Community Foundations: Vital Leadership for America’s Future

by Emmett D. Carson, Ph.D.

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Good morning. My name is Emmett Carson and as CEO of Silicon Valley Community Foundation I have the distinct pleasure and honor of welcoming you to the first ever White House Convening on Community Foundations: Vital Leadership for America’s Future. I want to thank President Obama for his recognition of the unique and special role of community foundations. I also want to thank Valerie Jarrett, Senior Advisor to the President for her thoughtful remarks about the opportunities for community foundations to partner with government to address the most challenging problems facing communities across America. And, I want to thank Jonathan Greenblatt, Director, Office of Social Innovation and Civic Participation who was key in making today happen and shaping the agenda.

One hundred years ago, Frederick Goff had the vision for the first community foundation in Cleveland, Ohio. Today, there are nearly 800 community foundations in the United States and the concept has spread throughout the world. The very best community foundations provide leadership by convening diverse people within their communities as well as government, businesses and nonprofit organizations to reach sustainable solutions. Secondarily, community foundations also excel at harnessing charitable capital to help meet short and long term community needs. For those who may be unfamiliar with community foundations, I would encourage you to read the report: “The Growing Importance of Community Foundations” produced by the CS Mott Foundation and the Lilly Family School of Philanthropy at Indiana University.

Birthdays and anniversaries are times when we look back at how far we have come as well as look forward in setting future goals. There are few organizations that have existed for 100 years and community foundations have been key actors in helping to sustain their local communities. As we look ahead, community foundations will be integral in helping our communities face old and new challenges. America’s persistent problem of how to create a more equitable society that provides opportunities for people of color and those who are economically disadvantaged remain critical issues requiring a redoubling of our efforts. For those that have doubted the value of community building, we need only look at current events in Ferguson, MO and the protests of solidarity among diverse people in over 100 cities across the United States. The need for candid community dialogue that builds bridges across people with very different experiences is urgently needed.

Community foundations are ideally situated to answer President Obama’s call for constructive local dialogues that engage diverse community members about the legitimate concerns of racial profiling, police brutality and unequal sentencing by the criminal justice system. Such discussions will inevitably require community foundations to engage in equally difficult discussions about income inequality. The uncomfortable facts are that a person’s skin color, zip code and parents’ wealth are fast becoming greater determinants of success than their education, drive or talent. No one should underestimate how hard this work will be and how long it will
take. However, community foundations must find the courage to help lead these difficult discussions because we are one of the few place based institutions that can.

Our communities also confront new challenges. Community foundations must lead in local efforts to accommodate the hopes and dreams of veterans who have sacrificed mind, body, and spirit defending this great nation. Community foundations must lead in helping to integrate the 11 million undocumented immigrants who are essential to our local economies but who are prevented from participating in our civic life. And, community foundations must lead in ensuring quality educational outcomes for all children as we transition our education system to meet the STEAM needs – science, technology, engineering, arts, and math– of the 21st Century.

The world is an increasingly smaller and interconnected place. The ongoing Ebola crisis is a powerful reminder that problems elsewhere in the world can quickly become problems for us here at home. In this regard, local communities will need an institution that can help people to understand and develop strategies for how they will respond to environmental warming, water shortages and global labor markets for goods and services.

Silicon Valley, my adopted hometown, which cannot be found on any map, is ground zero for an amazing technological revolution. In this emerging new world, driverless cars, cloud computing, 3-D printers, ever smarter phones and wearable technology such as glasses and watches will fundamentally change how we live, work and play. Without thoughtful intentionality, the American Dream will likely become even more difficult for those who believe the dream is already out of reach. Community foundations must help ensure that we maximize the opportunities and minimize the hardships for everyday people that will accompany the unprecedented technological changes that are underway.

As the world becomes more interconnected, it will be essential that local communities become more networked, linking individual donors, nonprofit organizations, companies, religious institutions, and local, state, and national government officials together. Community foundations are uniquely positioned to create these linkages, to leverage impact and create a nuanced understanding of how to position local concerns in a world that will look, feel, and operate very differently. Make no mistake, community foundations stand miles apart from commercial gift funds and university and religious based donor advised funds in that our work engages the entirety and complexity of our communities by using our convening capabilities to provide leadership along with our financial resources.

It is my hope that community foundations of all shapes and sizes – large and small, urban and rural, city-based, state-based, and those that I would call glocal, focusing on both local and global issues – will remember today as the day when we re-committed and rededicated ourselves to providing vital leadership for America’s future. In closing, I want to again thank President Obama, Valerie Jarrett, Jonathan Greenblatt and other Administration officials, for recognizing the special role community foundations have played over the last 100 years and the central leadership we can and must play in our local communities today and in the future.

Thank you.

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Silicon Valley Community Foundation

Silicon Valley Community Foundation makes all forms of philanthropy more powerful. We serve as a catalyst and leader for innovative solutions to our region's most challenging problems and, through our donors, give more money to charities than any other community foundation in the United States. As Silicon Valley's center of philanthropy, we provide thousands of individuals, families and corporations with simple and effective ways to give locally and around the world. Learn more at siliconvalleycf.org.