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BEWARE THE MANTRA OF PRIVATIZATION

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by Fernando Ferrer

I entered public service with a commitment to make a difference in people's lives. Having grown up with heroes like President John F. Kennedy, Robert F. Kennedy and Martin Luther King, Jr. as flesh and blood role models, I understand that making a difference in people's lives is the basis for government by the people and for the people. Indeed, my passion for this worthwhile ideal fuels my opposition to across-the-board privatization of city services without regard to what works and makes sense.

There are those who advocate using tax dollars to hire private concerns that would deliver virtually all the services that the government now delivers. These advocates are really opposing government efforts to make a difference in people's lives. It is government's role to ensure a level playing field and provide those services that help society function. Government's role involves no more and no less than providing a safe and secure environment in which people can freely co-exist. If government fails to deliver on this basic premise, the social compact that attracts people to a free and open society ultimately deteriorates.

A balanced approach to privatization recognizes the role of change, of new needs and of the entrepreneurial spirit. Government must deliver services effectively and efficiently. This includes intelligent partnerships with community and faith-based organization to deliver economic development, housing, and other services that build and rebuild communities. It also includes hiring skilled professionals to design projects and firms with expertise to build infrastructure.

Most of the debate over privatization occurs over the Giuliani Administration's future plans for the Health and Hospitals Corporation (HHC) in today's ever-changing health care environment. While it appears that the battle to keep HHC facilities has been won, serious concerns exist when the rebuilding of a facility in another borough effectively downsizes the health care institutions and includes plans to lease much of the site for other, including non-health, uses.

Any study of workplace effectiveness recognizes the need for highly motivated workers. Study after study show the most productive workers receive adequate compensation and, at the most basic level, they get adequate wages through a collective bargaining system. Misguided, short-term efforts to realize a quick buck in both the private and public sector often eschew the use of unionized workers. Look at privatization as a scheme to substitute minimum wage workers for civil service workers who have the skills and training to perform their jobs. A recent example is the attempt to privatize the security personnel at HHC facilities.

I opposed the privatization of Coney Island Hospital, and thankfully, the corporation agreed that it was wrong to attempt such a sale to a company that eventually went bankrupt. We must be equally careful when it comes to incremental efforts to introduce privatization at HHC facilities.

Our health system must be well staffed in order to provide quality care and to meet the needs of the community. In addition to having a sufficient number of quality medical providers, we must have quality security personnel. Officers who currently secure our public hospitals are unionized, receive benefits and are trained for their job.

Efforts to privatize these services certainly must be scrutinized to determine the long-term impact of the capacity of public health care facilities to provide quality care in a safe environment, but more importantly, I will remain opposed to the displacement of union workers whenever this may occur. Rather than blindly cutting appropriately trained HHC security personnel in a penny-wise, dollar-foolish scheme to save some money, it makes greater sense to efficiently deploy HHC police officers.

I have advocated against privatization of our public hospitals, which I feel could only compromise the long-term health care delivery available to our city's poorest residents, similarly, we must not allow efforts that could compromise the safety of patients, visitors or workers at municipal hospitals. These and other efforts at privatization only demonstrate HHC's need for an intelligent and comprehensive long-term plan for operating its facilities, with priority given to the health and well being of those it is intended to serve.

The use of trained skilled workers makes all the difference. Where private firms win bids to build a school or a road or a bridge or some other public structure, the successful firms employ unionized workers.

The more effective social service contractors, including faith-based organizations, pay workers union scale and the public gets the benefit in continuity of service from motivated workers.

Unfortunately, the mantra of privatization becomes the answer in the minds of misguided policy makers and their supporters when they look to address failing schools, problems at the Department of Buildings and their own failings in dealing with other governmental and quasi-governmental agencies. --They sell self-certification of construction plans and projects at the risk of public safety. They disguise the use of private ambulances as a service enhancement while they reduce EMS tours and fail to improve emergency medical response times.

At a time when the news media look for the next building collapse or façade to fall, let's look at how the Giuliani Administration turned its Department of Buildings into a cash cow rather than a public safety agency. The administration, through its self-certification programs, allows architects and engineers responsible to private parties to approve their work. At the same time, the filing and other fees generate more revenue than the department spends to ensure building safety. Want to ensure safety? Hire qualified civil servants to examine plans and inspect buildings to ensure safety code compliance.

This administration laudably has made use of ambulances from the voluntary and private hospitals. Regrettably, rather than using these private ambulances to supplement the existing level of service, this administration cut EMS tours, reducing service and threatening lives.

Privatization can mean intelligent partnerships with non-governmental concerns – non-profit, private, and faith-based and community organizations – which can help government more effectively and compassionately serve its citizenry. But privatization also includes misguided missteps that impede service delivery but still provide a windfall to the private firm. Government must carefully assess efforts to privatize to ensure that they result in an improvement of conditions, and not a handout to some entrepreneur at taxpayer expense.

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