

Administration of Barack Obama, 2014

Remarks on the "My Brother's Keeper" Initiative
February 27, 2014

The President. Thank you. Everybody, please have a seat. Well, good afternoon, everybody.

Audience members. Good afternoon.

The President. Welcome to the White House. And thank you, Christian, for that outstanding introduction. And thank you for cheering for the White Sox, which is the right thing to do. [*Laughter*] Like your parents and your teachers, I could not be prouder of you. I could not be prouder of the other young men who are here today. But just so we're clear—you're only excused for 1 day of school. [*Laughter*] And I'm assuming you've got your assignments with you so that you can catch up, perhaps even on the flight back. [*Laughter*]

As Christian mentioned, I first met Christian about a year ago. I visited the Hyde Park Academy in Chicago, which is only about a mile from my house. And Christian was part of this program called Becoming a Man. It was a program that Mayor Rahm Emanuel introduced to me. And it helps young men who show a lot of potential, but may have gotten in some trouble to stay on the right path.

They get help with schoolwork, but they also learn life skills like how to be a responsible citizen and how to deal with life's challenges and how to manage frustrations in a constructive way and how to set goals for themselves. And it works. One study found that, among young men who participate in the B.A.M. program, arrests for violent crimes dropped 44 percent, and they were more likely to graduate from high school.

So as Christian mentioned, during my visit, they're in a circle, and I sat down in the circle, and we went around, led by their counselor, and guys talked about their lives, talked about their stories. They talked about what they were struggling with and how they were trying to do the right thing and how sometimes they didn't always do the right thing. And when it was my turn, I explained to them that when I was their age, I was a lot like them. I didn't have a dad in the house. And I was angry about it, even though I didn't necessarily realize it at the time. I made bad choices. I got high without always thinking about the harm that it could do. I didn't always take school as seriously as I should have. I made excuses. Sometimes, I sold myself short.

And I remember when I was saying this—Christian, you may remember this—after I was finished, the guy sitting next to me said, "Are you talking about you?" [*Laughter*] I said, "Yes."

And the point was, I could see myself in these young men. And the only difference is that I grew up in an environment that was a little bit more forgiving, so when I made a mistake, the consequences were not as severe. I had people who encouraged me—not just my mom and grandparents, but wonderful teachers and community leaders—and they'd push me to work hard and study hard and make the most of myself. And if I didn't listen, they said it again. And if I didn't listen, they said it a third time. And they would give me second chances and third chances. They never gave up on me, and so I didn't give up on myself.

I told these young men my story then, and I repeat it now, because I firmly believe that every child deserves the same chances that I had. And that's why we're here today: to do what

we can, in this year of action, to give more young Americans the support they need to make good choices and to be resilient and to overcome obstacles and achieve their dreams.

And this is an issue of national importance. It's as important as any issue that I work on. It's an issue that goes to the very heart of why I ran for President. Because if America stands for anything, it stands for the idea of opportunity for everybody, the notion that no matter who you are or where you came from or the circumstances into which you are born, if you work hard, if you take responsibility, then you can make it in this country. That's the core idea.

And that's the idea behind everything that I'll do this year and for the rest of my Presidency. Because at a time when the economy is growing, we've got to make sure that every American shares in that growth, not just a few. And that means guaranteeing every child in America has access to a world-class education. It means creating more jobs and empowering more workers with the skills they need to do those jobs. It means making sure that hard work pays off with wages you can live on and savings you can retire on and health care that you can count on. It means building more ladders of opportunity into the middle class for anybody who's willing to work hard to climb them.

Those are national issues. They have an impact on everybody. And the problem of stagnant wages and economic insecurity and stalled mobility are issues that affect all demographic groups all across the country. My administration's policies—from early childhood education to job training to minimum wages—are designed to give a hand up to everybody, every child, every American willing to work hard and take responsibility for their own success. That's the larger agenda.

But the plain fact is, there are some Americans who, in the aggregate, are consistently doing worse in our society: groups that have had the odds stacked against them in unique ways that require unique solutions, groups who've seen fewer opportunities that have spanned generations. And by almost every measure, the group that is facing some of the most severe challenges in the 21st century in this country are boys and young men of color.

Now, to say this is not to deny the enormous strides we've made in closing the opportunity gaps that marred our history for so long. My presence is a testimony to that progress. Across this country, in government, in business, in our military, in communities in every State, we see extraordinary examples of African American and Latino men who are standing tall and leading and building businesses and making our country strong. Some of those role models who have defied the odds are with us here today: the Magic Johnsons or the Colin Powells, who are doing extraordinary things; the Anthony Foxxes.

Anthony, yesterday he and I were talking about how both of us never knew our dads and shared that sense of both how hard that had been, but also how that had driven us to succeed in many ways. So there are examples of extraordinary achievement. We all know that. We don't need to stereotype and pretend that there's only dysfunction out there. But 50 years after Dr. King talked about his dream for America's children, the stubborn fact is that the life chances of the average Black or Brown child in this country lags behind by almost every measure, and it's worse for boys and young men.

If you're African American, there's about a one-in-two chance you grow up without a father in your house—one in two. If you're Latino, you have about a one-in-four chance. We know that boys who grow up without a father are more likely to be poor, more likely to underperform in school.

As a Black student, you are far less likely than a White student to be able to read proficiently by the time you are in fourth grade. By the time you reach high school, you're far more likely to have been suspended or expelled. There's a higher chance you end up in the criminal justice system and a far higher chance that you are the victim of a violent crime. Fewer young Black and Latino men participate in the labor force compared to young White men. And all of this translates into higher unemployment rates and poverty rates as adults.

And the worst part is, we've become numb to these statistics. We're not surprised by them. We take them as the norm. We just assume this is an inevitable part of American life, instead of the outrage that it is. That's how we think about it. It's like a cultural backdrop for us, in movies and television. We just assume, of course, it's going to be like that. But these statistics should break our hearts. And they should compel us to act.

Michelle and I are blessed with two beautiful daughters. We don't have a son. But I know if I had a son, on the day he was born, I would have felt everything I felt with Malia and Sasha: the awe, the gratitude, the overwhelming sense of responsibility to do everything in my power to protect that amazing new life from this big world out there. And just as our daughters are growing up into wonderful, beautiful young women, I'd want my son to feel a sense of boundless possibility. I'd want him to have independence and confidence, and I'd want him to have empathy and compassion. I'd want him to have a sense of diligence and commitment and a respect for others and himself, the tools that he'd need to succeed.

I don't have a son, but as parents, that's what we should want not just for our children, but for all children. And I believe the continuing struggles of so many boys and young men—the fact that too many of them are falling by the wayside, dropping out, unemployed, involved in negative behavior, going to jail, being profiled—this is a moral issue for our country.

It's also an economic issue for our country. After all, these boys are a growing segment of our population. They are our future workforce. When, generation after generation, they lag behind, our economy suffers. Our family structure suffers. Our civic life suffers. Cycles of hopelessness breed violence and mistrust. And our country is a little less than what we know it can be. So we need to change the statistics, not just for the sake of the young men and boys, but for the sake of America's future.

And that's why, in the aftermath of the Trayvon Martin verdict, with all the emotions and controversy that it sparked, I spoke about the need to bolster and reinforce our young men and give them the sense that their country cares about them and values them and is willing to invest in them. And I'm grateful that Trayvon's parents Sybrina and Tracy are here with us today, along with Jordan Davis's parents Lucia and Ron.

In my State of the Union Address last month, I said I'd pick up the phone and reach out to Americans willing to help more young men of color facing especially tough odds to stay on track and reach their full potential so America can reach its full potential. That's what today is all about.

After months of conversation with a wide range of people, we've pulled together private philanthropies and businesses, mayors, State and local leaders, faith leaders, nonprofits, all who are committed to creating more pathways to success. And we're committed to building on what works. And we call it "My Brother's Keeper."

Now, just to be clear, "My Brother's Keeper" is not some big, new Government program. In my State of the Union Address, I outlined the work that needs to be done for broad-based economic growth and opportunity for all Americans: manufacturing hubs, infrastructure

spending. I've been traveling around the country for the last several weeks talking about what we need to do to grow the economy and expand opportunity for everybody. And in the absence of some of those macroeconomic policies that create more good jobs and restore middle class security, it's going to be harder for everyone to make progress. And for the last 4 years, we've been working through initiatives like Promise Zones to help break down the structural barriers—from lack of transportation to substandard schools—that afflict some of this country's most impoverished counties, and we'll continue to promote these efforts in urban and rural counties alike.

So those are all Government initiatives, Government programs that we think are good for all Americans, and we're going to keep on pushing for them. But what we're talking about here today with "My Brother's Keeper" is a more focused effort on boys and young men of color who are having a particularly tough time. And in this effort, Government cannot play the only—or even the primary—role. We can help give every child access to quality preschool and help them start learning from an early age, but we can't replace the power of a parent who's reading to that child. We can reform our criminal justice system to ensure that it's not infected with bias, but nothing keeps a young man out of trouble like a father who takes an active role in his son's life.

In other words, broadening the horizons for our young men and giving them the tools they need to succeed will require a sustained effort from all of us. Parents will have to parent and turn off the television and help with homework. Teachers will need to do their part to make sure our kids don't fall behind and that we're setting high expectations for those children and not giving up on them. Business leaders will need to create more mentorships and apprenticeships to show more young people what careers are out there. Tech leaders will need to open young eyes to fields like computer science and engineering. Faith leaders will need to help our young men develop the values and ethical framework that is the foundation for a good and productive life.

So we all have a job to do. And we can do it together: Black and White, urban and rural, Democrat and Republican. So often, the issues facing boys and young men of color get caught up in long-running ideological arguments about race and class and crime and poverty, the role of government, partisan politics. We've all heard those arguments before. But the urgency of the situation requires us to move past some of those old arguments and focus on getting something done and focusing on what works. It doesn't mean the arguments are unimportant, it just means that they can't paralyze us. And there's enough good will and enough overlap and agreement that we should be able to go ahead and get some things done, without resolving everything about our history or our future.

Twenty years ago, Congresswoman Frederica Wilson started a program in the Miami public school system—you don't, well, feel free to stand up—[*applause*—]—to help young boys at risk of dropping out of school. Today, it serves thousands of students in dozens of schools.

As mayor of New York, Mayor Bloomberg, Michael Bloomberg, who's here today, started a Young Men's Initiative for African American and Latino boys because he understood that in order for America to compete, we need to make it easier for all our young people to do better in the classroom and find a job once they graduate.

A bipartisan group of mayors called Cities United has made this issue a priority in communities across the country. Senator Mike Lee, a leader of the Tea Party, has been working with Senator Dick Durbin, a Democrat from my home State of Illinois, to reduce

disparities in our criminal justice system that have hit the African American and Latino communities especially hard.

So I want to thank everybody who's been doing incredible work, many of the people who are here today, including Members of Congress, who have been focused on this and are moving the needle in their communities and around the country.

They understand that giving every young person who's willing to work hard a shot at opportunity should not be a partisan issue. Yes, we need to train our workers, invest in our schools, make college more affordable, and government has a role to play. And yes, we need to encourage fathers to stick around and remove the barriers to marriage and talk openly about things like responsibility and faith and community. In the words of Dr. King, it is not either-or, it is both-and.

And if I can persuade Sharpton and O'Reilly to be in the same meeting—[laughter]—then it means that there are people of good faith who want to get some stuff done, even if we don't agree on everything. And that's our focus.

While there may not be much of an appetite in Congress for sweeping new programs or major new initiatives right now, we all know we can't wait. And so the good news is, folks in the private sector who know how important boosting the achievement of young men of color is to this country, they are ready to step up.

Today I'm pleased to announce that some of the most forward-looking foundations in America are looking to invest at least \$200 million over the next 5 years—on top of the \$150 million that they've already invested—to test which strategies are working for our kids and expand them in cities across the country.

Many of these folks have been on the frontlines in this fight for a long time. What's more, they're joined by business leaders, corporate leaders, entrepreneurs who are stepping forward to support this effort as well. And my administration is going to do its part. So today, after my remarks are done, I'm going to pen this Presidential memorandum directing the Federal Government not to spend more money, but to do things smarter, to determine what we can do right now to improve the odds for boys and young men of color and make sure our agencies are working more effectively with each other, with those businesses, with those philanthropies, and with local communities to implement proven solutions.

And part of what makes this initiative so promising is that we actually know what works and we know when it works. Now, what do I mean by that? Over the years, we've identified key moments in the life of a boy or a young man of color that will, more often than not, determine whether he succeeds or falls through the cracks. We know this—we know the data. We know the statistics. And if we can focus on those key moments, those life-changing points in their lives, you can have a big impact, you can boost the odds for more of our kids.

First of all, we know that during the first 3 years of life, a child born into a low-income family hears 30 million fewer words than a child born into a well-off family. And everybody knows babies are sponges, they just soak that up. A 30-million-word deficit is hard to make up. And if a Black or Latino kid isn't ready for kindergarten, he's half as likely to finish middle school with strong academic and social skills. So by giving more of our kids access to a high-quality early education and by helping parents get the tools they need to help their children succeed, we can give more kids a better shot at the career they're capable of and the life that will make us all better off. So that's point number one, right at the beginning.

Point number two, if a child can't read well by the time he's in third grade, he's four times less likely to graduate from high school by age 19 than one who can. And if he happens to be poor, he's six times less likely to graduate. So by boosting reading levels, we can help more of our kids make the grade, keep on advancing, reach that day that so many parents dream of—until it comes close, and then you start tearing up—and that's when they're walking across the stage, holding that high school diploma.

Number three, we know that Latino kids are almost twice as likely as white kids to be suspended from school. Black kids are nearly four times as likely. And if a student has been suspended even once by the time they're in ninth grade, they are twice as likely to drop out.

And that's why my administration has been working with schools on alternatives to the so-called zero-tolerance guidelines, not because teachers or administrators or fellow students should have to put up with bad behavior, but because there are ways to modify bad behavior that lead to good behavior, as opposed to bad behavior out of school. We can make classrooms good places for learning for everybody without jeopardizing a child's future. And by building on that work, we can keep more of our young men where they belong: in the classroom, learning, growing, gaining the skills they need to succeed.

Number four, we know that students of color are far more likely than their White classmates to find themselves in trouble with the law. If a student gets arrested, he's almost twice as likely to drop out of school. By making sure our criminal justice system doesn't just function as a pipeline for underfunded schools to overcrowded jails, we can help young men of color stay out of prison, stay out of jail. And that means, then, they're more likely to be employable and to invest in their own families and to pass on a legacy of love and hope.

And finally, we know young Black men are twice as likely as young White men to be disconnected: not in school, not working. We've got to reconnect them. We've got to give more of these young men access to mentors. We've got to continue to encourage responsible fatherhood. We've got to provide more pathways to apply to college or find a job. We can keep them from falling through the cracks and help them lay a foundation for a career and a family and a better life.

In the discussion before we came in, General Powell talked about the fact that there are going to be some kids who just don't have a family at home that is functional, no matter how hard we try. But just an adult—any adult—who's paying attention can make a difference. Any adult who cares can make a difference.

Magic was talking about being at a school in Chicago, and rather than going to the school, he brought the school to the company, Allstate, that was doing the work. And suddenly, just that one conversation meant these young men saw something different. A world opened up for them. It doesn't take that much. But it takes more than we're doing now.

And that's what "My Brother's Keeper" is all about: helping more of our young people stay on track, providing the support they need to think more broadly about their future, building on what works, when it works, in those critical life-changing moments. And when I say, by the way, building on what works, it means looking at the actual evidence of what works. There are a lot of programs out there that sound good, are well intentioned, well inspired, but they're not actually having an impact. And we don't have enough money or time or resources to invest in things that don't work, so we've got to be pretty hardheaded about saying if something is not working, let's stop doing it. Let's do things that work. And we shouldn't care whether it was a Democratic program or a Republican program or a faith-based program or—if it works, we

should support it. If it doesn't, we shouldn't. And all the time recognizing that my neighbor's child is my child, that each of us has an obligation to give every child the same chance this country gave so many of us.

So in closing, let me just say this. None of this is going to be easy. This is not a 1-year proposition. It's not a 2-year proposition. It's going to take time. We're dealing with complicated issues that run deep in our history, run deep in our society, and are entrenched in our minds. And addressing these issues will have to be a two-way bargain. Because no matter how much the community chips in, it's ultimately going to be up to these young men and all the young men who are out there to step up and seize responsibility for their own lives.

And that's why I want to close by speaking directly to the young men who are here today and all the boys and young men who are watching at home. Part of my message, part of our message in this initiative is, "No excuses." And government and private sector and philanthropy and all the faith communities, we all have a responsibility to help provide you the tools you need. We've got to help you knock down some of the barriers that you experience. That's what we're here for. But you've got responsibilities too.

And I know you can meet the challenge—many of you already are—if you make the effort. It may be hard, but you will have to reject the cynicism that says the circumstances of your birth or society's lingering injustices necessarily define you and your future. It will take courage, but you will have to tune out the naysayers who say that the deck is stacked against you, you might as well just give up or settle into the stereotype.

It's not going to happen overnight, but you're going to have to set goals, and you're going to have to work for those goals. Nothing will be given to you. The world is tough out there; there's a lot of competition for jobs and college positions. And everybody has to work hard. But I know you guys can succeed. We've got young men up here who are starting to make those good choices because somebody stepped in and gave them a sense of how they might go about it.

And I know it can work because of men like Maurice Owens, who's here today. I want to tell Moe's story just real quick. When Moe was 4 years old, he moved with his mom Chauvet from South Carolina to the Bronx. Now, his mom didn't have a lot of money, and they lived in a tough neighborhood. Crime was high. A lot of young men ended up in jail or worse. But she knew the importance of education, so she got Moe into the best elementary school that she could find. And every morning, she put him on a bus; every night, she welcomed him when he came home.

Shetook the initiative; she eventually found a sponsorship program that allowed Moe to attend a good high school. And while many of his friends got into trouble, some of it pretty serious, Moe just kept on getting on the bus and kept on working hard and reaching for something better. And he had some adults in his life that were willing to give him advice and help him along the way. And he ended up going to college. And he ended up serving his country in the Air Force. And today, Moe works in the White House, just two door down from the Oval Office, as the Special Assistant to my Chief of Staff. And Moe never misses a chance to tell kids who grew up just like he did that if he can make it, they can too.

Moe and his mom are here today, so I want to thank them both for this incredible experience. Stand up, Moe, and show off your mom there. *[Applause]* Good job, Moe. So Moe didn't make excuses. His mom had high expectations. America needs more citizens like Moe. We need more young men like Christian. We will beat the odds. We need to give every child,

no matter what they look like, where they live, the chance to reach their full potential. Because if we do—if we help these wonderful young men become better husbands and fathers and well-educated, hardworking, good citizens—then not only will they contribute to the growth and prosperity of this country, but they will pass on those lessons on to their children, on to their grandchildren. We'll start a different cycle. And this country will be richer and stronger for it for generations to come.

So let's get going. Thank you. God bless you. God bless the United States of America.

[*At this point, the President signed the memorandum on creating and expanding ladders of opportunity for boys and young men of color.*]

The President. All right.

NOTE: The President spoke at 3:43 p.m. in the East Room at the White House. In his remarks, he referred to Christian Champagne, student, Hyde Park Academy High School in Chicago, IL; Mayor Rahm I. Emanuel of Chicago, IL; Earvin "Magic" Johnson, Jr., former player, National Basketball Association; former Secretary of State Colin L. Powell; Tracy Martin and Sybrina Fulton, parents of Trayvon Martin, who was killed in Sanford, FL, on February 26, 2012; Lucia McBath and Ronald Davis, parents of Jordan R. Davis, who was killed in Jacksonville, FL, on November 23, 2012; Rep. Frederica S. Wilson, in her former capacity as member of the Miami-Dade County School Board; former Mayor Michael R. Bloomberg of New York City; civil rights activist Alfred C. Sharpton, Jr.; Bill O'Reilly, host, FOX News Channel's "The O'Reilly Factor" program; and Chauvet Wells, mother of Maurice Owens, Special Assistant to the White House Chief of Staff.

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Locations: Washington, DC.

Names: Bloomberg, Michael R.; Champagne, Christian; Davis, Lucia; Davis, Ron; Durbin, Richard J.; Emanuel, Rahm I.; Foxx, Anthony R.; Frederica S. Wilson; Johnson, Earvin "Magic," Jr.; Lee, Mike; Martin, Sybrina; Martin, Tracy; McDonough, Denis R.; Obama, Malia; Obama, Michelle; Obama, Natasha "Sasha"; O'Reilly, Bill; Owens, Maurice; Powell, Colin L.; Sharpton, Alfred C., Jr.; Wells, Chauvet.

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