Administration of Barack Obama, 2012

Remarks to Consumer Financial Protection Bureau Employees
January 6, 2012

Thank you. Well, it is wonderful to see all of you. I thought I would just drop by to help your new Director move in. [*Laughter*] He's been a little busy. So I thought maybe some boxes, a little plant. [*Laughter*]

I also just wanted to say hello to all of you who have just been doing extraordinary work in standing up what I think is going to be one of the most important agencies for people that there is. And I know that all of you have devoted enormous amounts of time and energy, and many of you are here making significant sacrifices with your families to make sure that this agency gets up and running really well. And so I just wanted to say thank you to all of you.

Let me begin by saying a few words about the latest economic news. This morning we learned that American businesses added another 212,000 jobs last month. Altogether, more private sector jobs were created in 2011 than any year since 2005. And there are a lot of people that are still—{*applause*]—there are a lot of people that are still hurting out there. After losing more than 8 million jobs in the recession, obviously, we have a lot more work to do. But it is important for the American people to recognize that we've now added 3.2 million new private sector jobs over the last 22 months, nearly 2 million new jobs last year alone. So after shedding jobs for more than a decade, our manufacturing sector is also adding jobs 2 years in a row now. So we're making progress. We're moving in the right direction.

And one of the reasons for this is the tax cut for working Americans that we put in place last year. And when Congress returns, they should extend the middle class tax cut for all of this year to make sure that we keep this recovery going. It's the right thing to do. There should not be delay. There should not be a lot of drama. We should get it done.

And the American people, I think, rightly understand that there are still a lot of struggles that people are going through out there. A lot of families are still having a tough time. A lot of small businesses are still having a tough time. But we're starting to rebound. We're moving in the right direction. We have made real progress. Now is not the time to stop. So I would urge Congress to make sure that they stay on top of their jobs, to make sure that everybody else is able to enjoy, hopefully, an even more robust recovery in 2012.

So the economy is moving in the right direction. We're creating jobs on a consistent basis. We're not going to let up, not until everybody who wants to find a good job can find one. But we have a responsibility to do even more than just try to recover from this devastating recession and financial crisis. We have a responsibility to make sure that the economy that we're rebuilding is one where middle class families feel like they can get ahead again. A lot of the problems that we're dealing with are problems that existed even before the recession, even before the financial crisis. For a decade or more, middle class families felt like they were treading water, that they were losing ground.

And what we want to do is make sure not just that we're getting back to the status quo, we want to make sure that we're dealing with those underlining problems. Getting to a point where middle class families feel like they can get ahead again, where hard work pays off again, where everybody gets a fair shot and everybody does their fair share and everybody is playing by the same set of rules.

And that's where all of you come in. Every one of you here has a critical role to play in making sure that everybody plays by the same rules. To make sure that the big banks on Wall Street play by the same rules as community banks on Main Street. To make sure that the rules of the road are enforced and that a few bad actors in the financial sector can't break the law, can't cheat working families, can't threaten our entire economy all over again.

That's your mission: to make sure that the American people have somebody in their corner, that American consumers have somebody who's got their back. And you finally got a great Director who is tailormade to lead this agency in Richard Cordray.

You've also got an extraordinary team that is lined up behind me here, who did a great job in getting this agency up and running and are going to continue to show extraordinary leadership in all the various issues that you're going to be addressing. And I also want to give a special shout-out to the woman who dreamt up this agency and spent so much time turning it into a reality, our friend Elizabeth Warren.

Just to be a little more specific, millions of working Americans use financial products like credit cards and student loans and mortgages. And that's a good thing. These products have a tremendous potential to make people's lives better—to buy products, to earn an education, to afford a home, to raise a family. And we all use them. But when they're sold in an irresponsible fashion they can also make life brutally hard on people. They can turn the dreams of a family into a nightmare. Things like hidden fees and traps on credit cards and student loans cost working American billions of dollars. Things like subprime loans and skyrocketing interest that you can't escape can not only bring families to their knees, but the entire economy to its knees.

And Richard just mentioned the example of this elderly couple that we met when we were in Ohio yesterday. These are folks—the gentleman was a marine who served in Korea. They had been married for 42 years. He had worked all his life; they had poured their savings into this home.

Because of a code violation—obviously, they're on a fixed income, they don't have a lot of money—they thought, well, maybe we can get a loan to make some modest repairs. And what initially was promised as an $8,000 line of credit to make these repairs, ended up being an $80,000 debt with no repairs that threatened them going into foreclosure.

And those kinds of stories are replicated all across the country. And it not only hurts those individuals, it hurts the entire economy. That shouldn't happen, not in America. And that's why we're here. We're here to put an end to stories like these.

And already, your work is making a difference. The "Know Before You Owe" campaign you've been working on for months is doing three big things. It's making home loan applications more transparent, so that families will know what they owe on their mortgages. It's making it easier for students to compare financial aid packages and know what they owe each month when they graduate. I could have used that. [*Laughter*] It's making—in fact, I've got a law school classmate here who, she probably went through the same thing I did. [*Laughter*] It's making credit card agreements shorter and simpler, so that credit card holders will know what they owe and what they're getting into. And I know that folks all across America have been sending in their stories to help shape these new initiatives.

This is not something where it's just a Washington top-down process. You are gathering the experiences of individual families, seeing how they got hurt, how they might have gotten cheated. And that's helping to define how you enforce these rules. And that's vitally important.

And now that Richard is your Director, you can finally exercise the full power that this agency has been given to protect consumers under the law. Now that he's here, irresponsible debt collectors and payday lenders and independent mortgage servicers and loan providers, they're all bound by the same rules as everybody else. No longer are consumers left alone to face the risk of unfair or deceptive or abusive practices—not anymore.

So we can make sure that folks don't lose their homes or their life savings just because somebody saw them as an easy target. We can make sure that students don't start out in life saddled with debt that they can never pay back just because of a lousy deal. We can safeguard families and seniors and veterans from toxic financial products. We can help give everybody the clear and transparent information that they need to make informed financial decisions and have companies compete for their business in an open and honest way.

That's Richard's commitment. That's my commitment. That's the commitment of everybody standing on this stage. And that's your commitment. That's why this agency is so important.

So I want to thank all of you for choosing to serve your country in these challenging times. Your mission is extraordinarily important. It's vital to the strength of our economy. It's really important to the security of working families. And I know that it might be personal for some of you. You may know a friend or a family member whose life was turned upside down because of some of these unsavory practices that this agency is designed to root out, and maybe you were then determined to prevent that from happening to somebody else. Now you can. And we're not going to let those folks down all across the country.

When I meet Americans all across the country or I read letters that I get every night, they really don't ask for much. They're not looking for a handout; they're not looking for special treatment. They just want a fair shake; they just want a fair deal. And we have a chance to give it to them.

So let's do everything that we can to make sure that middle class families can regain some of the security that they've lost over the last decade. Let's help to protect what they've worked so hard for and give them the chance to hand it down to their kids. I know you guys are ready to go to work. I am too. I couldn't be prouder of you.

So congratulations.

NOTE: The President spoke at 12:02 p.m. at Bureau headquarters. In his remarks, he referred to Elizabeth Warren, former Assistant to the President and Special Adviser to the Secretary of the Treasury on the Consumer Finance Protection Bureau; and William and Endia Eason of Cleveland, OH.

Categories: Addresses and Remarks : Consumer Financial Protection Bureau employees.

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