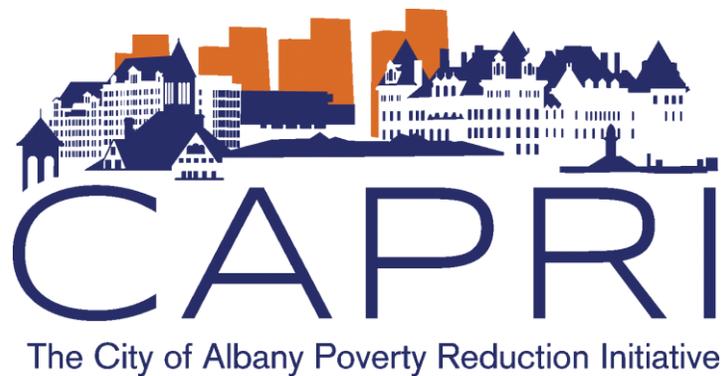


The City of Albany Poverty Reduction Initiative (CAPRI)

TOWN HALL SUMMARY

*Albany Public Library
Howe Branch*

June 1, 2017



200 Henry Johnson Boulevard, Suite 4. Albany, New York 12210

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Town Hall Meeting Objective

The CAPRI initiative can only be successful if we listen to our community. The Town Hall Meetings bring together City of Albany residents impacted by poverty and community stakeholders serving our community to discuss the challenges and barriers those living in poverty face. Their expertise and informed opinions will help guide CAPRI to create meaningful and sustainable solutions that positively impact our community.

Head of Household/Family Group

Question 1: Why do you think some young people are not working?

The majority of the group focused on the education system as the main reason why young people are not working. They all agreed that employment issues for young people in the area start before they even attempt to enter the workforce, citing ‘undereducation’ both within and outside of the public-school system as the main problem. One woman suggested that the lack of quality education in the school district in subjects like history and literature have contributed to their unpreparedness for the workforce. Another woman mentioned that there were not enough role models in the school system that looked like many of the students. She suggested that teachers and staff in the schools are often the only college-educated adults some of these young people may see in their daily lives, so when the teachers are not people of color or of minority groups, they are less likely to be encouraged or motivated to do well in school and work. According to several group members, this contributed to the limited sense of self-worth these students may feel.

A man in the group also suggested that young people were not receiving an adequate or ‘proper’ education outside of the school system. He pointed out the restraints in the social networks these young people have. They are not in contact with many people that can inform them of job openings or have opportunities to be mentored. The group also agreed that older generations have relaxed or lowered their expectations of the younger generations and there is not as much pressure to succeed as there once was. Several people suggested that this shift in cultural norms has also contributed to the decreased number of young people with jobs.

Question 2: What could you, your community and community organizations do to help you and those you know stay or get back into school and/or get a job?

To combat the issues in the public-school system, one of the women in the group suggested that the schools should make a greater effort to hire teachers that look like the students they are teaching. She said that this would encourage the students to do well in school which would allow them to have better chances in the workforce. According to her, seeing adults of color with stable, ‘more prestigious’ jobs would also increase their sense of self-worth. The group also agreed that the community, along with the school district, should work together to develop job and career-oriented mentorship programs that would help young people become better prepared to enter the workforce. Several people in the group pointed out that this would also greatly improve and expand the social networks these young people have, increasing their chances of employment.

With regards to the stigma of “failing schools”, a woman in the group also suggested that empowering parents with children in the school district would have a significant impact in youth employment. She suggested that parent involvement in school activities and programs would show young people that they are important and capable of working towards a better future for themselves. She also mentioned that having parents with children in the school district instead of parents that moved out of the district to

“better schools” would create a sense of ownership and encourage investment in the school district. It would also lead to more equitable and efficient initiatives because the solutions would be grassroots rather than top-down.

The group agreed that the older generations needed to raise their expectations and hold the young people accountable for their actions. They believe that if younger people feel they are expected to work, they will try to do so.

Question 3: What are the day-to-day challenges you and those you know face?

According to the group, one of the major challenges faced by young people is a negative self-image or limited sense of self-worth. This is impacted by high rates of mass incarceration, a lack of role models, and an education system that does not teach young people about the historical achievements of the communities to which they belong. One woman in the group highlighted the inability of young people to take home books from school as a serious problem that impacted them daily. Another woman pointed out the high quantity of low-quality programs available to help young people. She said there are several nonprofits offering similar services and while this leads to overlap, they are also inefficient and help a limited number of people. Two people from the group mentioned transportation issues as a daily challenge faced by many people as well. They said the bus services are limited sometimes and routes do not always serve all areas of the city equally. People are being forced to live farther away from the services and jobs they need.

Question 4: What changes or solutions do you want to see happen in yourself, your neighborhood, your school and in the city of Albany?

Several group members stressed the importance of having diversity among the teachers and staff at schools to provide more role models for students. They also want to see a change in the curriculum to one that reflects the history and culture of the communities to which the children belong. One woman brought up the importance of community engagement and suggested door-to-door initiatives to promote investment in the school district by those that live in it. She mentioned the difficulty of scaling these initiatives and making sure that they were grassroots and not technocratic or spearheaded by outsiders. One man believed that a shift back to a culture that celebrates the accomplishments of prominent Americans of color could be a solution that could be implemented at the individual level. Two women in the group who were familiar with many of the small nonprofits that provide services to families and youth agreed that funds to these groups should be restricted until they have proven they can work more efficiently. They also want to see more collaboration between these nonprofits to prevent overlap. Every member of the group wanted to see more career-oriented mentorship programs set up to provide young people the personal development opportunities and social networks they need to work and advance their careers. The group hoped that the raised expectations of young people would encourage them to seek employment, but they also want to make sure that the community does their part as well and provides

the job opportunities as well as mentoring to ensure they can grow in their careers and personal development journeys.

Support System Group

Question 1: What systems are in place which help or prevent people from getting jobs?

Reverend Johnson, a pastor of a local church in the south end, began the conversation by explaining that the style of Civil Service exams may disqualify certain groups from obtaining certain jobs, and that a major factor is the style of language that may not be understood by the participants. An additional factor pertaining to the inefficiency of the exam is that the style of the exam minimally relates to the actual job qualifications.

The group agreed that the additional levels of testing are discriminatory, thus immediately disqualifying most applicants. Also, included as an issue that is preventative when it comes to people obtaining jobs, is a systematic lack of awareness. In other words, certain employment positions are being reserved for a smaller group of people. This rolls into another issue of the assistance that is only provided through employers or “who you know.” Consequently, while it is true that many are helped, there is a larger population of those who are denied those jobs. The issue of “agency fatigue” was mentioned by multiple participants, as an issue that many in the community are enduring after they lose the motivation of having to meet with agency after agency for employment, financial support, etc. Transportation, a common theme throughout the discussion, serves as a major restriction when it comes to attending interviews/having a means to work, especially in the south end area. Lastly, having to identify as a felon on an application may immediately label one as ineligible from obtaining a position.

Question 2: What policies help or prevent you, your community, and community organizations from helping you and those you know get jobs?

The group agreed that the “cliff theory” continues a mass cycle of poverty when a single parent may be led to take a raise from their employer but as an effect, be disqualified from social services due to the increase in income. The quality and ineffectiveness of transportation and zoning serves as a policy that prevents themselves and their communities from getting to interviews or to their place of employment. Victoria brought up the barriers of grant qualifications as an issue, and once again the support to “ban the box” was brought up in order to keep criminal history separate from what qualifies one to fulfill the duties of his/her job.

Question 3: How do policies negatively affect the day-to-day challenges you and those you know face?

Victoria began the conversation by attesting to the poor customer service (DSS, Social Security, etc.) that families are consistently experiencing. Also, the difficulties in accessing Section 8 and the inconsistencies that were between housing and support services were identified. Zoning policies were again held

responsible for the additional challenges and restrictions of the community. Reverend Johnson brought up the policy of pollution and waste dump that was reserved for the City of Albany and the group labeled it as an environmental justice. Lastly, the youngest member of the group stated that there were unsupportive policies between the workforce and childcare, classifying them not “family-friendly”

Question 4: What changes/solutions do you want to see happen in yourself? Your neighborhood? The city of Albany?

The group agreed that the surplus of vacant houses in the City of Albany was disturbing and that more occupied housing and higher rates of homeownership would be a change that they would like to see. Another change included civic engagement and leadership as a support to neighborhoods. One woman suggested that community gardens and other means of beautified neighborhoods would show the support that the people have for their communities. As stated throughout the conversation, accessible supermarkets along with doctors’ offices are necessary for families. When I asked for solutions to this issue, the popular idea was to create locally owned businesses (grocery stores) right in their own communities. Lastly, a solution that the group agreed on seeing was more outlets for the youth, such as a recreational facility.

Jobs/Careers Group

Question 1: What barriers exist that prevent the hiring of youth?

Among the topics discussed by the group were a lack of skills for employment and a lack of awareness of services and employment opportunities. The skills that were identified as lacking included vocational skills, education, and the English language for some communities. Bias and misconceptions of employers and individuals about the abilities of an individual when job seeking was also identified. The group was also in agreement that individuals have a lack of knowledge and connections with services, employment, and resources. In addition, the group agreed that resources that are available are disconnected from those that they intend to serve, so services do not reach their potential. This included employers not being aware of services that can assist them with finding employees that fit their needs. This group also suggested that the questions at the town hall include everyone in poverty rather than being youth centric.

Question 2: What could you and your community do to retain young people?

The group quickly identified the need for services such as job coaching and mentoring to continue after someone is linked with employment. Being able to obtain, afford, and maintain childcare while employed was a barrier that was also mentioned; the group discussed that assistance for affordable child-care would assist those in poverty with keeping continuous employment. Aside from child-care, transportation was an obstacle for those in poverty staying employed. The group suggested that having adequate and

flexible transportation available as well as employer programs that provide transportation to and from work would help individuals maintain continuous employment.

Question 3: What are the day-to-day challenges the job-seekers you know/work with face?

The group identified multiple challenges that individuals and families face day-to-day. One such example was religious practices of different individuals, such as fasting and praying during Ramadan. This issue as well as the lack of flexible and adequate transportation affordable and available child-care was identified. A lack of opportunities that are close to a person's residence as well as a lack of knowledge how to navigate the job market and workplace are also challenges that many face.

Question 4: What changes/solutions do you want to see happen in yourself? Your neighborhood? The City of Albany?

The main point that the group chose for a solution was to create a larger collaborative effort among services to remove disconnect with the consumer. This included suggesting that services create a streamlined process to make it easier for individuals to access multiple services and avoid bureaucratic and procedural hurdles. Other suggestions included tax benefits for employees who help train employees, more neighborhood restoration, and for services to invest more in people rather than material resources.