

THE WHITE HOUSE

Office of the First Lady

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For Immediate Release

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REMARKS BY THE FIRST LADY

AT A GREATER DC CARES EVENT

Renaissance Hotel

Washington, D.C.

1:12 P.M. EDT

MRS. OBAMA: Thank you. Thank you so much. Well, that's very -- please -- said that is just a very nice welcome. It's an example of how the Obama family has felt welcomed to this community since January -- what was that date we got inaugurated? (Laughter.)

But good afternoon, and I am delighted and honored to be here to celebrate with you. I want to thank Mayde for that kind introduction. We did get to spend a lovely lunch together, and she tasted some of the fruits of the garden. They were good. (Laughter.) I also want to thank, as I kindly referred to them as the two Matts -- Matt Schuyler, who's the current chair, and the incoming chair, Matt Mitchell, for their hard work. I got a chance to meet them backstage.

So I'm just delighted to be able to join you all today, and I'm here simply to say thank you for the work that you've done and to help celebrate all of your accomplishments, the work that you've done to help make D.C. a truly wonderful community. It has been so nice to call this city our second home.

As you know, the President has said that America is facing some of the greatest challenges it's faced in generations, and as a result, Washington can only do so much. I think probably each and every one of you in this room realizes that. There's only so much that government can do.

As has been the case throughout our history, communities are built and rebuilt by regular people: folks working in businesses, philanthropists, foundations, and volunteers, all of them coming together to find solutions to these types of challenges. And during this time we are going to need everyone, and that -- everyone to rededicate themselves to this type of community-building, and we're

going to need people to basically take hold of this kind of ethic of service and make a personal commitment to helping get this country back on the right direction.

And I believe that we're in a unique moment in history. Maybe you're seeing the same thing. I'm feeling it as I'm traveling not just around D.C. but around the country. But people really want to get involved. They really want to. They're looking for a way to turn their frustration, excitement, anxiety into action. And the recent passage of the Serve America Act -- the federal government is tripling its contribution to volunteerism, and people are responding to that investment. Applications, as we're seeing for service opportunities, are up by record numbers, and that's a very good thing.

And with the knowledge that, as Barack said throughout his campaign and throughout his presidency, that ordinary people can do some extraordinary things if they're given the proper tools and support, my husband is asking us to come together to help lay a new foundation for growth.

And that's really where all of you come in, where you've been coming in for years and years and years through your work. In order to make service a part of every citizen's life, we need to ensure that we have the capacity to welcome those volunteers in. And that's easier said than done. We want to be able to put folks' goodwill into good use. We need to make sure that every hour of time that they commit is spent doing something that's actually going to make a difference, that every dollar contributed is actually going to go to moving some real solutions forward.

And I realize that that's easier said than done. Having built an organization myself from the ground up -- as you heard from my background, I've kind of floated through my career, building stuff and then moving on and building something else -- I know what non-profits, foundations and social entrepreneurs face. I understand it. I know how hard it is to get the money to pay for fundraising, and accountants, and volunteer coordinators, to get all the technology that you really need to make the work happen; that this just doesn't happen out of goodwill, that it takes real resources to move things forward.

And I know what it's like to worry about making payroll, which I know many of you are going through in these tough times. I know that you're laying off consultants and staff members because you're seeing dollars dwindle. I know what it's like to write need statements and come up with measurable outcomes and -- (laughter) -- yes, we all know that -- segregating funds, completing AmeriCorps progress reports. I've done all that. And it's necessary, but at times it can drive you nuts. (Laughter.) So I know that service doesn't just happen. And I know how hard you work behind the scenes to make it happen, and a lot of times people take it for granted because if the work is getting done, then nobody really cares how. And when it stops happening, they wonder why, but often don't have the resources to step in.

So I want to congratulate you all on doing what it takes to make these programs work, and just knowing what it takes to keep the operations going that you don't even get a chance sometimes to

celebrate what you've done to realize to step back and look at the impact that you're having. So I honor all of you for the effort, and hope that you can, if not today but tomorrow and in the coming weeks, pat yourselves on the back for the work that you've been doing, because we're going to need you to do even more.

When I look over this room, I think about my days when I worked at Public Allies. I headed that program in Chicago before I moved into the university, and that organization allowed me to work with more than 30 Chicago organizations every single year, placing AmeriCorps members with them so that they could expand their services. We placed young people with organizations working on education and youth development groups, environmental groups, neighborhood, economic development groups, all types of groups all throughout the city of Chicago. And I saw first-hand through that work the variety of neighborhood and community needs that exist out there, and how hard it is for these groups to meet that need with the resources that they have. So they were excited to get these young people. However naïve and untrained they were, they ate these Allies up.

And we recruited some of the best kids across the city of Chicago. For every young person that we recruited at a great institution like Northwestern, DePaul or the University of Chicago -- we even recruited kids from Harvard Law School -- we also recruited someone from Cabrini Green or from Little Village or North Lawndale. And through my work with Public Allies I realized that the next generation of leaders was just as likely to come from poor and working-class neighborhoods as they were to come from some of the top colleges around the country.

My time at Public Allies also gave me the opportunity to work with John McKnight and Jody Kretzmann, who developed the Asset-Based Community Development approach to neighborhood development, and that really influenced how we worked with communities. Some of you may be familiar with this approach, but the approach acknowledges that all of us, every single one of us breathing in this community, in this planet, those of us serving and those of us who are being served, that we're all both half-full and half-empty.

We all have skills and talents that make us good friends, family members, workers, and leaders, and we also have needs and shortcomings that come along with those strengths. We can't do well serving these communities, I learned with Public Allies, if we believe that we, the givers, are the only ones that are half-full, and that everybody we're serving is half-empty. That has been the theme of my work in community for my entire life -- that there are assets and gifts out there in communities, and that our job as good servants and as good leaders is not only just being humble, but it's having the ability to recognize those gifts in others, and help them put those gifts into action. Communities are filled with assets that we need to better recognize and mobilize if we're really going to make a difference, and Public Allies helped me see that.

At Public Allies, we endeavored to do this also by bringing these young people together from diverse backgrounds. We worked with African Americans, Asian Americans, Latinos, Native Americans, white,

gay, straight, you name it, college graduates, ex-felons, we brought them all together every week to work in a group.

And truly, that's where the magic happened, when you saw those kids from all those different backgrounds really tussling it out and trying to figure out their philosophies in the world in relationship to their beliefs and stereotypes.

The law school graduates realized they had a lot to learn about how communities really work and how to engage people. There's nothing funnier than to watch a kid who believes they know it all -- (laughter) -- actually come across some real tough problems in communities that test every fiber of what they believe.

And then you see the young person with a GED realize that they could go to college because they're working with kids who are just as smart or not smart as them who are going, and they gain a sense of the possibilities that they have. They know that their ideas are just as good, sometimes even better. That's when those lights go off. That's what we think about when we think of Asset-Based Community Development -- that a kid from Harvard and a kid with a GED are both full of promise.

Everyone learned to build authentic relationships with one another where they could recognize each other's strengths and provide honest feedback on their challenges. They gained a blend of confidence and humility that prepared them to be able to lead from the streets to the executive suites.

You could take any one of those Allies -- and it's not just Allies, there are kids like this all over the country, and you could plop them down in any community, and they would know how to build relationships. You know, that's not just important in non-profit, that's important in life. These are the kind of gifts that we can give people through service.

And as we move forward to implement the Serve America Act, my hope is that the Office of Social Innovation that's going to do some of this funding will help us identify the wonderful concepts out there like Asset-Based Community Development. There are other wonderful approaches out there that are working in communities all over this country. This office hopefully will identify more of them and help them grow and develop the best solutions, and replicate those ideas throughout the country.

I also hope that these efforts will help us encourage philanthropy that is more responsive to the needs of the organizations. I was fortunate at Public Allies Chicago to have some pretty significant major investors -- multi-year grants, as we called them back then. I guess they still exist. (Laughter). But when you have that kind of long-term investment from foundations and corporations, that allowed me to do things like hire a development staff, or an office manager, to pay for technology that would help support this work. And you know, again, this work doesn't happen by itself. You need staff and resources to do it.

That core of organizational support made it possible for me to meet those measurable outcomes, and I hope that more philanthropists in this time will step up and have a longer-term investment approach to organizations like yours, because effective outcomes come from effective organizations, and if we are able to shed some light on the work that you're doing and the need for financial support, we can get the foundation community thinking even more critically about building the sustainable kind of support over time.

We need foundations and philanthropists to provide the integral support for our community organizations. But we also need those community organizations to provide support for all these volunteers we're recruiting now. We need to harness this amazing amount of goodwill that we're generating through this administration in a way that ensures that we serve all Americans to the best of our ability.

So once again, we're going to need you. As tired as you may be, we're going to need you. So that's why I'm here -- (laughter) -- to say thank you, because we're going to be tapping you more and more. (Applause.) Now is the time that we have to connect with one another and share good ideas and hold each other up and give each other that private counsel when the dollars are running short and hope is a little harder to find.

But that's why times like this, opportunities to gather and celebrate, are important to just get us back on track. Right now we are going to be channeling hopefully thousands of volunteers in your direction. America is looking to engage. But as you know with volunteers, if they're not connected to something meaningful, if their experience isn't organized and makes sense, then we lose them forever.

So we hope to be able to provide some of the resources that you need, but we also need you to prepare for the challenge. And if we do that and continue to harness this energy, we can not only change the way this nation feels about service, but we can change the way the world sees us. So many people will need a place to funnel their talents and their energies. Volunteerism is one of those win-win situations that makes absolute sense in this point in our nation's history.

So celebrate today. Eat up. Drink that tea. (Laughter.) And we look forward to working with you in the years to come. Thank you so much. (Applause.)

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1:29 P.M. EDT