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SUMMIT ON
VOLUNTEERISM
A Response to
Economic Crisis

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My thanks to the Knights of Columbus and to Fairfield University for facilitating this dialogue. I'm pleased to share a slightly different perspective from the national level and actually a worldwide perspective, too. And I think we all know the challenging times that we're in, that are changing and evolving times as well. Historically we look at the nonprofit sector as filling the gaps, the safety net role, and we look for money and for financing to support those activities; but I think this particular time now is where we really need to think creatively about newer solutions and newer ways of framing our response, than some of the traditional or historical ways that we've done this.

We are uniquely positioned to be able to do this. It's a sign of hope and optimism. We have the knowledge of local needs. We see firsthand what's happening, in our communities, to our neighbors. We have solution expertise and a point of view, which is critical in this. We have community-based leadership from our boards, our volunteers that are involved with our organizations, and we have experience with cross-sector relationships and partnerships. And finally, we have the ability to convene, as was demonstrated here today, to bring light to a particular issue, a situation and to challenge us to think of new and innovative ways that we can respond.

This conversation is important and if in this environment we're serious about creating sustainable, long-term solutions, we need to be talking about genuine systems change. So we need to have as our goal, genuine integrated systems of support, not our isolated silos of what we're each doing. So in order to make transformative, sustainable progress in key areas and programs, our institutions, our systems must come out of their silos and refocus our efforts on integrated results-oriented things. We need to address root causes. We need all public and private systems involved in community change efforts, to make a public commitment to share measurable goals. We need to leverage our expertise and the expertise of each other. Our objectives must be people centered. When systems and strategies are organized or defined by programs, you can't create the right kind of success. We've heard it from other panelists talking about putting a face and understanding and realizing who we're talking about. It's not some issue or some program that we're interested in. Our strategies should really reflect that as well. We need to drive a social movement for change. From our perspective, many nonprofits wrongly believe that this is the time to receive additional money. And while we'd all value and want to have that, and money is critical and important, that alone hinders us from thinking and looking at some really innovative, organic growth change collaborations. And so this culture must change as well.

United Way itself is focused on igniting a social movement in communities to give, to advocate, and to volunteer. This is a significant change from how many folks look at United Way or feel they've known United Way. So again, it's give, advocate, volunteer. And through cross-sector partnerships, we are focused on goals in the areas of education, income, and health in order to advance the common good.

The United Way system is a large nonprofit in the United States with over 1300 local community-driven organizations. We are in 46 countries and territories and are a \$5.6 billion global enterprise. But we are



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a community-impact organization. We've reframed our work, in this environment around advancing the common good, through strategic outcome-oriented goals in the areas of education, income, and health. We've outlined bold 10-year national goals and we've put a public stake in the ground, which is very different for United Way, seeking results like cutting in half the number of high school drop-outs and cutting in half the number of low-income families who are financially unstable. We believe we must all continue to grow the culture of volunteerism, if we're serious about impact. Live United is our call to action. It's vital to a thriving civil society and it increases community capacity to create change.

So here are three things that I thought we could think about as a way of moving forward collectively. Is there a way for us to establish a prioritized agenda, a shared agenda, not necessarily with all of us, but for those of us that are aligned around particular issues, for us to think of new ways that we can work together? America is not at a loss of deserving philanthropic causes, but not all of these causes are of equal value to our nation's current and future well-being. Basic human services, as well as the need to better educate young people so that they can compete successfully in a global economy, are priorities. We could identify some very specific areas to address nationwide, some strategic outcome-oriented goals, see where our missions align around that, and then to collectively mobilize volunteers where they're needed most for this lasting impact.

Secondly, we ought to hold ourselves accountable for performance-based goals. We should publicly establish these goals, and be so bold as to say what those are and then be held accountable by our board, by our volunteers, by each other and our community. Too often success is measured by what we can count, the money we've raised, or the number of people who've participated, or the number of hours of service. Let's focus our volunteering efforts on work to solve the causes of entrenched problems and go beyond addressing only the symptoms.

And the third is that we work at a large enough scale to really make a difference. During the past five years, more than 40,000 nonprofits were established each year in the United States. And unfortunately, the increased capacity has failed to necessarily translate into proportional value for society. Why? The overwhelming majority of these startup charities, despite possessing inherently noble missions, are simply too small to operate, and too independent, to put a dent. It is not that we want to eliminate innovation where we typically see the greatest pieces, but to challenge ourselves to find ways to truly be more innovative and creative in how we can solve the problems we're faced with. We must work together. We are looking for real intangible ways in order for us to be able to do that. We work best when we do work together.

So we've heard the challenges, we know what we read in the paper and hear on the news, but now is really a time for inspiration. I'm inspired by the conversations and the dialogue in our table discussions. It's not a time for desperation. The number one reason that people don't volunteer is that they haven't been asked. So I challenge each of you to ask yourself again, and get yourselves reengaged in ways to volunteer, to turn to the person to your left, to the right, to your neighbors at home and ask them to be involved. But along with that, make sure there's capacity for people to find the types of opportunities so that they are meaningful, and they are about the long-lasting change that we are looking for in our



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communities. And while there's a trend of family volunteers, it's very difficult for me and my three children to be able to find an opportunity in my community in order to do that. It's still difficult for me to find opportunities where a group of us can volunteer. It's still difficult for me to find opportunities in the evening or on the weekend where I can volunteer. So I challenge us from that standpoint as well, to find the innovative skill-based volunteering we've talked about, to find family volunteer opportunities, to find virtual opportunities for folks to be involved. And at the same time, asking people different from us, similar to us, different age cohorts, etc., to be involved in this incredibly important work.

So it's time, I believe, to roll up our sleeves, to get shoulder to shoulder with one another, to engage ourselves, to engage our neighbors in this incredibly important work that lies ahead of us. Thank you very much.