



**Remarks by Rural Development Deputy Under Secretary Vernita Dore for the
38th Annual Blacks in Government National Training Institute**

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Thank you so much.

I'm so proud to be here today in Atlantic City to welcome everyone to the 38th Annual Blacks in Government National Training Institute. I'm especially pleased because BIG this year celebrates 40 years as a national organization, 40 years of helping African Americans advance in their chosen, government careers.

BIG has done that by providing opportunities for networking, development of workplace skills and career advancement, and sharing of work experiences. Begun by workers from a single, U.S. Department of Health, Education and Welfare office in Maryland, BIG now has a national community of chapters nationwide. But this organization is not simply about career advancement or advocacy; it's about giving back to the community.

As minorities, if we ourselves have not suffered want or deprivation or been denied opportunities, we know someone very near to us who has. It can be our own parents or other family members, the neighbors with whom we grew up, or even those with whom we now live and work.

It is a felt closeness that gives us special insight and empathy into the needs of others. It compels us to see all others as ourselves, to envision their lives of struggle as how ours could have played out or to remind us of our own struggles overcome. It is this realization that moves us powerfully to work on behalf of others, to be an agent for change and to succeed as a light to others who might be inspired to follow in our footsteps.



For many of us, career success and influence always contains that underlying motive of community service. That’s why, as we advance in our careers and attain influential positions, we so often find ourselves giving back by volunteering our time in churches, community groups and projects, nonprofits, fraternities, sororities, and organizations like BIG. And by the way, let me add how appropriate the acronym BIG is, because community service IS bigger than ourselves.

During my 29 years with the USDA and even before that, I have been involved in many organizations, working in many capacities. When I served as the chair of one particular group, I made sure to include everyone, no matter their position, as an active contributor to the cause. You see, everyone’s contribution was important in building a “pyramid” that led to our overall success. In this way, community service and giving back is a group effort.

You can see this in the way many successful and prominent people go about giving back to the community. For example, championship basketball player, LeBron James, who is considered the face of the NBA and amassed much wealth and fame, has also amassed a reputation as a philanthropist. He has supported the Boys & Girls Club of America, the Children’s Defense Fund and ONEXONE, which seeks to improve the lives of children around the world. He has also created his own LeBron James Family foundation, focusing on children in Akron, Ohio, his hometown.

Then there’s the example of the Rev. Dr. William Barber, whom many of you may have heard speak during the Democratic convention. Pastor of a church in a small, North Carolina town and president of the North Carolina, NAACP, he led a voter registration effort that added more than 442,000 new voters to the rolls.

He also created “Moral Monday” protests in the state capital building in Raleigh, opposing the cutting of unemployment benefits and education funds and other measures taken by state legislators. His first gathering drew only a handful of supporters, but the movement grew. Soon drawing crowds of up to 10,000. Demonstrations branched out to other North Carolina cities.

Both these efforts could not have been accomplished without individuals and other organizations working with him in various capacities.

Similarly, community activist Phaedra Ellis-Lamkins by age 26 headed the San Jose-based South Bay Labor Council, consisting of 110 unions and 110,000 members. She soon became known as the “Robin Hood of Silicon Valley,” as she sought passage of a living-wage law, inclusion of community benefits in all new development projects and guarantees for union labor to work in San Jose’s convention center, civic auditorium and arts venues.

In 2009, as CEO of Green For All, a Washington D.C.-based group that addresses climate and energy issues, she brought together groups, some of whom had never been engaged in environmental issues. She succeeded in getting amendments to a federal clean energy bill that included funding for green-jobs training. Other efforts brought in the private sector to create jobs and work in low-income communities of color to create clean-energy jobs.

In these examples, we see that community service always involves a group and that individuals can always participate in some way. Each of us has a unique talent and is capable of contributing. I’m sure it’s a skill you use in your own workplace and volunteer efforts, assessing how to utilize your own skills and that of others to serve the community well. This skill of looking to others and involving them is one we use frequently in USDA Rural Development.

Most people call it “leveraging,” but it basically involves the idea of the pyramid, using our own federal resources and partnering with others to build even greater efforts to serve the community. That idea has recently been put to work in USDA RD’s newest community effort, Uplift America. The inspiration for the joint effort arose from someone who knows all about “giving back,” and has used her influence to improve the lives of millions of Americans, Lisa Mensah, Under Secretary for Rural Development.



Uplift America is a public/private partnership to fight persistent rural poverty in the United States. Persistent poverty exists in regions in which 20% of the population has lived below the poverty line for more than 30 years. That includes many parts of rural America. It means that one in five people in these areas have spent decades in poverty. It means that some children and even adults have never known prosperity in their entire life. It means whole generations of people in this great country of ours are doing without and suffering and even going hungry year after year.

No matter how hard they work they can't lift themselves out of poverty because their surrounding communities lack or have inadequate resources. These communities may not have even the basics like medical centers, childcare centers, libraries, schools, food banks, municipal buildings and housing.

To help remedy this, Uplift America involves redirecting the USDA's Community Facilities Direct Loan Program so that up to \$500 million in loan funds can be lent to eligible lenders who in turn, will re-loan those funds, plus guarantee loans, to local projects. In 2016, the first year of Uplift America, \$50 million in grants and \$100 million in loan guarantees will be raised and utilized, putting over a half billion dollars of resources in the places that need them most.

The new effort was launched a little more than a month ago on July 19, in Washington D.C. Gathered together were representatives from the USDA Rural Development, Bank of America, the Mary Reynolds Babcock Foundation, the Corporation for Enterprise Development, community financial institutions and others. All of them will be busy working together, in effect, building a pyramid of success that will uplift areas of persistent poverty in America.

This is the kind of work, repeated over and over again throughout rural America that makes me proud to have chosen to work for USDA Rural Development. Overall, we have an active portfolio of more than \$214 billion in loans and loan guarantees to help improve the economies in our nation's rural communities.



We at USDA are strongly motivated, committed and prepared to offer assistance to strengthen all the populations within rural America. We at USDA recognize that when we upgrade our own skill sets, exchange information and ideas with community officials, and build partnerships with other organizations and corporations, we broaden our ability to help others.

And that is essentially what you all are doing here today and I applaud you. Through your government jobs and your “off hours” of volunteer work you are providing essential services to the cities, counties, states and regions in our country. Through training sessions and meetings like this, you are becoming better equipped and of more value to not only your own career, but your abilities to serve others.

Organizations like BIG and its gatherings also motivate and inspire, because, truthfully, it can be wearying to be a nonstop worker for change without lifting your head and seeing what others are doing, what tools they are using and how they are solving problems.

That's why I'm always uplifted and inspired myself by professional gatherings like this. I love to see all of us working together to make this country a better place for all of us. To me it embodies the very essence of a particular line from the BIG covenant:

“I share your pursuit of the highest quality of life.”

This is the core of giving back, of community service, whether in our daily jobs or our volunteer efforts. And I hope you come away from this week inspired and uplifted and better equipped to tackle all your efforts at creating change for the better. My hope is that with the tools you take away from this week you will be energized to plunge into your community, whether on the job or as a volunteer, engage yourself and others and become an agent of change. With all of us working together in a variety of roles, we can and will make a difference.

Thank you.