

The Dollars and Sense of Blackness: Newark... The Economic Impact Panelists share insights on problems, potential solutions

Unemployment, insufficient healthcare and the plight of young people were among the topics covered at a panel discussion "The Dollars and Sense of Blackness: Newark . . . The Economic Impact." A live, collaborative news effort sponsored by radio stations WBGO 88.3 FM and WNYC 93.9 FM/AM 820, the discussion was broadcast August 6 from WBGO and heard on both stations.



Okems Okemezie, Vonnice Brown and Dr. Kendell Sprott share their insight during the panel discussion.

"The dollars and cents that are coming into the black community are going to have to be created by the black community; it's doing for self, real clear," said Fredrica Bey, executive director of Women in Support of the Million Man March (WISOMMM).

Bey was among members of the guests comprising the program's audience who added insightful commentary to that of panelists Vonnice Brown, chief facilities operator at The

Apostles' House; Okems Okemezie of the City of Newark

African Commission; and Kendell Sprott, MD, acting chairman of pediatrics and senior associate dean of clinical affairs at University of Medicine and Dentistry of New Jersey-New Jersey Medical School (UMDNJ-NJMS) and a physician at UMDNJ-University Hospital.

Rutgers University Board of Governors Distinguished Service Professor Dr. Clement Price participated via telephone, and Dr. M. William Howard, Jr., pastor of Bethany Baptist Church, supplied recorded remarks.

During the discussion, panelists and audience members shared thoughts on how the downturn in the economy is impacting Newarkers in several ways including jobs, healthcare, and education.

Since his days as a medical student at UMDNJ-NJMS in the early 1970s, Dr. Sprott has seen many changes in Newark's healthcare.

"Over the years, Newark has seen the number of private practitioners dwindle, and they haven't been replaced," said the pediatrician, who also has a law degree.

Dr. Sprott has spent most of his medical career in Newark and explained that this reduction has limited the number of hours that physicians are available. For this reason, and because Newark and other cities such as Camden have a disproportionate number of residents who live in poverty and lack healthcare coverage, many people feel forced to use emergency rooms for primary care.

Dr. Sprott said the recent closure of several hospitals only aggravates this situation, creating a scenario where people can wait in emergency rooms up to a full day or more to be seen.

As with Dr. Sprott, Dr. Price's extensive knowledge of and time spent in Newark have given him a unique perspective on New Jersey's largest city. A history professor for more than three decades, he has witnessed Newark's changing demographic landscape. An increasing number of people from Latin America, the Caribbean and other points on the globe, Dr. Price said, are now calling Newark home.

"Newark is at a crossroads," said the renowned historian who also chaired President's Obama's transition team for the National Endowment for the Humanities.

Dr. Price said that since many circumstances in Newark will continue to falter along with the national economy, signs of hope are apparent. These include an entrepreneurial spirit coming to the city via young people in their 20s and 30s.

"While these are horrific times, people are rushing to the non-profit sector," Dr. Price also said. He cited examples of attendance at the Newark Library, which is up by 17 percent; the overwhelming support of the

Newark Museum during its centennial celebration this year; and most recently, the Newark Black Film Festival which drew the largest audience in its 35 year history.

Such support of the non-profit sector was echoed by other members on the panel.

"People are beginning to appreciate the need of coming together to achieve the common goal," said Okems Okemezie. "There is more of a request to encourage non-profits to collaborate."

Despite that cooperation, the state of the economy presents increased challenges.

Vonnice Brown said while The Apostles' House, whose services include assisting homeless women and children, can provide education, training and child care for the women in their program, the jobs "just aren't there." Consequently, the average length of stay for women has increased from two weeks to 30 days.

That extended length of stay combined with expensive rental costs and limited Section 8 availabilities, is reshaping the agency's program to resemble low income housing as opposed to emergency shelter.

In discussing housing later in the program, one audience member, Emmanuel Towns, Esq. of America's Leftout Campaign, asked whether the recent financial bailouts only apply to a select financial class, or to all Americans, including Newark residents.

Another subject of "The Dollars and Sense of Blackness. . .:" was youth.

Twenty-one year old Marques-Aquil Lewis of "Da Youth" Organization said limited job opportunities for young people have caused them to sell drugs and participate in gangs. Lewis, who is also a Newark Public Schools advisory board member, said insufficient guidance from leaders has had a negative impact.

"The people who are supposed to be leading us and guiding us are playing politics and not principles," he complained.

According to Eric Saunders of Tri-City Peoples Corp., this could be remedied with more guidance.

"When you put strong people behind young people, success is imminent," he said.

Saunders referred to a young person in the Tri-City's program who overcame several personal challenges with the support of nurturing foster parents.

In closing the panel discussion, Dr. Price said that the dialogue is "a good thing; it suggests that the future of our community is right at the center of our imagination."