Secretary Shaun Donovan Addresses Y-PLAN National Summit

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When I think of unity, I think of it as is sharing a dream. Young people sharing a dream are working to make it into a reality which brings families and communities together and that is incredibly inspiring to me, and to so many people. I have to give a shout-out to all the champions of Y-PLAN, for more than a decade you’ve done remarkable work to empower youth with tools to build their own communities and to build their own futures. What started as an idea in Berkeley has now grown to nine cities, and as your theme suggests we’ve got to keep scaling this work by moving from pockets of change to systems of opportunity. I want to say that we at the Department of Housing and Urban Development have been very proud to be your partner along this journey. I am really so grateful for your leadership, as well your service to the country.

Cesar Chavez famously said, “students should not be mirror imitators, they must learn to think and act for themselves.” You’re using your unique ideas, perspectives and energy to better your neighborhoods. You’re adding tremendous value to the work we’re doing at HUD, and you’re demonstrating that young people don’t have to accept the common view that they are just leaders of tomorrow. They are also leaders of today. In fact, if you look back at American history from the Civil Rights Movement to the Tech Revolution, young people have often been at the frontlines of progress. It should be no different with urban planning.

As I was thinking about my remarks here today, I went back to my own childhood, and what really got me started in my interest in cities, in housing, in working on poverty in so many different ways. Where it comes from for me is, I grew up, like your famous founder here, in New York City. And while I was born in 1966 I became conscious in the 1970s of what was going on around me. I know most of you in the room aren’t old enough to remember what was happening in the 1970s in New York City, but it was a difficult, difficult time. The city was teetering on the edge of bankruptcy. Miles and miles of neighborhoods were wiped out by arson and abandonment and the number 4 train line which ran through my neighborhood became known as the “mugger’s express.” In fact, things got so bad that in 1975 they created a tourist guide just to help visitors “survive” New York. Suggestions in that guide included: don’t go outside after 6 pm, avoid all public transportation, and never load the trunk of your car in public.

More profoundly, as a child growing up I could really feel that the civic bonds that hold a community together were fraying, and the truth is New York wasn’t alone during that period. Across the country cities were in crisis and, the federal government’s urban renewal approach was part of the problem rather than part of the solution. Too often in the past, the federal government in Washington DC would look at a community that was struggling and see it as a problem to be solved, as a cancer to be cured, and bring an attitude that we in Washington knew best. We wouldn’t engage with local leaders on the ground, students, other community leaders, but instead try to fix it ourselves. And so often it
would come in, and wipe out entire neighborhoods, choosing to start with a blank slate, rather than engage and cultivate the assets and people, the leaders that were already on the ground in those neighborhoods.

As a result, you see highways constructed that cut through entire neighborhoods, the Claiborne Corridor, for example. Giant housing complexes were built to replace historic homes, and in many of these cases, government made things worse by isolating families by the very opportunity that we were supposed to be creating. Furthering the problem, agencies like mine, like HUD, operated in siloes. HUD focused on housing, Education focused on schools, the Department of Justice focused on public safety, and so on. There was too much focus on individual problems, and not enough on the community as a whole.

This was not the right approach. It left us with too many neighborhoods today where regardless of how hard a child or their parents work, the single biggest predictor of those child’s life outcomes and even lifespan is their zip code. Simply put, place matters. Consider five-year-old Savannah who lives with her mom in one of the toughest sections in Washington DC; A faucet in their apartment leaks, which is subjecting Savannah to mold, causing her to suffer severe asthma, and she’s not alone. In fact today in the United States, 36,000 children are missing school due to asthma. As a result, children like Savannah who are spending time in the emergency room instead of the classroom don’t have a fair chance in life.

Think about another example that illustrates how place matters. Consider the tragic tale of Hadiya Pendleton. Last year, a week after performing at the President’s inaugural, the fifteen year-old was back home in Chicago. Shortly after finishing her final exam she was hanging out with her volleyball teammates in a park, when a man mistook the group for a rival gang and fired shots at them. Hadiya was struck in the back of the head and killed. Now clearly Hadiya Pendleton didn’t get a fair chance to succeed in life.

And to illustrate one more time how place matters, consider the story of a boy named Michael, who was about six years old when Hurricane Katrina struck New Orleans. He told a reporter that the storm “took everything.” It gets painful when I think about it. For years he had nightmares about the storm, and he wasn’t alone. According to one study, five years after the storm hit, children displaced by Katrina were four and a half times more likely to have a serious emotional disturbance than comparable children the year before Katrina hit. Clearly these young people didn’t have a fair chance in life.

All of these stories illustrate that what’s shaping the lives of these young people is not just their talent and their drive, but where they live. And I think we can all agree, it is a huge moral failure in this country that we can predict a child’s future by putting their address into Google Maps. But it’s also an economic failure because children growing up in poverty cost the U.S. half a trillion dollars each year in lost wages, lost productivity and so many other costs. We could increase our GDP four percent in the United States if we could solve poverty among our children. And the single biggest cost is really the lost
potential because if given a fair chance, as you know, young people growing up in those neighborhoods could be the next teachers, the next scientists, the next entrepreneurs, and the next urban planners.

And here we are in the richest country in the world, we simply can, and we simply must do better. We’ve got to give everyone a fair shot by working together to create communities of opportunity that are both economically and environmentally resilient. I am completely committed to this work and so is President Obama. As the President’s often said, despite going to some very prestigious schools, his greatest education came from the days that he worked as a community organizer on the south side of Chicago. He saw how distressed neighborhoods dimmed hopes and deferred dreams. So when he became president he initiated a new federal approach around place. He worked tirelessly to break down the artificial barriers that prevented the federal government from working well with itself and with local leaders. Case in point is our work at the neighborhood level.

During his first term President Obama launched an inter-agency effort called the Neighborhood Revitalization Initiative. It increases the resources available to local leaders and communities that have come together with a common vision and a commitment to real measureable results. That’s what’s happening with the HUD initiative that you all know very well, Choice Neighborhoods. Building off the HOPE 6 program, we’ve expanded our scope so that resources can be targeted not just to public housing, but to all forms of housing in a neighborhood. As well as all of the other critical assets that make up a vital, successful neighborhood. And it is making a real difference. Just take a look at the two projects that Y-PLAN is involved with. New Orleans, which we’ve just talked about outside, received one of the first five choice implementation grants in 2011. Partners from the public and private sector are coming together to create and rehabilitate more than 2000 units of mixed income housing in Iberville, which will be supported by enhanced education programs and new violence prevention efforts.

In fact I was just in New Orleans about a week ago, I’m a big runner, so I went out and got my morning exercise, I ran through Iberville and along the Claiborne Corridor, and what I saw there was an amazing set of connections. A new street car coming through the neighborhood that’s going to connect residents of Iberville to the new hospitals just down the street where there are going to be thousands of new jobs available, training programs and other things. So it’s really a comprehensive view of what a neighborhood can and should be. But also take San Francisco, which was also one of the first to receive a Choice Neighborhoods Implementation grant. There we joined partners in a plan to create and enhance more than 600 units of housing in the eastern Bayview area. It’ll be complemented by investments and assets that range from a health center to transportation improvements and so many other things. In total the partnerships that are created through Choice Neighborhoods are driving change and expanding opportunity.

And at a time of tough budgets, what we’ve seen are those partners that are coming to the table, they’re putting their money where their mouth is. For every one dollar that we bring to the table, our other partners have brought eight dollars, dramatically multiplying the impact of the work that we’re doing. As you know the Department of Education is achieving similar great outcomes with its Promise Neighborhoods effort which is actually modeled after the Harlem Children’s Zone that I know
well and worked closely with when I was in New York City. At the Department of Justice we also have an effort that’s called the Byrne Criminal Justice Program, which is achieving great results.

Communities that are designated as Promise Zones and I’ve joined the President in January to announce the first five, communities that are designated will get a competitive advantage for about twenty different federal programs that are oriented at neighborhood initiatives. They’ll get full-time AmeriCorps Vista volunteers to support their work, and they’re going to get a top-notch team from each up to a dozen federal agencies. In addition, the President has proposed and called on Congress to cut taxes on hiring and investment in areas that are designated as promise zones, to bring jobs and attract economic activity. Working together we’re going to bring together new optimism, new energy, new positive activity, and new progress to these neighborhoods.

In addition we want to scale up this effort because it’s a place-based model that can be replicated by other areas to address their own unique concerns, and we look forward to working with local innovators; I’m expecting every one of you in this room is going to go up and get involved in a promise zone somewhere around the country, because this place-based work is going to make our communities more economically resilient for generations to come. But in this day and age, that’s not enough. We also have to enhance our nation’s environmental resilience to deal with the growing threats of climate change.

In regards to climate change, it is absolutely clear that we need to take action. Now I’ve seen this all too well and too closely, because as a native New Yorker, the President asked me to lead the long-term recovery from Hurricane Sandy. And I will tell you, that hurricane caused destruction in my neighborhood. I know families and friends who lost their homes, lost their businesses, a friend lost his daughter in the storm. And the sad truth is that these types of storms will keep coming. What we used to call the 100-year storm is now coming every few years. And the question that all of us face is not a question of if, it’s a question of when. And we have to ask ourselves, each of you particularly our young people have to ask yourselves: Do we accept extreme weather as a new normal, and sit idly by as these threats grow? Or do we meet this great challenge with equally bold action?

To all of us the choice is clear, we must act, and I’m grateful to work for a man who understands that. Last June President Obama released his Climate Action Plan, the most aggressive initiative ever undertaken by a U.S. president to address climate change. A core goal of the plan is to prepare communities for the impacts that extreme weather is already having. Specifically on this last point as it relates to Sandy, it was clear to all of us that rebuilding the region would be a long process that required special attention from the federal government. So from the beginning, working with local partners, the taskforce knew it wasn’t enough just to rebuild back to the way things were. Instead we wanted to help the region rebuild stronger and smarter so that it could deal with future storms.

First we made sure that real science about what would happen in the future was at the heart of our work. We tried to empower others knowledge of that science so they could rebuild. We developed a sea-level rise tool that allows students and local communities to click on a map, and find out exactly
what would happen to your street, your neighborhood, even your house, 25, 50, up to 100 years in the future in terms of sea-level rise. With this knowledge in hand, communities can take the measures necessary to protect themselves from future floods. The taskforce also encouraged local leaders to think regionally. Because if water is blocked in one city, in one town, it has to go somewhere else, possibly impacting a neighboring town or village. And so to help foster a real culture of resiliency, we made sure that every one of the projects funded by Sandy, the $50 billion that we were investing to help the region rebuild, every one of those dollars had to take into account these future flood risks and to look at what impacts the work they were doing would have on neighboring communities.

As part of his climate action plan, the President has committed to making this approach national. This represents an important milestone in our country’s history. But still the taskforce wanted to go even bigger and get our international counterparts involved. Why? Because whether it’s a small community in Oklahoma that’s been hit by a tornado, or a city the size of New York hit by a hurricane, no place alone can figure out how to prepare itself for the effects of climate change. And no region or country has a monopoly on innovation and understanding of these risks. To really build the most resilient region possible we wanted to attract as many good ideas as we could no matter from where or who they came from.

So in June of last year we launched Rebuild by Design, a competition with partners from foundations, universities, and other leading institutions. We put out a call for out of the box thinking that will help the region manage flooding and limit damage when the next storm hits. The response was overwhelming. We got more than 140 proposals from fifteen different countries across the globe, all with creative plans that ranged from infrastructure to green spaces. As the taskforce evaluated them it wasn’t just looking for abstract concepts that looked good on paper, it wanted ideas that could become a reality on the ground so they could strengthen communities. It sought proposals with the potential to change how building is done in cities, and along shores.

For instance, in Staten Island we had a team of landscape architects and engineers who teamed up with students from the Harbor School. where the students’ curriculum is based on the New York Harbor. This team came in and they proposed a new kind of living breakwater where these students would help grow millions and millions of oysters. In fact these students have started a project called the Billion Oyster Project where they’re going to try and grow a billion oysters around New York Harbor. But they’re going to start with this effort of these new living break waters on the coast of Staten Island, and if it works it has the potential to be scaled up across the country.

Bottom line, each of the teams that entered proposed ideas in their own unique ways that offer these kinds of ground breaking concepts, all of which imagine new and great possibilities. They’ll go a long way in helping communities change their mindset by making resiliency a priority. Not just when rebuilding after a disaster, but with all building for a new future. And in doing so, you’re going to help shape not just a stronger region there, but an entire country for generations to come.
That is the power of planning and the work that you all do. You know that success of your efforts isn’t determined by the height of buildings, but by the way you meet the needs of people. And to the young people specifically that are here today. We need you to be on the front lines. Your imagination and ideas can solve our biggest challenges that we face. HUD wants to work with you to foster collaboration and support local leaders so that young people like Hadiya aren’t taken from us too soon. HUD wants to work with you to develop a culture of resiliency, so that children like Michael aren’t impacted whenever the next Katrina or Sandy hits. In short, HUD wants to work with you to restore promise and hope in distressed neighborhoods, and ensure that every community has access to those ladders of opportunity that the President talks about. This isn’t easy work, but working together, I know that we can do it.