



**Remarks by Rural Development Deputy Under Secretary Vernita Dore
Honoring Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. and USDA Drum Majors for Service**

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Thank you, Duane. I'm so pleased to be here today to commemorate the legacy of the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.

And to recognize USDA's workers who are striving to live up to his legacy. These awards make me so proud of our staff and their dedication to helping others.

The Drum Major for Service awards are named for a sermon Dr. King gave, a month before his tragic death. He talked about how we all have the "drum major instinct." He called it a lifelong desire to lead the parade or be great in some way.

But Dr. King defined being great as serving others. And he said, "It means that everybody can be great, because everybody can serve."

Dr. King said that when his life was over he wanted to be remembered, not for the awards he won – which include the Nobel Peace Prize – but to be remembered as a drum major ... for justice, for peace, and for righteousness.

And that's how we remember him today: for his leadership in the Civil Rights Movement, his fight to end segregation, and to get voting rights. We remember the Montgomery Bus Boycott, marches in Selma and Montgomery, Alabama, and, of course, Washington D.C.

He went on to create the "Poor People's Campaign." Dr. King had realized that a decade of progress in civil rights did not automatically bring economic progress; did not end poverty. So, he focused on jobs, housing, education, and business assistance.



Today, in America, countless activists across the country work on these very same issues. They follow in Dr. King's footsteps and have become drum majors in their own communities. I'll mention just three of them and the work they're doing.

Randy Shaw – co-founded the Tenderloin Housing Clinic in San Francisco. It helped low-income tenants get heat in their cold apartments and protected them from evictions during the mortgage meltdown. Plus, it created a program to house the homeless.

Majora Carter – started Sustainable South Bronx. This group worked on behalf of working-class and low-income people. It succeeded in getting an illegal dump turned into a riverside park, restoration projects along the Bronx River, and creation of a green-collar training program.

Craig Watkins – During his eight years as Dallas County District Attorney, and the only African American DA in Texas, Watkins partnered with the Innocence Project using DNA evidence to overturn more than 20 wrongful convictions.

Multiply these three drum majors times the thousands of others in the country doing similar work, and you see how right Dr. King was that everybody can be great, and can be a drum major.

And even though we've made progress, more drum majors are sorely needed today because the challenges that Dr. King faced still exist ... in even deeper and more complex ways. Let me touch on some of them:

Job Discrimination: The Unemployment rate is significantly higher amongst African Americans.

Wages: A wage gap still exists for minorities and women.



Wealth gap: If you have a wage gap, it contributes to a wealth gap, which has only been widened by the Great Recession. The result is that 27% of blacks live in poverty.

Segregated neighborhoods: Even though the 1965 Fair Housing Act banned overt and intentional discrimination, our nation’s neighborhoods remain segregated. It’s a result of past and present lending practices, redlining, placement of public housing, and other factors.

The problem with segregated neighborhoods is that neighborhoods with minority populations become less attractive over time. They are more likely to be industrially zoned, receive fewer city services, and are cut off from other neighborhoods by freeways and highways. Residents in those areas suffer from lack of access to public transportation, quality schools, health care, grocery stores, and other retail establishments.

Education: In education, challenges also continue. Reflecting neighborhood segregation, many schools remain segregated. Because of the way schools are funded, lower-income schools are challenged by fewer resources. Only 73% of low-income students graduate from high school.

Voting rights: Finally, even voting rights, secured during the Civil Rights movement, have become a political issue. Thirty-six states have passed laws requiring voters to show personal identification at the polls and, in some cases, photo ID. For the elderly and minorities, this presents costs and obstacles to voting.

All these issues are not unique to the United States. Across the globe similar problems have inspired others who have become drum majors for justice in their own countries.

Perhaps you’ve seen the movie about **Malala Yousafzai** (**pronounced: “Mah-Lah-Lah Yous-Eff-Zigh (long ‘I’)**). A Pakistani girl, she became the youngest-ever Nobel Prize recipient. At age 11, she wrote a blog about her life under Taliban occupation. It led to an interview in the *New York Times*, to her becoming well-known and to her being shot on a school bus in reprisal.



She survived to gain even greater prominence. A U.N. petition on education was created in her name, which led to Pakistan's first-ever education rights bill.

Then there's **Chen Guangcheng (pronounced: "Chin Gwog-Chin")**, a Chinese civil rights activist who focuses on women's rights, land rights, and the poor in China's rural areas. After organizing a class-action lawsuit against China's one-child policy, he was sent to prison for four years and then kept under house arrest. He fled to the U.S. Embassy in Beijing and now lives in the United States.

In Barcelona, **Ada Colau (pronounced: "Call-Ow")** founded an organization to help people evicted from their homes as a result of the 2008 world financial crisis. And **Winnie Byanyima (pronounced: "Be-An-Yee-Mah")**, now head of Oxfam International, a global anti-poverty organization, began her activism locally. In 1995 in Uganda, she created the Forum for Women in Democracy, which continues today.

These drum majors for justice across the world underscore the breadth of Dr. King's vision. He recognized the global impact of poverty and called for nations to come together to fight it. In his 1964 Nobel Peace Prize address he said:

"... If a man is to redeem his spiritual and moral 'lag,' he must go all out to bridge the social and economic gulf between the 'haves' and 'have not's' of the world. Poverty is one of the most urgent items on the agenda of modern life ... There is nothing new about poverty. What is new, however, is that we have the resources to get rid of it."

In his 2016 State of the Union address, President Barack Obama also addressed the need to tackle poverty. He said, "America is about giving everybody willing to work a chance, a hand up."

At President Obama's insistence, we at the Department of Agriculture are also walking the path of Dr. King, by being drum majors for the fight against rural poverty.



In America, 85% of the country’s persistent-poverty counties are rural, with 20% or more of the people in poverty for 30 years. For this reason, President Obama has tasked USDA as the lead in this fight against rural poverty. As Dr. King said, we have the resources to ‘get rid of it.’

First, let’s take a look at Departmental accomplishments through USDA’s StrikeForce for Rural Growth and Opportunity Initiative and President Obama’s Promise Zone Initiative. Launched in 2010 by Secretary of Agriculture Tom Vilsack, StrikeForce invests in high-poverty areas to turn them around. Through the President’s Promise Zones, we are working with other public and private partners to expand economic mobility and opportunity to rural and Tribal Promise Zones.

Through StrikeForce, in 2015 alone, USDA partnered with more than 1,000 organizations to support about 57,000 projects through more than \$7.5 billion in investments to the poorest places in rural America. USDA held 2,900 meetings with community organizations, and delivered “intensive care” to 880 persistent-poverty counties, parishes, boroughs, and census areas.

And now, as the Deputy Under Secretary for USDA Rural Development, let me take a few moments to shine some light on the accomplishments of USDA Rural Development, the mission area that I am proud to lead and represent.

Many of the drum majors I referenced earlier began locally, just as we do at USDA Rural Development, focusing on one region, one group. Yet, the impact they, and we, all bring ultimately changes and improves society overall. USDA Rural Development is the primary Federal agency supporting rural America, through our more than 40 loan, grant, and technical assistance programs.

Our programs put roofs over heads, bring water to the tap, and create jobs by financing business start-up and expansion. We help provide healthcare clinics and high-speed Internet service to communities that never had them before. We support local groceries, farmers markets, and ag producers. And we provide fresh, healthy nutritious foods to rural children and households that need it the most.



Here is where we spent some of our Rural Development dollars last year on the fight against rural poverty. It all starts local through grassroots knowledge of local needs:

- 11,595 jobs were created or saved in high-poverty areas
- 133,000 low-income families got homes
- \$18.9 million direct loans helped 178 very-low-income Native American families become homeowners
- \$119 million for Tribal utilities infrastructure, including more than \$55.5 million for water and waste systems and system improvements.

Besides the dollars and the formal programs, Rural Development most importantly brings people with dedication, caring, and commitment.

Thanks to Rural Development, every day, we are helping our rural neighborhoods to “have more.”

The 11 individuals and three groups we honor today make me so proud. You inspire us and motivate us to lead, and to become drum majors for justice and righteousness, as Dr. King said.

By honoring you, we honor Dr. King’s call to help the “have nots.”

I thank you for your service on behalf of those who need a helping hand, and I am so very proud to join you today to recognize your achievements.

We are, all of us, drum majors for justice and equality.

Thank you.