we know, to the extent that parents are improving their own skills, children also improve.

"We initially saw that the federal government underwrote a considerable amount of the Summer Youth Employment Program. Today, we don't have federal support, except for the in-school WIA, which is a very small portion. But, overall, we don't have federal support for summer programming and we also sustained some state cuts in the Summer Youth Employment Program. Last summer, we received approximately $6 million less in state funding in New York City."

And we also know that we're supporting parents in navigating resources. Many newcomers find—like many of us who have been here a while find -- New York City to be very complex. And so part of it is time the parents learn, time the children learn and time that they can spend together and time that we can also assist parents with resources in their new homeland.
And so, for all of these reasons, we think that this is a very powerful model and, from everything that we've learned from the National Center for Family Literacy, it's actually working to improve both on the adult side, the skills, their ability to learn English, but also that teachers are saying that the academic performance of children is also improving.

I think of it in a way perhaps beyond what those who are pedagogically oriented might think, which is that you also see that family unit and begin to strengthen that family unit and see that family unit as an ongoing means for learning and a source of learning. And that's important, because when I talk about strengthening the family, yes, it's for improving skills, but you also need a strong family. Because there are lots of temptations and influences that may not have existed in their previous land, gang involvement, substance abuse, *et cetera*. And so you really want to do everything you can to bolster the communication between the young person and the parents.

And you also want to strengthen the role of the parents which can be diminished if the child is acting as the translator. You want to make sure that that parent remains in a position of authority and sees their leadership role in that family.

Q: One of the things that came out of this study was that there seems to be a real mish-mash of individual language centers that are being funded and that relatively few are in immigrant-intensive areas of Queens. Is the placement of English-language programs, something that your department can affect?

JM: We can and, to the extent that we fund programs directly, we can direct the funds to communities where the services are needed most. And, in our last immigration RFP, for such services as assisting with citizenship, we actually looked at those communities where there were particular increases in new immigrants.

But we don't comprise the total funding picture, so we have control over those things that we have control over and will use our resources to get to communities that are underserved. And so, for example, the eight programs that we fund under the family literacy program are throughout all of the boroughs and New York will have an increase in the number of immigrants in the Bronx, for example. Clearly, Washington Heights in upper Manhattan is a needy community. And so we have strategically placed our programs in those communities, but, again, we are not the only funding source in this area.

Q: At any given time, about how many people are enrolled in those English-language programs? Do you have a number on that?

JM: Our Adult Literacy programs serve 12,000, DYCD Family Literacy programs serve approximately 400, and newly launched Toyota Family Literacy programs serve 60 individuals.

Q: If you could advise the mayor in terms of thinking about things in the future, do you see areas in which maybe we're not doing such a good job now or don't have the funds and you might urge him to try to think about trying to get funds, allocate

funds, reallocate funds, whatever, for training, for job creation? You know, ways in which to deal with the youth employment problem?

JM: The allocation of funds is a very tricky issue for us because, obviously, we've had a very tough fiscal climate here in New York City and we are always balancing lots of competing demands. But, certainly, we are continuing to look at ways to support, as I just mentioned, the family literacy model, after-school and our employment programs. If there are three priorities that this agency is putting forward, it's those three areas.

And our hope is to engage young people earlier on and so that we don't have to talk about—you know, one of the reasons why I am emphasizing after-school is that I don't want to have to talk about disconnected youth; I want them to be connected and part of structured programs very early on. And where initially it's in cultural-enrichment activities and recreational activities and then they are phasing into, obviously, in the high school years, employment opportunities, apprenticeships and that we see it as a continuum of services and that's really what my goal would be.

Q: This *is* the Department of Youth & *Community Development*, so let's discuss economic development. Some studies on disconnected youth suggest that a big reason why especially males seem to drop out of the labor force is that decent jobs are just not being created that they think they have a shot at. Construction is, obviously, one area in which some disconnected male youth would tend to be very interested. Do you see any possibilities that more consideration of the problems of youth could be given when the city encourages development, when the Empire Development Corporation gives businesses tax breaks? That is, that more of those jobs be targeted for youth so that, if they got the training through your programs or others, they would at least have a shot at those jobs?

JM: Absolutely. I mean, one of the things that we haven't done as much has been to really engage the business sector. And when I say "we," perhaps my agency, but also, I think, the nonprofit sector as well. We say, "Here, we have a whole bunch of kids, hire them." We have not done as much to really engage the business community and ask them what it is they need and what are the skills that make a young person successful. What kinds of support does a young person need, and so on and so forth. I think our approach is more along the lines of: "We have the demand and we have a bunch of kids ready to work, when they can they start?"

And I think what we're doing, what I'm doing with the Partnership for New York City and with other representatives of industry, is really going more as a listener. In designing our solicitations, I think what we really need to hear from them is how do we design a training program that works? Who should be recruited for some of these jobs? How do we support them and get that kind of valuable feedback before I go ahead and do what I think is right, because, as long as there is a mismatch, I don't know that we're going to move forward.

I think it's very, very encouraging, because the city is rebounding and there are lots of new projects to point to and I think to the extent that we really engage the private sector fully in this discussion, I think we'll see more and better results.

Q: But you don't see any direct role for your agency in interacting, for example, with the Empire State Development Corporation?

JM: We've already reached out to them. In fact, we were at their conference in Albany recently and made a presentation to them. And, so we're beginning to make those connections. We're approaching it a little differently than before.

Q: What about other possibilities for job creation targeted at youth, like transitional jobs programs. There are various proposals to try to have a kind of local Job Corps that would give six-month or whatever jobs targeted at out-of-school youth. Does that have any chance, in the current environment, of being something that you would support?

JM: Well, we will look at really any opportunities. We are in the process of constructing our new solicitation and so, within the fiscal constraints, I think anything that has demonstrated that it can gainfully employ young people —you know, we're not just about the workforce preparation piece.

We think that the unique thing about this youth work force portfolio coming to DYCD is that we can also get into the youth development piece, the piece about mentoring with a caring adult, holding high expectations. Those kinds of things that often can get lost and may be the difference between a young person sticking with it. We know that it's not the same to engage a young person as it is to engage an adult, but that people come to the table with different reasons, different responsibilities. The things that may be welcoming to adults are not necessarily welcoming to young people. And so, for us, it's sort of the whole pie, the whole complement of services. It's not just giving the jobs.

Q: So do you see any component for job creation in addition to job preparation from the public sector? Or is that something which your department would not really support?

JM: We are not really in the business of job creation, although, clearly, are supportive of it. But we have Deputy Mayor Doctoroff and the Department of Small Business Services and the Economic Development Corporation and other agencies that are really taking the lead on that and it obviously is very key to this administration. It's just that this agency wouldn't be at the forefront of that discussion, but clearly would partner with them.

Q: You said you've been to Albany. Do you feel that those agencies are paying more attention or are saying they'll pay more attention to the youth component of that job creation? Or do they view job creation as something they have to leave to the private sector and they can't intervene and urge job creation for youth?

JM: Well, I think this administration is being very, very proactive in terms of job creation, as you heard in the State of the City and has been for the last three years, you know, a key component of the administration.

Q: Do you feel you have the mayor's ear? Can you get access to the mayor and is he responsive on these issues?

JM: I think he's very responsive. After all, he's made youth a primary hallmark of his administration and that's very, very exciting: that he really believes, like I believe, that every young person should have the same opportunities to succeed and he believes that very passionately. And so it's very exciting to be part of an administration where that's a given and where we can be creative. We can launch and implement a family literacy program and test that and pilot that. We can make the substantive changes to the Summer Youth Employment Program and add an educational component, use a debit card and things that—since I was in the program when I was eighteen years old -- changes that you haven't seen in some 24 or so years.

So I think it's very exciting that we are able to be innovative and do things that respond to both demographic information, that we are all learning at the same time, that we can regroup and say, "Okay, well, hmm, let's target our resources, let's focus," and not be constrained because it may be not the way we used to do things in the past.

Q: One thing that needs to be part of all this is the problem of youth getting access to community college or 4-year college education. As a college professor, I know there's a real crisis now in terms of the affordability of college. And, actually, New York State is one of the most expensive states in the country in terms of the cost of community colleges. Does that pose any special challenge to your mandate here, the cost of college and how daunting that is to a lot of youths, especially low-income youths? There's a study estimating that the average college grad goes out of college today with $25,000-plus in debt because of cutbacks in grants and so on. Do you see access to college as an area in which, in New York, we need to try to improve?

JM: Well, I talk about the value of a BA all the time, because even with that kind of financial investment, clearly the research continues to say that it pays off. It may seem daunting to a family -- and myself. You know, I certainly am still paying student loans! But, hands down, it means a higher quality of life, both financially and otherwise. And so, that is one of the things that we are really promoting. Even when we promote getting a GED, we say, "Don't see the GED as an end in and of itself. Really see it as a beginning of your post-secondary opportunities."

Q: But what do you say when they say to you it's too expensive and the state and the feds don't give enough money to help us out?

JM: I would say that, if there's any way possible to make the sacrifice, that it's still a worthwhile endeavor in the long run. Not being insensitive to what that family might be trying to have—you know, the challenges and having to cobble together funds. But, if there's something that you can bet on, it's that a BA or a college education will pay off. Better than the stock market or other kinds of things, you know; it generally translates to an increased income.

Q: Going forward, what do you see today as your department's main achievements and challenges?

JM: I think it's an exciting time for the department. I think, overall, we are really emphasizing quality programming in all aspects of what we're doing. We know that, for example, in the area of after-school that, perhaps, in the past, we had funded programs that really didn't offer intensive programming. And we are really shifting toward more comprehensive models, making sure that the quality of what we fund is even and it's not to say that we haven't funded quality in the past, but that we are making sure that, no matter what community you live in, that you can expect a certain number of hours of programming, a certain breadth of programming. That we will really make more of an effort to combine, even in these tough times, the resources that the city has to bear.

I think this is an important direction, as well as the targeting, of course, balancing what is a universal need for programming, whether it's youth employment or it's after-school, with what are the communities that are underserved. And so we must always be cognizant that every kid probably should and could benefit, on the one hand, from solid youth development programming and, on the other hand, balancing that with what we know to be true where certain communities have traditionally been underserved. So I think that we are moving ahead and it's a very exciting time.

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