

National Urban League Remarks

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Good afternoon everyone! Thank you so much for inviting me to be with you at this wonderful event. As my wonderful colleague Secretary Solis and I can tell you, at the White House, we're big fans of the National Urban League, and it's a bonus for me when I get to spend time with people who are working hard in our communities while also shaping national policy. Your President and CEO – Mark Morial – is considered a global leader and widely admired by everyone who knows anything about policy-making. And every smart leader surrounds himself with people who are at least as smart and savvy, and that's why Chanelle Hardy is Executive Director of the National Urban League Policy Institute. I'd also like to specifically thank John Hoffmeister, Chair of the National Urban League Board and Warren Logan, President of the Association of Executives for their exemplary leadership. The work you do every day is indispensable as we solve our Nations' greatest challenges.

I am proud to stand in front of the National Urban League and all of your delegates and affiliates. For more than 100 years, the National Urban League has dedicated itself to the idea that economic empowerment can elevate underserved urban communities. It's been your unwavering belief that by focusing on education, health care, economic growth, and civil rights, we can empower African Americans living in urban centers and build a better America for everyone.

The National Urban League was established in New York City at a time when that vision for our community was uncertain. The migration of African Americans from the Jim Crow South reshaped cities across the nation. With new opportunities also came new tensions. Race riots were common, and segregation -- by law or practice -- was often a way of life. The urban poor often lived and worked in squalid and dangerous conditions. Just last week, the President commemorated the 100th anniversary of a fatal fire that swept through a dangerous Lower East Side factory and shocked the conscience of the nation.

Yet despite these challenges, the nation was moving forward and there was reason to be optimistic. New York's population swelled as its skyscrapers reached higher into the sky. Penn Station opened, connecting downtown travelers to Long Island, Philadelphia and the world beyond. And uptown -- through the talent of Duke Ellington, Zora Neale Hurston, Langston Hughes and others -- the Harlem Renaissance was born.

The Urban League grew as did the promise of American cities. In 1939, in the midst of the Great Depression, General Motors unveiled "The Futurama" exhibit at the World's Fair in New York. In this gleaming vision of the not-so-distant "future" of 1960, visitors, most of whom did not own cars, were left in awe of the "ideal city of tomorrow," imagining themselves driving past breathtaking skyscrapers on concrete multi-lane highways, speeding toward new destinations and opportunities. It's hard to believe, but at the time, unemployment was above 15 percent.

Even in the hardest of times, cities have inspired us. They still do. Cities continue to lead the nation as centers of commerce and hubs of innovation. The President understands this. He started his career as

an organizer on the South Side of Chicago, helping organize job training and other programs for a neighborhood devastated by steel plant closures. As President, he has said that strong cities are the building blocks of strong regions, and strong regions are essential for a strong America.

The President understands that as we continue to recover from a horrible recession, cities need to inspire the nation again. He's laid out a compelling vision for how America can win the future by out-educating, out-building and out-innovating our global competitors. And he wants America to be the best place in the world to do business. A big part of that means making sure our neighborhoods, cities and regions – and the men, women and children who live in them -- are well-equipped for the 21st century.

That means making sure that all of our kids are getting the best education possible. As the President has often said, "Few civil rights are as central to the cause of human freedom as equal educational opportunity." But education goes beyond fairness. It is an economic necessity. We need to make sure American workers can go to head-to-head with workers in any other country. We've got to be more productive, more capable, and more skilled than any workers on Earth.

It is true that our nation's inner city schools have languished from inadequate resources, a shortage of quality teachers and--in too many inner cities across America--violence. Some of our children simply do not feel safe at school. However, cities have also been on the forefront of school reforms. Reforms that this President has sought to find and replicate.

Bruce Randolph School in Denver went from being among the worst schools in Colorado to graduating 97 percent of its seniors last year. Cincinnati's, Taft High School went from graduating one in five students to graduating 95 percent of its seniors. Just a couple of weeks ago, I travelled with the President to visit Miami Central Senior High School, where they've implemented a number of turnaround strategies. Because of their great work, they've raised the school's score on the state's report card from an F to a C. The school climate is improving, student suspensions are decreasing, and community engagement is rising.

This Administration isn't just going to stand on the sidelines cheering on school turnaround efforts across the country. While communities are taking the lead, President Obama has committed over \$3.5 billion to school improvement. Why? Because today, 12 percent of our high schools generate 75 percent of our nation's drop outs – 50 percent of whom are Latino and African American. That's unacceptable, plain and simple. We won't tolerate it and we're going to work with you to make those schools centers of learning and places where dreams are nurtured, instead of places where they shrivel and die.

If we're to close the achievement gap and put an end to the stubborn cycles of poverty across America, we need to spur action and transformative change in our nation's schools. That's what Race to the Top is all about. For less than 1 percent of annual education spending in America, Race to the Top has spurred more change, more collaboration, and more positive and productive activity than any other education program. RTT has led over 40 states to raise their standards for teaching, learning, and student achievement.

This year, the President is looking to build on that success and has asked Congress to fix No Child Left Behind by the beginning of the fall semester. We need to put outstanding teachers in every classroom, and give those teachers the pay and the support that they deserve. And we need to not only hold failing

schools accountable, we need to help turn those schools around. We need to make sure we're graduating students who are ready for college and ready for careers.

This is a challenge that is especially acute in the African American community. Post-secondary education is now a pre-requisite for success. Over the next ten years, nearly half of all new jobs will require more than a high school diploma. Furthermore, half of today's thirty fastest growing job opportunities require at least a 4-year college degree. And yet, today, only 30 percent of African-Americans age 25-34 have an Associate's degree or higher. HBCUs, Predominately Black Colleges, and other Minority Serving Institutions are working overtime to increase the number of college graduates. They enroll nearly 60 percent of the nation's 4.7 million minority undergraduate students. As President Obama recently said, HBCU's have "made it possible for millions of people to achieve their dreams and gave so many young people a chance they never thought they'd have -- a chance that nobody else would give them."

That's why this Administration is investing \$850 million in our Historically Black Colleges and Universities and Predominately Black Colleges over the course of this decade. This funding will increase the capacity of these institutions nationwide to renew, reform, and expand programs to ensure that students are given every chance to rise to their full potential, earn their degrees, and enter the workforce. And that is why the President has re-established the White House initiative on Historically Black Colleges and Universities.

Winning the future also means out-building our competitors by making sure our infrastructure can meet the demands of the 21st century, rebuilding our crumbling roads and bridges, connecting America with high speed rail, wireless and the Internet. Even as we make difficult choices to reduce the budget, the President remains committed to making investments in our urban infrastructure. It's critical if we're going to move products, people and services, create new markets and meet the demands of existing ones. The President's FY12 Budget proposes an additional upfront boost of \$50 billion in transportation infrastructure investment over six years. More than 20 percent of this funding will go to supplement urban mass transit programs. The Budget also provides \$30 billion over six years to fund a National Infrastructure Bank and \$53 billion over six years for a passenger rail program that will fund the development of a robust intercity passenger rail network.

Government has a responsibility to make smart investments and encourage smart planning. We can no longer continue developing our cities and metros with 20th century plans. To win the future, we need an innovative urban policy that integrates the various resources the Federal government brings to bear.

A great example of this new approach is the Partnership for Sustainable Communities. The Departments of Transportation, Housing and Urban Development, and Agriculture as well as the Environmental Protection Agency have adopted a "whole of government" approach to promoting sustainable development in our nation's metro areas, cities, and rural areas—by coordinating their policies, programs and investments in transportation, housing, land use, energy and the environment, as well as other "place-making" investments that shape physical development patterns.

Another initiative focuses on the communities that are experiencing the greatest distress, those that are high-poverty, high-crime, and with high-unemployment. The Neighborhood Revitalization Initiative helps transform neighborhoods of concentrated poverty into neighborhoods of opportunity. To do this, the Departments of Housing and Urban Development, Education, Health and Human Services, Justice and Treasury are working together to coordinate their neighborhood programs and investments in

affordable housing, education, public safety, health access, and community development. Just last week, the Obama Administration awarded Choice Neighborhood planning grants to 17 communities around the country and announced six finalists for implementation grants. We can help communities across the country take this approach to scale. That is why we are asking Congress to permanently authorize both the Choice Neighborhoods and Promise Neighborhoods initiatives.

The President's urban agenda is helping create communities where people want to live and do business, and where we can promote more sustainable living patterns just by more careful design and the wise integration of our physical infrastructure.

The President has said that we have to get our deficit under control, and we must. But even as we live within our means, we can't sacrifice investments in our future. If we're going to out innovate the rest of the world, we have to invest in America's research and technology, in our scientists and engineers.

Cities have long been at the forefront of innovation, and today I'd like to talk to you about one way this Administration is taking a new approach to place-based policies- the Regional Innovation Clusters Initiative. We know that clusters work. From well known places like Silicon Valley and the Research Triangle in North Carolina to lesser known places like Dayton's Tech Town, Tucson's Arizona Bioscience Park, and the Middle Georgia Economic Alliance, clusters are helping to connect disenfranchised communities to career and educational opportunities, secure higher paying jobs for their residents, and stabilize regions.

Through the Regional Innovation Cluster Initiative, seven Federal agencies including the Departments of Commerce, Labor, Education, and the Small Business Administration are working together to coordinate Federal economic, business and workforce development policies, programs and investments in an effort to spur entrepreneurship, innovation, job creation, and regional economic growth. This initiative incentivizes regions to collaborate and plan based on the region's unique economic assets and competitive advantages, and by making strategic investments to help accelerate the growth of self-identified clusters.

We see economic cluster strategy as part of the bedrock of the new foundation for American prosperity as it supports the unique competitive advantages of regions across the country in order to drive industry forward and get America moving again.

And let me tell you all the places in our country where we have started to create these opportunities. In Jacksonville, Florida – SBA's Emerging Leader's Initiative has collaborated with Urban League affiliates in Jacksonville, New Orleans and Baltimore. Each of these partnerships is working to identify small businesses with a high potential for growth that are located in underserved communities. Through specialized training, these entrepreneurs are offered innovative business strategies and access to capital through leveraged networking. These strategic partnerships allow participating firms to benefit from experts and networks offered by each organization.

The President has said that we need make sure that the economy is working for everyone. We need to make sure that every child who's willing to work hard has a chance to succeed; that working families can share in growing productivity; and that we're not simply creating an economy in which one segment is doing very well, but the rest of the folks are treading water -- or worse, drowning. Growth needs to be inclusive and the opportunities for upward mobility should be widely shared. That's why the

investments that we've made to strengthen our economy, revitalize our communities, and strengthen our education system will leave our country – and all her citizens -- standing on stronger ground than ever before.

A hundred years after its founding, the National Urban League continues to insist upon a vision for economic opportunity for families and communities in cities across the country. Because of you, our most optimistic, inclusive vision for urban areas will become a reality. Thank you for being a guiding light for us all, and I look forward to working together in the months and years to come.

Thank you!