



2010 National Conference on Volunteering and Service

Posted by Charlie Anderson on July 07, 2010 at 05:30 PM EDT

As she wrote on the White House blog the last week, Domestic Policy Council Director Melody Barnes gave the keynote address at the opening plenary session for the 2010 National Conference on Volunteering and Service. We have included her full remarks below.

The White House

Melody Barnes' Remarks at the National Conference on Volunteering and Service

June 28, 2010

Radio City Music Hall - New York, NY

1:30 PM EDT

Hello! How's everyone doing out there? It is great to see so many familiar faces. First, I would like to thank Mayor Bloomberg for hosting us here in the great City of New York and for his consistent leadership in service and social innovation, particularly his work on the Cities of Service initiative.

We are all indebted to Patrick Corvington, CEO of the Corporation for National and Community Service, and Michelle Nunn of the Points of Light Institute for their great leadership – and of course, thank you to the staff at CNCS and Points of Light Institute for all that they have done to make today possible.

I'm also thrilled that Senator Warner – from my home state of Virginia -- is here as a supporter of service and innovation.

Let's give all of them and all those who have helped pull this fantastic event together a round of applause.

I am excited to join all of you who have dedicated your lives to serving your communities and giving others the opportunity to do the same. I can't believe it's already been a year since the last National Conference in San Francisco, but what a tremendous year it has been for service.

As you well know, our nation faces a daunting set of challenges. But, from day one, the President has acted on the principle that "service is a solution" – that service is a critical tool as we address our national priorities: education, health care, energy, and economic recovery.

The President and First Lady have always believed that the best ideas don't come from Washington. They come from individuals and communities all across the country. That's why the President tasked me with creating the Office of Social Innovation and Civic Participation as part of the Domestic Policy Council in the White House – to find the best ways to invest in and scale programs that work and find ways to help communities better solve their own problems. We know that we need to get the policies right, but we also know that Americans everywhere are already working to make a difference – and they deserve our support.

That's why one of the President's top priorities in his first 100 days was to sign the Edward M. Kennedy Serve America Act. We worked with our colleagues on both sides of the aisle in Congress and with those of you who have been working in the trenches for years to give the American people more opportunities to serve.

This legislation bears the name of a consummate public servant and guiding light for so many of us, and Senator Kennedy worked tirelessly with his close friend Senator Hatch to pass it. The Act provides the greatest growth in service opportunities in a generation, including an increase in the size of AmeriCorps from 75,000 members to 250,000 by 2017.

Included in the Serve America Act is the exciting new Social Innovation Fund or SIF. The SIF will support innovative and potentially transformative community solutions that are having an impact at the local level and have the potential to serve even more communities. During the past year, the Corporation for National and Community Service crafted the fund with help from thousands of you who lent your feedback and ideas, and CNCS will be announcing the first grantees later this summer.

At last year's conference, the First Lady also asked every American to do their part when she launched United We Serve – an ongoing effort to get everyone involved in addressing our most pressing challenges. Since then, millions of Americans have stepped up to the plate. And this summer, the First Lady is calling on us again through United We Serve: Let's Read, Let's Move. Working together, we can reduce the summer learning loss and tackle childhood obesity through exercise and healthy eating. Already, federal agencies, non-profit organizations from 4-H to Reach Out and Read, and individuals are stepping up to answer that call. We hope many more of you – national organizations and individual citizens, alike – will do the same.

During the past year, we've come a long way, and we've achieved a lot together. So let me say: thank YOU for your work over the last year and the many years that preceded it. YOU made this happen. YOU living proof that service isn't separate from our national priorities, instead it's pivotal to solving them.

But let me say -- to borrow a phrase you may have heard from the President -- we have more work to do.

While there is undoubtedly momentum in the right direction, the problems we face are daunting. Our nation is still on the long path to recovery, and an oil spill – the worst environmental disaster in our nation’s history – has once again devastated the people of the Gulf Coast who have met so much hardship with resilience and determination.

In fact, it’s in times like these that we need the power of service and social innovation more than ever. That’s why the theme of this conference is: “it’s up to you”. As the President and First Lady have said over and over, government cannot address these problems alone. We have to marshal the talents, resources, and ingenuity of people in communities across the country – people like you and the thousands you represent.

There are many ways to make a difference: from military service to public service; from serving as a teacher, firefighter, police officer, or librarian, to running a local nonprofit that addresses unmet needs in a community. But the common thread is that those who serve do so for a reason larger than themselves. They take responsibility – YOU take responsibility -- not just for your own health and well-being, but also for your neighbors’. Let me give you some evidence to support that statement.

Is anyone here from Pennsylvania?! Let’s talk about what’s going on there – an innovative partnership between City Year, Communities in Schools, and Johns Hopkins Talent Development. Called “Diplomas Now,” the initiative is focused on solving the dropout crisis. Well, the program started as a pilot in a Philadelphia school and began showing very promising results –an 83% drop in failing math students, an 80% drop in failing English students, and an 85% drop in student suspensions. Because success should breed success, Diplomas Now has expanded to Chicago, Los Angeles, New Orleans and San Antonio – and is looking to grow even more.

And think about Youth Villages, which Sonal Shah – the Director of my Social Innovation team -- visited in Memphis as part of our Community Solutions Tour. Anyone here from Tennessee?! (Pause) All right. In 1994, Youth Villages decided to focus on a home-based model to help children struggling to overcome serious emotional or behavior challenges. Since then, they have seen remarkable results, with large numbers of kids integrating successfully into their communities while being served in a more cost-effective way. For that reason, Youth Villages can now be found in 11 states and the District of Columbia. Imagine if we could help every child with these challenges reintegrate into their community? Youth Villages tells us it’s possible.

These organizations show that innovation is about learning, changing and improving; they are enterprising in their use of service and volunteerism, and they are driving real results. Whether it's turning around schools that are failing our kids, engaging our seniors in promoting healthier lives for their peers, or preserving America's great outdoors – service and innovation are integral to solving our national challenges.

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The message I bring to you today is this: our success as a nation depends now more than ever on YOU. Your work to transform individual lives and communities is vital to finding new and innovative ways to meet our country's most pressing challenges. The solutions you are developing in your communities can be used to strengthen, reform and support our schools; help us bring quality, affordable health care to everyone; build a sustainable energy future; and ensure economic recovery, economic opportunity and economic growth in every community in the country.

To achieve at that scale, we have to come together – the public, private, nonprofit, academic, and philanthropic communities. We need to share best practices, share new ideas, and invest in what works. And we need to support a new generation of leaders who can build on the great progress we have made together.

Let me leave you with one example. Ashley Sloan where are you? Please stand up and let us see you! [Pause] Ashley engaged in voluntary service on an 'Alternative Spring Break' while at the University of Kansas. That experience motivated her to join AmeriCorps NCCC as a team leader.

One year after her NCCC experience ended, Hurricanes Katrina and Rita hit the Gulf Coast and Ashley felt like she had to do something. She joined the St. Bernard Project -- an innovative organization that gets people back into their homes -- when it was in its nascent stages. And four years later, Ashley's still committed – managing dozens of other AmeriCorps members and celebrating their 280th house built.

As the Gulf Coast and other communities across the country continue to face daunting challenges, we are called to serve and can take heart that tens of thousands of AmeriCorps members and millions of volunteers are working alongside Ashley to provide vital services and needed support.

You are the leaders who inspire people like Ashley Sloan and provide them with the concrete tools to make a difference. That's why even in the face of incredible obstacles, I know that with leaders like all of you, bright days are ahead. We can do it. We can succeed. We can share

talent and expertise and resolve to build an even stronger America. Thank you and thank you for all you do.

And now, I'd like to turn your attention to a video from our fearless leader in service, the First Lady of the United States, Michelle Obama.

Thank you so very much for your attention, and have a wonderful conference!