Written by Julianne Malveaux, NNPA Columnist
Thursday, 12 March 2009 12:18

I was watching the periphrastic pundit, actor and neo-economist Ben Stein on CBS Sunday morning pontificating.

He said that if President Obama offered more happy talk, more conviction that times would get better, then they would.

I was watching him just a few minutes after I had a conversation with a sister who lost her job the same week her husband did. They were confident that they could make it through three months, thanks to savings, but didn't know what would happen to them after that. Stein wants happy talk, sister wants a job.

The real deal is that the jobs are hard to come by. To be sure, at any point in time, some folks are hiring even as the market is hemorrhaging jobs. Eight hundred fifty thousand people lost their jobs last month – or 851,000 to fully accurately reflect the report that was released by the Bureau of Labor Statistics.

The unemployment rate shot up, not unexpectedly, to 8.1 percent. That is only one measure of unemployment. If we add up the people who have dropped out of the labor market, as well as those who are working part time but need full time work, we are really talking about a rate of 14.8 percent. That means one in seven Americans doesn't have the work she needs.

When we break it down, we are talking a rate of 7.3 percent for Whites, and 13.4 percent, almost double, for African-Americans. When we make the appropriate adjustments for those who are stopping out, dropping out, or underutilized, the rate for African- Americans is 24.4 percent.

That means that one in four African American people cannot find work! That means that one in four African American people cannot find work! That means for all the talk of recession, the African American community is in depression. There has been precious little recognition of this fact in this era that some would describe as "post racial". Instead, there is much talk of the boat we are in, the same boat. Some folks are riding, and some folks are rowing.

This high African-American unemployment rate translates into multiple layers of misery. Some churches see their collections off. People are giving, but they are giving less, because they have much less to give. Some nonprofit organizations see giving off, for the same reasons. People are inclined to be generous but you can't get blood from a stone. From a college perspective, when unemployment rises, parents find themselves in distress that trickles down to students.

Bills go unpaid, graduations are imperiled, and colleges juggle their tendency to collect on unpaid bills and provide some compassion to those students who need a break. America needs a break! Perhaps the stimulus package provides some of it, but if the truth is to be told, those best prepared to benefit from the stimulus are those least hurt by this depression.

We need to call it like it is for the African American community. The majority community may feel our pain one of these days, but in the shortest run, we remain two Americans. When we

unpack stimulus, too many are relying on goodwill to have benefits trickle down to the African-American community.

Even in stimulus, there must be some discussion of affirmative action and equal participation in the $787 billion that is being spent on jump-starting our economy. Can we jump start the economy and leave some people out? If we are not careful, we will see better macroeconomic numbers and little relief in the African American community.

The United Negro College fund (www.uncf.org), the organization that supports the 39 private HBCUs in our nation, has taken steps to help our colleges weather the storm. They are raising money to provide emergency scholarships to our students with greatest need.

Of course, they are asking folks to help, and of course, those of us who are able to help will do so. UNCF just celebrated its 65th birthday, lifting up Black Enterprise publisher Earl Graves and New York education booster Caroline Kennedy, as honorees. The organization is one of the many attempting to buffer the depression that is brutalizing the African American community.

Still, this depression is real and devastating, and any gathering of our people brings tales of economic distress – joblessness, foreclosure, homelessness, and more. While this new stimulus package is not perfect, it is the largest we have seen. Will the African American community benefit from the billions of dollars pumped into the economy? Are we prepared to fight for our share of the stimulus package, and of this budget?

Julianne Malveaux is President of Bennett College for Women. She can be reached at presoffice@bennett.edu.