

Alliance for Children and Families National Conference
Peter Goldberg Welcome Address
October 14, 2009

Welcome to the Alliance for Children and Families National Conference. Thank you for attending our signature event.

I want to begin my comments this morning with this notification: The first person to stand up and shout “you lie” gets to sit through my three-hour post conference wrap-up. And, the first person to throw a shoe at me has to wear my old flip flops for the rest of the conference.

Seriously, we are happy to be in Houston. Fifteen years ago, when I first became your president and CEO, one of my first trips was to meet members in Texas.

To enshrine my visit — or perhaps for some other reason — the members I visited gave me this souvenir to take home. It has been in my office ever since and I have been waiting for just the right time to use it.

I am certain the souvenir of your visit to Houston and the state of Texas will be the learning, networking, professional development, and enrichment activities contained within this premier event.

One year ago, we met in Baltimore in an uncertain time, to say the least. The economy was nose diving and the length and depth of the recession was on everyone’s minds.

An historic presidential election was a week away. While the presidential and congressional elections would significantly shape the public sector response to an emerging economic crisis, no matter who won the elections, 2009 was not expected to be a pretty year, and it has not been.

Beginning with the new Obama Administration, and then passage of the stimulus package, and then a vigorous national debate on health care — to name but a few — so much has happened in a year.

As you well know, the term social innovation has also become a little more popular this past year.

But I would remind our public sector leaders that innovation is not consigned only to new organizations. In this room today we have agencies with histories that go back to before the founding of Texas. You didn't get to where you are by turning your back to innovation.

The reason you have withstood every challenge thrown your way has so much to do with innovation, adaptation, and resilience. We should never forget that.

As a nation it seems, thankfully, that we have averted an economic catastrophe; yet human services safety net organizations, including child welfare and family service agencies, have struggled mightily.

To our great credit, we are still here, still standing and ready, willing, and able to fight another day. But let's make no mistake about it, this has been a very trying time.

With terrible issues to face such as unemployment, home foreclosures, the increase in poverty, and high cost of health care, the communities you serve are very lucky they can turn to you.

Yes, our theme for this event speaks to strategies for the challenges you face, as it should. But it also speaks to some of your best attributes: caring, courage, and collaborations.

Your caring and compassionate work continues. Moreover, throughout the long history of our field, you have evolved with courage to effectively respond to more complex, multifaceted issues facing children, families, older adults, and communities today.

Members of the Alliance have courageously been on the forefront of positive change.

And, you have welcomed innovations from the outside, recognizing that you may not have created the systems within which you operate, but you can most certainly use your vast expertise to make them better.

Through collaborations and other arrangements, you have prepared for the future while ensuring caring service in the present. Whether it is adapting to new funding models, completing mergers or acquisitions, implementing social enterprises, or even adopting new concepts and techniques, you get the job done, allowing your mission to guide you in your work.

Your communities have benefited from your bravery. It takes courage to move out of the comfort zone, to take chances, to change, and yes, to innovate. In this field, there is little reward for taking risks, but driven by your mission, and compelled to provide high quality programs and services, you take those risks in order to better serve your communities.

In addition, Alliance members share their experiences, expertise, and wide-ranging knowledge with peers here in the Alliance network.

There are fifteen member CEOs on the Alliance board of directors providing invaluable direction — including our board chair Scott Finnell of Pressley Ridge. Members drive the Alliance's strategic plan in your role on the strategic positioning committee. You consult with us on membership retention and recruitment through the membership committee.

Members are responsible for the programs at all Alliance conferences. You provide invaluable advice to the *Families in Society* advisory committee, the Executive Leadership Institute, the Civic Engagement steering committee, and the New Age of Aging national leadership advisory committee.

All of you have the great fortune of access to the Resource Development Services program due to the generous time and effort of members. Alliance members serve on the boards of directors of our affiliated organizations: Families International, Ways to Work, FEI Behavioral Health, and United Neighborhood Centers of America.

You continue to make this network stronger, this organization more high performing, and the field even better, and for that we thank you. We believe, authentically, in a Members First value proposition; at the end of the day this is about you, not us.

There are realities to your work that can make the mission-driven intent more problematic than we would like; a few cry out for a brief comment here.

In the past year, essential services you provide have been threatened by state governments as they wrestle with cash flow problems associated with declining tax revenues.

Some states are in difficult circumstances and searching every nook and cranny to find relief. In their desperation, some are even trying to off-load some of their problems by shifting them to you, as if you have funds they do not. How misguided; how callous.

When state governments end up placing part of their cash flow problems in the lap of their human service providers by putting off payments due for months on end, how can they possibly expect the same sustainable level of service? And yet, how can you be expected to compromise on the care you provide? Let's be clear and direct — the idea that government can shift cash flow problems onto the backs of nonprofit human service providers is short-sighted, wrong, offensive, and insensitive to your service responsibilities.

In my frustration with this situation, I have to ask: Would a road construction contractor continue to work on a new highway if the government issued them an IOU? No.

This cash flow issue is clear, direct, and now. Even more pernicious however, may be the growing public sector abuse of the privatization contracting model.

The notion that government believes it can pay less and less each year than it costs you to provide a contracted service, and that you simply can and will subsidize and supplement public sector contracts with private giving is short-sighted, wrong, offensive, and insensitive to the virtues of private philanthropy.

While we have to be candid about this complex issue and not lay all fiscal problems on public sector funders, it is clear there is an urgent need to address the capacities of nonprofit human service providers to continue making up for getting shortchanged by government.

Give a highway contractor ninety-two cents on a dollar and I guarantee you that highway contractor will pave ninety-two miles; the other eight miles will be dirt.

But we don't pave highways, we serve children and families. We are not commercial businesses, but community-based organizations. Our history and our values compel us to serve even when we are financially abused. But that doesn't mean that it is right or that it can continue unaddressed.

It is our responsibility to forcefully and proactively address and take on this issue and the concern it causes because if we do not advocate for the children and families we serve, what will happen to them? Confronted with tough fiscal choices and powerful lobbying groups, will government fulfill moral obligations to underserved communities absent our voice?

See this as my call to arms, so to speak. Whether it means better pricing, or more pointed advocacy, or other vigorous measures, it is not adequate to dream of a rescue and hope for the best.

Another issue that is continuing to gain importance for Alliance members and the people you serve is health care reform.

The increasing difficulty of gaining access to affordable health care is not a new topic. But the recent efforts at reform are new, and have elicited strong emotions.

In hindsight, the emotions are understandable, although I don't know if many members of Congress who held public meetings this summer would agree with me.

For nonprofit human service providers and the Alliance, health care is a two-pronged issue. First, there are the interests and needs of the people you serve. Second, the interests and needs of the people you employ.

The committee of Alliance members that help guide our public policy office, recognizing late last year that health care in general would be an important topic for our advocacy efforts, prioritized health care advocacy into four areas.

Through the leadership of our senior vice president of public policy, Patrick Lester, we are advocating to protect Medicaid funding for therapeutic foster care and therapeutic residential services; improve children's access to health services, especially dentistry and mental health; promote the use of health information technology to improve children's health; and repeal the federal Medicaid law that prohibits reimbursement for all medical and behavioral services received by patients in mental health institutions.

As the debate on health care reform rages on, I continue to be concerned that the voice of the nonprofit sector has been overwhelmed by much more powerful constituencies. It is discouraging that a sector that accounts for more than five percent of the gross domestic product, or more than \$660 billion, isn't getting an adequate seat at the table.

There is evidence that the nonprofit sector is struggling with health care costs, just like other sectors. In fact, recently the Johns Hopkins Listening Post Project, of which the Alliance and some member organizations take part, found fifty-nine percent of the nonprofits polled ranked health care costs as one of their organization's top challenges — out of all their challenges.

In addition, nearly three out of every four nonprofits offering health benefits reported to the Listening Post Project that their organization's total direct health insurance costs increased during the past year.

Obviously, this issue is particularly important to some nonprofits because good benefits are a way we use to reward loyal employees and offset the effects of generally lower pay scales. Whatever the outcome of health care reform, it will affect not just your clients, but your ability to attract and retain a high quality workforce.

Now that I have let off a little steam, let me close on some more gracious and hopeful notes.

I am confident you will gain many positive takeaways over the next three days. Playing an important part in ensuring my confidence is the volunteer planning committee, made up of Alliance members.

My special thanks to our planning committee co-chairs from Houston-based organizations: Curtis Mooney of DePelchin Children's Center and Nyla Woods of Family Services of Greater Houston.

They have graciously guided both the Alliance and the committee through the entire process, from the theme, to the keynote speakers, and beyond.

The year 2011 marks the one hundredth anniversary of the organizations that merged to form the Alliance. When we gather next year on October 20-22 in Milwaukee, we will officially begin the celebration.

With the guidance of our centennial committee co-chairs, C.T. O'Donnell of the Rensselaerville Institute, and Patti Lyons of the Consuelo Foundation, we will have celebratory activities throughout 2011, concluding at the Alliance National Conference in Washington D.C. in October.

Be sure to set an appointment to share your historical highlights for the one hundredth celebration with our writer, Patricia Winsten, at booth 31 in the exhibit area right here in Houston.

We do have much to celebrate considering all the achievements in this important field. This past year, after continuing to witness the resiliency of the field, I am yet again amazed at not only the caring, courage, and collaborations, but also the ingenuity, determination, and innovation within your organizations.

I believe, in fact I know, this country would be a much more difficult place in which to live without all of you.

Thank you for attending this premier event and thank you many times over for all you do for our society.

Next, David Ruiz, senior vice president of Bank of America, is here to introduce our first plenary speaker.

The Alliance and our sister organizations Ways to Work and United Neighborhood Centers of America rely on companies like Bank of America to partner with us so we can achieve mission.

In fact, Bank of America was one of the first main supporters of the expansion of the Ways to Work program. We are so grateful that Bank of America shares our commitment to strengthening families, neighborhoods, and entire communities, which includes sponsoring this event. My thanks to David for being here today.