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Remarks at the African American Policy in Action Leadership Conference

November 9, 2011

Everybody, please have a seat. It is wonderful to see all of you. I've got some old friends here—[*laughter*]—not old in years, but been knowing you. It is wonderful to see all of you.

I want to, first of all, thank Heather, who is doing outstanding work. Heather has my complete confidence. She has my ear. And so when you're talking to her, you're talking to me, which means she's going to be getting a lot of phone calls, I know. [*Laughter*] But she's up to the task and we're very proud of her.

I want to thank all of you who are here. We've got some elected officials. Mayor Nutter, congratulations. I know we had a little bit of election work going on yesterday. I was in Philly yesterday, did not say anything about football during my visit. [*Laughter*] Didn't say anything about football games. Mayor Mark Mallory is here. There he is, right there, Cincinnati. We have—I think Congressman [Congresswoman]* Donna Edwards is around here. There she is, right here. And she's been a great partner.

And of course, we've got leaders from all across the country. So many of you have worked so diligently during what has been one of the toughest times in our country's history in order to provide opportunity, to make sure that communities were able to hang on during difficult times, and begin to rebuild again in the wake of an extraordinary financial crisis and the deepest recession we've seen since the Great Depression.

Obviously, we have enormous challenges. The unemployment rate in the African American community has always historically been higher than the norm. And since the unemployment rate generally is high right now, it is way too high when it comes to the African American community. Many of the challenges that existed before the crisis have been worsened with respect to opportunities for decent housing, with respect to making sure that our schools are equipped to prepare our kids for the 21st century.

So we've got a lot of work to do. But the report that has been prepared that I know our teams are going to be talking about that will be released, I think is a compilation of everything we've done over the last 3 years that has not only lessened the severity of the crisis for millions of people, kept millions of folks out of poverty, made sure that millions of folks still had unemployment benefits, health care, et cetera, but also talks about the foundations that we are laying so that as the economy recovers, the African American community and communities all across the country of every stripe are going to have an opportunity to finally begin to rebuild so that we are seeing good, solid, middle class jobs with good benefits that families who are desperate for their piece of the American Dream, that they're going to be able to achieve it.

Now, some of these strategies are longer term: all the good work that we've done, for example, in education. The payoff is not going to be tomorrow. It's not going to be next year. It's going to be 5 years from now and 10 years from now as we steadily see improvement in the performance of our public schools.

When it comes to health care, we are already seeing enormous improvements in terms of funding for preventive care, for community health clinics. But full implementation is going to

* White House correction.

be taking place starting in 2013. We'll have those exchanges, and suddenly families who did not have access to health care will be in a position to get it.

So some of these things are going to be phased in over time, and will not bear full fruit for some years to come. But as all of you know, we've got a sense of urgency right now—the fierce urgency of now—when it comes to putting people back to work. And many of you have been engaged in pushing Congress to pass the "American Jobs Act." This is the only plan that—out there—that independent economists have said would put people to work right now.

It's been estimated that it would grow the economy by as much as an additional 2 percent of GDP; put as many as 1.9 million people back to work; would be targeted at not only getting teachers back in the classroom and construction workers on the job rebuilding America, but also targeting the long-term unemployed; allowing communities that have seen more than their fair share of foreclosures to be able to take those properties and start rebuilding them; improving our infrastructure in vital ways that will spur on economic development; summer youth programs, so that our young people can start getting on track and getting in those habits of work that are so important to instill a sense of responsibility, and a payoff for behaving responsibly.

All those things are contained in the "American Jobs Act." Now, as you know, so far the Senate has just said no, not because these are ideas that are partisan; these are ideas that traditionally have been supported by Democrats and Republicans alike. Their argument for why they're passing it—they haven't passed them so far has been that, well, they don't like how we're paying for it, because we ask, for example, folks who make more than a million dollars a year to pay a little bit more in taxes in order to make sure that our economy is strong.

The American people are behind us on this. Not just Democrats and Independents, but Republicans support many of the ideas in this bill, and so we're going to keep on pushing very hard, and we're going to need your help to continue to mobilize communities to focus on how we can put people to work right now.

In addition, though, we also want to continue to find ways where we don't have to wait for Congress, where are initiatives that we can take right now administratively that would make a difference in the communities that all of you represent. And so part of the function of this gathering is for all of you to share your best ideas, your best practices. What are things we can get implemented in the next 3 months? Where are areas where you see a potential difference being made?

I'll just give you one example. We, on our own initiative, identified the need for small businesses, who in these difficult economic times have some cash flow problems. We said, you know what, let's speed up payments to them. They've already done the work, or they're in the process of doing the work, and the Federal Government likes to sit on that money until the last day. [*Laughter*] Let's see if we can send them that check a little bit sooner so that they can put that money back to work.

And obviously, African American businesses typically are small businesses, so this is something that can benefit folks right away, and we can start seeing a difference in our communities.

I want to make sure that those are the kinds of ideas that all of you are providing to us, sharing with our Cabinet Secretaries, sharing with our staffs. And what we want to do following up on the report about what we've already done is hopefully 3 months from now, 6 months

from now, we'll be able to go back and say, here's some additional steps that we took based on community input.

So I just want to—so use today as an opportunity to share ideas with us. We're going to have breakout sessions. Let's do some brainstorming; we want your input, we want your ideas. At the end of this—the conference, I've asked Valerie Jarrett as well as Gene Sperling, who is my chief economic coordinator, the head of the National Economic Council, to come back and hear what ideas were proposed.

But the last point I want to make is this—and I made this point just recently when we were dedicating the new King Memorial—we have been through tougher times before. Our parents have been through tougher times; our grandparents have been through tougher times. We know tough times. And what we also know, though, is that if we are persistent, if we are unified, and we remain hopeful, then we'll get through these tough times and better days lie ahead.

So I just want everybody to participate here in a spirit of persistence, determination, and unity. And if you maintain that spirit, then I'm confident that not only will the American—the African American community emerge from these difficult economic times stronger than we were before, but this entire Nation is going to come out more unified, better equipped to deal with the challenges of the 21st century than we were before.

So I appreciate all of you. God bless you. God bless America.

NOTE: The President spoke at 11:54 a.m. in the South Court Auditorium at the Dwight D. Eisenhower Executive Office Building. In his remarks, he referred to Heather A. Higginbottom, Deputy Director, Office of Management and Budget; Mayor Michael A. Nutter of Philadelphia, PA; Mayor Mark Mallory of Cincinnati, OH; and Senior Adviser to the President Valerie B. Jarrett.

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