

July 30, 2008

Dear Delegates and Platform Committee Members:

During August, each of you will be called upon to play a leading role in the formulation of the Democratic Party Platform for 2008. It is a weighty responsibility made more so because of the breadth and depth of issues currently facing Americans.

To allow all Americans an opportunity to participate in the process, Senator Obama and the DNC initiated national "Listening to America" meetings. All Americans were invited to host or attend a "platform meeting" and make policy recommendations to the Democratic Party. More than 1,600 meetings took place across the nation and among citizens abroad within a two-week period.

The attached is a compilation of recommendations made by citizens at three very large meetings held in New York City:

- on July 22nd at Occasion Catering Hall in Jamaica, Queens;
- on July 23rd at Cardozo School of Law in Manhattan;
- and on July 29th at Medgar Evers College in Brooklyn.

Much was said about foreign policy, renewing American leadership abroad, ending the war in Iraq, and unequivocally opposing torture of political prisoners. However, the primary focus of all three hearings was on an urban agenda. That agenda is reflected in the following document.

Perhaps the most remarkable characteristics of these three grassroots meetings were that a small group of volunteers organized three large events in fewer than 10 days, with no financial support from the campaign; that close to 1,000 people attended the meetings on short notice; that elected officials, delegates, and platform members turned out in ample numbers to listen to the policy recommendations; and, above all, that there were so many passionate personal testimonials and recommendations from across the full spectrum of New York City society.

We have summarized their observations and recommendations to Senator Obama and the DNC in an effort to represent the urban agenda that the people of New York City so urgently seek.

Sincerely,

Virginia Davies  
New York for Obama

**Listening to America Summary  
For the Queens, Manhattan, Brooklyn, New York  
Platform Hearings**

*An Urban Agenda*

**INTRODUCTION**

Three large hearings were held in New York City over the course of eight days – in the boroughs of Queens, Manhattan and Brooklyn. Platform delegates, convention delegates and local elected officials listened intently to the testimonies and recommendations of 170 New Yorkers. Overall, nearly 1,000 residents of the three boroughs – as well as visitors from other boroughs and counties – attended the platform hearings on three separate evenings. Each of the gatherings included representatives from all walks of life, socio-economic groups, races and ethnicities, gender preferences, and age groups. In Queens and Brooklyn, many overcame transportation obstacles in order to attend. In Manhattan, attendance was robust despite extreme heat and thunderstorms. Everyone, senior citizens and teenagers, prosperous professionals and homeless citizens, were obviously eager to participate in the Platform development process for the first time in their lives.

While there may be some eight million stories in New York City, there were just a few stories repeated consistently at the platform meetings in all three boroughs. Although much was said about foreign policy, the war and veterans' rights, the recurring themes reflected a clear-cut urban agenda and included: Economic Justice, Education, Energy Policy, Gun Control, Health Care Disparities and AIDS/HIV, Housing, Immigration, the Prison Industrial Complex, Transportation, and Women. This document summarizes these issues. It also includes a page of information about each of the hearings and a page of quotations and comments on these and other issues of importance to the attendees.

We urge you to hear our voices as you shape the Democratic Platform.

## OUR HOPES OUR VOICES: A SNAPSHOT

The following is a selection of quotations from testimony at the 3 hearings.

“Take back the high ground.”

“**We need more occasions like this one to discuss issues.** The Democratic Party has ignored the Urban Agenda. **We must rededicate ourselves to this beyond the election.**”

“It’s one thing if it’s an issue that concerns you; it’s another if the issue is you.”

“Empirical evidence proves capital punishment is not a deterrent; some innocent people are put to death.”

“**Diplomacy, Diplomacy, Diplomacy! Learn from other countries.**”

“**We need a platform for ourselves, for our hood.**” Voice of a teenager

“No Preventive Wars.” “End the war in Iraq.”

“We are the grass roots, the ones with the enlightened political consciousness.”

“We demand an end to torture.”

“Reduce the size of the military and increase the size of the diplomatic service.

“Doing more with less, will lead to doing less with less.”

“The Democratic Committee needs to hire cyber security teams as least as good as the competition as soon as possible.”

### ECONOMIC JUSTICE

“The market should not decide, the people should decide.”

“In our cities Black America is a Third World Country.”

“Full employment at a living wage, so that every American who wants to work can get a decent job that enables him or her to pay the rent and put food on the table.”

“Stop privatizing our military. Stop privatizing industries that should be public entities.”

### EDUCATION

“The poorest students are getting the poorest education.”

“Less testing, more teaching.”

“**Create a Marshall Plan for education.**”

“Instead of No Child Left Behind, **EVERY CHILD MOVING FORWARD**”

“Special education is about differences, not disabilities.”

“Children are not paint by the numbers.”

“Why is it only 11% of black and 16% of Latinos 8<sup>th</sup> Graders are reading at or above grade level?”

“Safeguard our children’s futures: increase investment in Head Start, early childhood and pre-K”

“Identify high functioning high school kids and give them service credits toward college for tutoring pre k thru 8<sup>th</sup> grade kids. If they continue this work for 5 years, find a way to forgive student loans.”

### ENERGY POLICY

“**Energy reform can happen everywhere,** even in Queens”

“New York City violates federal clean air standards, and as a result the rates for respiratory conditions such as asthma in Central Brooklyn (as well as other parts of the city) are quadruple the national average”

“Walking the streets of Brooklyn, I hear and see the pain felt by residents at the beginning of the month when they open their electric bills. And a rate increase was just announced.”

“Define global warming as National Security.” “Spend more resources on renewable energy.”

“**Create an Apollo Plan for energy.**”

“Utilize State Workforce Investment Boards to identify emerging green economy jobs that foster ladders and pathways out of poverty.”

## **HEALTH CARE DISPARITIES AND AIDS/HIV**

“Create Health Empowerment Zones to implement strategies to increase the number of culturally sensitive medical doctors and health care professionals and caregivers in our urban communities.”

“Health care is a human right.”

“Our response to AIDS/HIV has been hampered by an ideological approach, rather than a scientific approach.”

“I don’t understand why we’re taking off the table single payer health care, when it is the only thing that works.”

## **HOUSING**

**“Establish a National Housing Trust Fund.”**

“We need a concerted national strategy to prevent homelessness.”

## **GUN CONTROL**

“Firearm injuries represent a major public health problem that is exacerbated by less handgun regulations.”

“In 2005(the last year with information) there were 30,000 deaths and 70,000 non fatal injuries from firearms. One tenth of the deaths were children.”

“Fewer restrictions on handguns result in a substantial increase in deaths.”

“In the District of Columbia in 1976, the restrictive handgun law resulted in an almost 25% decline in fatalities.”

## **IMMIGRATION**

“Build strong families in immigrant communities.”

“Support comprehensive immigration reform.”

“Support national security measures which do not compromise US civil rights and civil liberties, and do not radically profile US citizens.”

People are being rounded up in broad daylight and deported. It’s turned into a terror campaign against undocumented workers.”

## **PRISON INDUSTRIAL COMPLEX**

“For the average Black person, the criminal justice system is a relentless obstacle to social, economic and political process. Families are torn apart by a criminal justice system acting with impunity where, for example, one gram of crack cocaine is equal to 500 grams of powder cocaine.”

“Develop a ‘model’ approach of industry, housing and social services to increase the capacity of urban communities to successfully resettle large numbers of displaced persons from the prisons back into the communities.”

“95 percent of incarcerated youth are African American and Latino.”

## **TRANSPORTATION/INFRASTRUCTURE**

“A healthy and productive society requires a top flight public infrastructure. Power generation, roads, hospitals, schools, and public transportation, these are the physical elements that keep our society going and creating opportunity.”

“Fix it or lose it.”

## **WOMEN**

“Create affordable child care.” “Provide daycare at colleges and universities.”

“Demand pay equity.”

“More and more women are living in poverty in retirement.”

“If you want to see Roe v. Wade upheld, you better vote for Obama.”

## ECONOMIC JUSTICE

*“When you see who’s working in the streets in our community, you see that almost no one looks like us. This is true in practically every sphere of work.”*

--Queens resident

*“It’s hard to pick one thing when Bush has destroyed so much.”*

--Manhattan resident

Perhaps because New York is a microcosm of the world, testimony on the subject of economic justice ranged from the local to the global at all three Listening to America forums. Therefore, the following planks were widely recommended:

- At the local level, projects affecting communities must be carried out in cooperation with those communities. Jobs at living wages must be made available to community residents. And small businesses and non-profit organizations must be integrated into both governmental and private development planning.
- The woeful neglect of labor standards, both at the national and international levels, must be corrected, and the obstacles to workers joining and organizing unions must be addressed by an Obama administration that vigorously supports passage of the Employee Free Choice Act.
- The egregious gender and racial disparities in income in this country can not be separated from the pronounced disparities that exist in the global economy, in which the richest 1 percent of people in the world receives as much income as the entire bottom 57 percent.
- A U.S. minimum wage should be established that is in fact a living wage, indexed to inflation. All trade agreements must contain provisions that would raise wages around the world, not to the U.S. level, but to levels that would provide a living wage for workers in their own countries.

## EDUCATION

*“Senator Obama should view the math/science deficit in this country as a homeland security issue.”* – Queens resident

The achievement gap between poor and more affluent students at every level of the education system threatens our future as a democratic nation and a viable competitor in a global economy. This rang out loud and clear at every major “Listening to America” meeting. Therefore, the following ideas were advocated:

- Start at the root of the matter with Early Childhood Education by caring for and educating children from infancy through age five to make sure they are not already behind by the time they reach Kindergarten. Increase funding for high-quality childcare for working families, for Early Head Start and Head Start, and for universal pre-school.
- Radically reform No Child Left Behind, from grades K through 12, by actually funding the mandate, increasing support to the schools that really need it and emphasizing teaching and learning over testing. Include the Special Education Program that too often places kids into learning ghettos based on color and class. All of this means more and better teachers, smaller classes, and intolerance for vouchers, which can never serve a critical mass.
- Restore Science and Math Education to their central importance from grades pre-K through 12. The creeping science, technology, engineering, mathematics crisis – or “STEM Crisis” – has to be solved if we are to be a prosperous and safe nation.
- Guarantee higher education to everyone who wants to go to college. Introduce a college tuition tax credit for all low- and middle-income families and forgive interest on student loans in return for community service, including public school teaching. An educated majority will help us keep pace with the world and remain free.

## ENERGY POLICY

*“Energy reform can happen everywhere, even in Queens” – Queens resident*

*“The production and functioning of renewable energy sources will not only help us accomplish our environmental goal. It will also provide needed jobs and stimulate our economy.” -- Manhattan resident.*

Our nation’s energy crisis was a priority at all of the New York “Listening to America” meetings, with many participants calling for an Apollo-like Project that would include investment in green technologies, an end of our dependence on foreign oil and the promotion of alternative energies. The policy prescriptions ranged from requests to meet former Vice President Al Gore’s challenge to produce 100 percent of the country’s electricity using carbon emission-free methods within 10 years, to an increase of investments to make homes and businesses more energy self-sufficient.

But more interesting than the policy prescriptions were the ways in which attendees described the energy crisis not just in ethical or economic or environmental terms, but also as a crisis whose direct impact hits them and their families. The consensus was that an energy platform should revolve around these facts of life:

- The high and seemingly uncontrollable cost of oil, affecting the cost of food, heat and transportation. Queens residents in particular fear that their neighbors will not have enough heat or electricity this winter due to a crunch of resources or an inability to afford their utilities
- Energy and its relationship to two of the largest challenges facing our nation: first, foreign policy, where our addiction to oil has forced us to commit tremendous military and diplomatic capital in the world's most volatile region, and where there is mounting sentiment that our disproportionate emission of the gases causing climate change and ozone depletion severely impact our relations with developing nations; second health care, where the prevalence of traffic congestion in our cities and the emission of pollutants into the air and water directly relate to increased incidents of asthma, particularly in inner-city neighborhoods.
- America's shortage of common-sense methods for reducing energy usage. There were calls for the initiation of methods used in other nations such as motion-sensor lighting in the common areas of apartment buildings, which is common in much of Europe and in Brazil, and the use of solar roof panels, such as those used in Turkey and numerous countries around the globe. An escalation of a strategy to reduce carbon emissions, taking a lead from other countries that are now far in advance of us, was also strongly advocated.

## GUN CONTROL

*“I’m going to tell you about one bullet that killed three people, a bullet that went through my fourteen-year-old nephew’s heart, and caused one of his uncles to die of a stroke and his father to die of a heart attack the day before the killer was convicted.” – Queens resident*

The voice of one man calmly describing the effect of one bullet on his family inspired 150 New Yorkers to applaud with passion a proposal to include a nationwide, uniform gun-control plank to the Democratic platform. “One bullet that killed three people” was the bullet that pierced the heart of the speaker’s fourteen-year-old nephew. Learning of the child’s death, one of his uncles suffered a stroke and fell backwards down a flight of stairs to his death. Months later, in a courtroom, on the eve of the killer’s conviction, the father of the slain boy was struck by a heart attack and died without ever knowing what the verdict would be. That’s how one bullet ended three lives and shattered the hopes of an entire family.

Strict gun control laws were advocated in all three boroughs, but this story prompted the entire Queens assembly to applaud and advocate a clear-cut platform plank that would at the very least call for a ban on the sale or transfer of handguns, strengthen federal restrictions on the purchase and possession of guns and require a license for gun possession.

## HEALTH CARE DISPARITIES AND HIV/AIDS FUNDING

*"I don't understand why we're taking off the table single payer healthcare when it's the only thing that can work."* Brooklyn resident

The lack of access to affordable healthcare has left 47 million Americans among the ranks of the uninsured. But each person among that 47 million has his or her own story to tell. Particular urban health care concerns included diseases related to poor nutrition, the childhood obesity epidemic, and the spread of HIV/AIDS particularly among young women of color.

One Manhattan resident at Listening to America remarked, "I feel a little selfish doing this, but I'm here to talk about me. 23.6 million people have diabetes in the U.S. – and that's talking about me, because I have diabetes... Nearly 1/3 of Latinos lack health insurance, and that's me again, because I'm Latino." It was broadly agreed upon that:

- Disparities in health care by ethnicity and income are particularly prevalent in urban areas and must be addressed head-on in the Democratic platform. As one attendee pointed out, adults who make under \$20,000 are 2 times more likely to have heart disease, 1.5 times as likely to have asthma, and 3 times more likely to use the Emergency Room ER as the primary source of health care than are adults making \$75,000.
- Lower income people tend to live in concentrated areas within cities with too little access to affordable healthy foods and education on the basic facts about nutrition.
- Childhood obesity is a particular concern, with 25 million kids currently overweight or on the brink of becoming so. The increase in childhood obesity – a direct result of unhealthy diets, sedentary lifestyle, aggressive soda and junk food marketing, and the cutting of funding for physical education in schools – leads to costly conditions like Type II diabetes.
- Nowhere is the failure of our health insurance so obvious as in the treatment of HIV/AIDS. A resident pointed out the irony that the U. S. will not give foreign aid fight the spread of HIV to other countries unless that country has a national strategy to fight HIV/AIDS. But the U.S. itself has never articulated a national strategy to do the same.
- Therefore, the ability of the urban poor to obtain affordable health care, including preventative care, must be prominently addressed in the Democratic platform. A health care reform plank must include a plan that allows all working Americans, as well as all working immigrants, access to comprehensive health care insurance through their employers.
- It was almost universally agreed that the platform must include a comprehensive single-payer health care system to cover everyone in the U.S.

## HOUSING

*“Affordable housing, affordable for whom?”* Queens resident

At all hearings we heard about the acute need for housing... and we were admonished for using the term “affordable housing” as we were repeatedly reminded “**affordable for whom?**”

In this city of renters (NY has about 3.25 million housing units, almost 2.1 million of which are rentals), we heard little about foreclosures but a lot about the need for appropriately priced rental housing for poor, lower-middle and middle-income people. Nationally, according to the US Census in 2001, approximately 33 percent of housing units were occupied by renters (34 million units), who spent about 29 percent of their income on housing. The most recent Housing Vacancy Survey conducted in NYC (2005) revealed that 67 percent of the City’s housing was rental, or twice the national average. About 50 percent of these renters are paying more than 30 percent of their income for rent, 29 percent of whom are actually paying more than 50 percent of their income for rent. (See chart at end of Summary Document.)

Attendees at all three forums agreed that solutions for housing require that the federal government be an active partner, especially by providing Public Housing and Section 8 subsidy for families with limited incomes, and by providing subsidy for construction of new units for limited-income families. (In NYC Public Housing provides almost 180,000 families with apartments in the government-owned developments and Section 8 provides a government subsidy for about 90,000 families who live in privately-owned apartments that meet quality housing standards). Suggestions included:

- Restore full funding to HUD’s Public Housing and Section 8 Programs which have not received full funding since 2002
- Fully fund the National Housing Trust Fund
- Increase the number of Public Housing units and end the privatization of subsidized housing and gentrification of HUD-assisted housing
- Mandate that States using low-income housing tax credits provide a portion of their yearly allocation to Public Housing Authorities, or provide them with a selection preference
- The annual appropriations for HUD have been inadequate to cover the costs of these programs and nationally. Since 2001 in NYC, this has resulted in underpayments to NYCHA (which administers most of Section 8 and all of Public Housing in NYC) of in excess of \$600 million. Additionally programs that assist in markets that are improving, such as Mark to Market need to keep pace with changing markets and need to be funded. Residents proposed that the government commit to a five-year plan to eradicate homelessness in the USA. Ratify the Right to Adequate Housing with a new national housing bill and support the ratification of the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights to establish adequate housing as a human right.

## **IMMIGRATION**

*“A wink and a nod will no longer do. Effective border control is a critical step. But so is ensuring that otherwise law-abiding undocumented immigrants have the same protections as everyone else in a modern, free society.”*

It is happening all over the country, but in this city in which 170 languages are spoken and 36 percent of its 8 million people are foreign-born, the war launched by the Bush administration against the millions of undocumented workers in the country is felt with special urgency. Community and legal organizations across the country have reported a jump in the number of home raids where armed Immigration and Customs Enforcement agents aggressively seek out immigrants with orders of deportation by storming into homes without properly issued warrants, interrogating people, conducting unauthorized searches and taking parents away from frightened children. In the first six months of 2008 over 250,000 people were arrested and deported.

Raids on work places have also increased dramatically, from garment factories in California to meatpacking plants in Iowa and day laborers’ work sites in New York City. At the same time government agents arrest individuals who are not their targets but who happen to be present. The government admits to arresting by-standers and calls them "collateral arrests".

More people are being held for longer times in detention facilities. The conditions of the facilities fail the standards for United States jails and prisons. Some detainees are even placed with criminals though immigration violates civil law. Some facilities are contracted with private companies that make sizable profits. The number of detainees increases while the number of presiding judges diminishes.

The platform must contain a plank that facilitates a path to citizenship for the 12 million law-abiding and hardworking undocumented workers in America. A place to begin is passage of the DREAM (Development, Relief and Education for Alien Minors) Act, introduced in the Congress this year. Some 80,000 undocumented young people who were brought to the country by their parents reach the age of 18 every year. They were raised as Americans but have no legal status. The DREAM act would give them a path to citizenship.

## **PRISON INDUSTRIAL COMPLEX**

*“Prisons should not be industrial complexes for the underclass. We want our men home. We want full employment for our men.”* Queens resident

*“Be sure our former convicts are educated about the political process and given the right to vote”* Queens resident

*“We have a state of emergency in America because we have recidivism by default.”*  
Brooklyn resident

Too many of our city neighborhoods have been adversely affected by the prison system. One grandmother stated emphatically that we need to create hope for our young boys by providing educational and vocational opportunities and she added there needs to be jobs in the community for every man. Residents of all three boroughs spoke repeatedly about the prison system and recidivism and recommended that the platform reflect that we must:

- Build bridges with prison. Help maintain strong family ties with the prisoner. Organize communities to be effective providers of supportive services in a holistic way. Expand public health to prisons including detection and treatment of communicable diseases and create links to health providers in the community, after the prisoner returns, to ensure treatment for mental illness, addictions and other illnesses. Develop viable educational and training programs in the prisons, so that the prisoner will have skills when he or she returns to the community. Create incentives for reentry preparation
- Promote successful reintegration. Create a plan for each prisoner. Create opportunities for the community to be fully productively engaged in each prisoner's reentry. Do not release prisoners into homelessness. Provide counseling for prisoners and families. Provide employment and work opportunities. Encourage released prisoners to participate effectively within their communities.

## **TRANSPORTATION**

*"Queens is transportation hell"* -- a refrain repeated often by Queens residents

The Democratic Party's plans for revitalizing America's infrastructure and curbing our addiction to oil and fossil fuels must include increased investment in mass transit. The following convictions and recommendations were expressed at all "Listening to America" meetings:

- We know mass transit works for the environment, taking cars off the street and lowering our pollutant and carbon emissions. We know mass transit benefits low- and middle-income citizens, giving them a cheaper transportation option than driving and providing relief from the rising costs of gasoline, car insurance and parking. We also know mass transit works to improve public health, enhancing pedestrian safety and reducing instances of asthma and other respiratory afflictions. We know that efficient mass transit works for the disabled and elderly. No wonder ridership on public transportation is at its highest level nationwide since 1957.
- Yet we are not funding mass transit in our cities at a level commensurate with its benefits. As gas prices drive more and more people into the New York City subway, the weaknesses in access and service become apparent. As one attendee in Queens remarked, "Queens is almost inaccessible by public transportation, so it's almost impossible for us to get to and from work. Southeast Queens is completely inaccessible."

- We can surely find the funds to finance technological innovations, improved service and increased service without raising fares, particularly in lower income areas, for the hardworking men and women who take 10.3 billion trips on mass transit – and rising -- each year.

## WOMEN

*“All we need is respect, dignity and equality...”* Manhattan resident.

A middle-aged woman voiced this straightforward statement during the Manhattan Listening to America meeting as she urged the Democratic Party to...Reaffirm its support of the right of women to control their own bodies.... Ensure women can live safely, free from harassment and violence.... Provide equal pay for equal or comparable work.

All of these principles underlie more specific legislative initiatives supporting the sale of over-the-counter emergency contraception, ensuring free access to clinics, enhancing of the Violence Against Women Act to create more community-based domestic violence programs, strongly supporting the Fair Pay Restoration Act and demanding increased funding and staffing of enforcement agencies.

Many women also testified on education, jobs and the rights of workers, the economy, housing, health, and ending the war in Iraq. This is no surprise because feminists are Humanists.

**Feminism n. the policy, practice or advocacy of political, economic, and social equality for women.**  
**Humanism n. a concern with the needs, well-being and interests of people**

**ABOUT LISTENING TO AMERICA: AN URBAN AGENDA  
QUEENS, MANHATTAN, BROOKLYN, NEW YORK PLATFORM HEARINGS**

**QUEENS** Platform Hearing  
July 22, 2008  
Occasions Catering Hall  
127-08 Merrick Boulevard  
Jamaica, NY 11434

Volunteers 20  
Presenters 38  
Attendance 151

**MANHATTAN** Platform Hearing  
The Benjamin Cardoza School of Law  
Jacob Burns Moot Court Room  
55 Fifth Avenue  
Manhattan, New York 10003

Volunteers 23  
Presenters 62  
Attendance 352

**BROOKLYN** Platform Hearing  
Medgar Evers College  
Founders Auditorium, Bedford Building  
1650 Bedford Avenue  
Brooklyn, New York 11225

Volunteers 25  
Presenters 70  
Attendance 375

There were Convention Delegates, Platform Delegates, Organizing Committee Members and Local Elected Officials at all 3 events. All 5 Boroughs – Bronx, Brooklyn, Manhattan, Queens and Staten Island were represented at these events.

# Wages Insufficient for Median NYC Rent

Salaries and (Un)Affordable Housing in New York City

