

Obama team seeks support of progressives on poverty: White House staff address Sojourners gathering

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Members of President Obama's domestic team addressed more than 1,000 Christian progressives at an antipoverty meeting in Washington, asking for their help to accomplish the president's agenda.

"It is shameful that we live in a country where hundreds of thousands of kids experience hunger over the course of the year, and there's no reason why we can't address that," said Martha Coven, a White House poverty expert, who drew applause during a panel discussion April 27 at the Mobilization to End Poverty, hosted by the social justice organization Sojourners.

Sponsors of the four-day gathering that ended April 29 included the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, Oxfam America, World Vision, the American Baptist Churches' national ministries and Wesley Theological Seminary. Altogether, 23 denominations and religious groups lent support to the meeting.

Coven, who directs the White House Office of Mobility and Opportunity, thanked the crowd for its support of Obama's proposed budget, which includes programs to help first-time mothers and combat child abuse and neglect.

Van Jones, a White House special adviser on green jobs, said the president's plans for harnessing renewable energy will help employ those adversely affected by the current economy and will address global warming. But, he said, calls to Congress are needed for such plans to take hold.

"We've got to be able to go back to our colleagues at the White House and tell them that help is on the way, that poverty is not a second-tier or third-tier issue . . . for

people of faith,” he said, according to Religion News Service.

Joshua DuBois, executive director of the White House Office of Faith-based and Neighborhood Partnerships, said the president views religious and other community organizations as co-workers in efforts to increase the availability of affordable health care and give more children access to high-quality education.

“He knows . . . we can’t solve these problems in Washington alone,” he said, citing Obama’s past role as a community organizer.

In a brief videotaped greeting, the president thanked those gathered for their efforts to advocate for those in need. “My administration is working to match your service with a commitment of our own that the least of these will not be forgotten,” Obama said in an apparent reference to the Gospel of Matthew.

In that vein, Mark S. Hanson, the ELCA presiding bishop, speaking at a roundtable discussion, said that if he were serving a parish, he would ask adults to hold each other “accountable to publicly live out the mandate of serving the poor or spreading the justice of peace.”

“We would confess it didn’t go as well as God intended,” said Hanson in remarks reported by the ELCA News Service. “Then we would become a community of moral discernment, not splitting conservatives and liberals, but engaging the word in the world as this community of faith in this context.”