

Council Hearing on Resolution 367
Testimony of
Walter Fields
Vice President, Political Development
Community Service Society
June 9, 2005

105 East 22nd Street
New York, NY 10010

Phone 212 254-8900
Fax 212 260-6218
www.cssny.org

David R. Jones
President &
Chief Executive Officer

Steven L. Krause
Executive Vice President &
Chief Operating Officer

BOARD OF TRUSTEES

Harvey W. Schultz
Chairperson
Janet W. Thompson
Vice Chairperson
Kofi Appenteng
Treasurer
Mark M. Edmiston
Secretary

Norman Adler
John F. Beatty
Steven Brown
Bill Chong
Sydney de Jongh
Anne Diedrick
Barbara J. Fife
Dall W. Forsythe
Adam V. Friedman
Nicholas A. Gravante, Jr.
Jonathan D. Greenberg
Bret M. Halverson, Ph.D.
Joseph R. Harbert, Ph.D.
G. Penn Holsenbeck, Esq.
Michael Horodniceanu, Ph.D., P.E.
Nancy J. Lasher
Kelly O'Neill Levy
William P. Maloney, Esq.
David J. Pollak
Alvin N. Puryear, Ph.D.
Deborah Sale
Donald W. Savelson, Esq.
David Schneider, Esq.
Sandra Silverman
Ken Sunshine
Barbara Nevins Taylor
Gregg A. Walker
Jeffery J. Weaver
Carolyn L. Wright-Lewis

HONORARY LIFE TRUSTEES

Stephen R. Aiello, Ph.D.
David N. Dinkins
Elinor C. Guggenheimer
Marian S. Heiskell
Douglas Williams

Good afternoon. My name is Walter Fields and I am the Vice President of Political Development for the Community Service Society (CSS), whose President and CEO is David R. Jones. As you know, CSS is one of this city's oldest not-for-profit organizations, representing the interests of low-income New Yorkers for 160 years. Our contributions to the city include the founding of the Columbia University School of Social Work, developing the prototype for the free lunch program for school children, aiding victims of the Titanic disaster and most recently those affected by the terrorist attack on the World Trade Center on September 11, 2001.

Most recently we issued two reports that called attention to crises in New York City's labor market: the first detailed the extent of joblessness among Black males and the second revealing the large numbers of "disconnected youth", those who are out of school and out of work, in our city. The findings of both reports prompted action by the City Council to appropriate \$10 million targeting job training and development, and moved Mayor Bloomberg to create the Mayor's Commission on Construction Opportunity.

Today I want to briefly comment on Council Resolution 367 in support of HR 2631, the “Religious Freedom Peace Tax.” At this time CSS takes no particular position on federal expenditures for military purposes but recognizes that some individuals, due to their religious beliefs, may object to the use of their tax dollars for warfare. HR 2631 raises the possibility of those taxpayers having the right to object to such uses and, instead, designate that their tax dollars be used for “life-affirming” purposes. It is an intriguing proposition and raises hope that, at a minimum, the introduction of this bill in Congress will stir a public debate over the spending priorities of the federal government. Clearly, our interest, at CSS, is in any movement in this nation toward the recognition of human service needs and the responsibility for collective concern and action.

We were invited to share our thoughts on what the targeting of “life-affirming needs,” as specified in the language in HR 2631, could mean as it relates to the social needs of residents of New York City. Clearly we would welcome any additional resources that would address the needs of the city’s most vulnerable. And sadly despite some signs of economic recovery, the poor of our city – many of whom are people of color and new immigrants – continue to suffer conditions that place them outside the mainstream of opportunity and upward mobility. Our research on Black male joblessness and disconnected youth suggests the need for a focused infusion of resources toward expanding job opportunities across industries, lowering barriers to employment, creating new opportunities for employment, and improving skills toward meeting the needs of the new,

technology driven economy. At a minimum a threshold for defining “life-affirming needs” in our city should be directing aid to those most in distress. CSS research suggests two subgroups in our city that meet that definition are Black men and young people between the ages of 16 and 24, and the focus must be on work.

Any redirection of funds should be considered carefully because the natural tendency when monies become available is to address a wide range of problems that have been lingering. Unfortunately the results of that approach is usually at the end of the day we are all left a bit bewildered and disappointed that we have not seen much progress. If HR 2631 becomes law it will be incumbent that priorities are determined for the expenditure of redirected tax receipts. If not, these so-called “life-affirming needs” will continue to undermine the overall health of our city. This is particularly important considering the fact that New York State consistently does not receive its fair share of federal tax dollars relative to the tax payments of its residents.

At a very basic level HR 2631 could force a reevaluation of our spending priorities on the state and local level by shadowing where those federal dollars would be targeted. Some degree of realignment must take place across all levels of government to create the necessary push to alleviate conditions affecting the poor and dispossessed of our city. I would urge the Council to use the introduction of Resolution 367 as an opportunity to begin a citywide dialogue on our moral obligation toward those in need and the responsibility of government, at all levels,

to intervene when the private market has proved incapable or disinterested in addressing those needs. The Community Service Society stands ready to work with the Council in creating conditions in our city so that all New Yorkers can share in the promise of opportunity and prosperity that is synonymous with our city. I appreciate the invitation to share our thoughts with you today. Thank you.