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Remarks to the RWJF Commission to Build a Healthier America

Washington, DC

Thank you, David. Good morning, Commissioners, special guests, ladies and gentlemen, folks following us online. Mark and Alice, here we are again! Thank you for providing your exceptional leadership to the Commission as co-chairs for a second time. We couldn't ask for better guidance. And David, thank you for the tremendous expertise and commitment that you've provided as staff director.

You all have done an extraordinary job of carrying the messages of the first Commission into meeting rooms *and* living rooms across America. You have worked hard to keep the recommendations on the public agenda. And, as you will hear, you and the Commission have had a real effect on actions around the country. To those of you [Commissioners] who have returned to continue working on these important issues, welcome back. And to those of you who are new to the Commission, welcome aboard!

I love the message delivered in the video that you just saw because it presents the work of this Commission in a simple, straightforward way: give people the opportunity to live healthier lives from their first days to their last, from cradle to twilight. It's that simple. That important. And that difficult.

One of the most significant accomplishments of the first Commission was getting the public to understand that health is about much more than health care. Simple. Important. And difficult.

Simple, because we know our health is affected by where and how we live, learn, work and play. Important, because research shows the effects of these everyday occurrences are significant and widespread. Difficult because most of the policy discussions by our leaders remain narrowly focused on medical care.

By the way, I'd like to point out that the phrase—*where we live, learn, work, and play*—was developed by the Commission, and now we hear it everywhere! It's a simple concept. It's also a difficult one, because it means there isn't one, easy fix to our nationwide problem. Our neighborhoods, our schools, streets, stores, jobs, and communities—all play a role in the state of our nation's health. And everybody—from our families, teachers and caregivers, to leaders in business, government, and community organizations—must work together to make things better. We all know that's *not* so simple. And far too often, it's downright difficult.

Four years ago, the Commission issued a set of recommendations that sharpened the nation's focus on the social determinants of health in America. And, happily, they not only sparked discussion from coast to coast, but they also sparked action, in towns, and in cities. In school lunchrooms and on playgrounds. At community health clinics, municipal halls, and workplaces all across America.

In a moment, David will discuss the progress that's been made since 2009 in much more detail. But I'd like to share one example that speaks directly to what we are here to address today: early childhood intervention and community development.

In Minneapolis, there is a program called the Northside Achievement Zone that is taking what it calls a "cradle-to-career" approach to helping low-income families, using education as a ladder out of poverty. In fact, one of our speakers today—Art Rolnick—is a board member of this initiative, which people call NAZ for short. Thank you, Art, for being here today. The goal of NAZ is to change everything about a Northside child's life all at once.

The CEO, Sondra Samuels, calls it providing a "cocoon of support". And that cocoon—not surprisingly—speaks directly to the Commission's recommendation that all of our children receive high-quality care, coordinated services, and early education. Each family in the NAZ is provided with a personal coach who works with a team of public and private partners to address whatever the child needs to succeed—inside and outside the classroom. From pre-K to college and beyond. If the family needs housing, the coach helps find a decent place to live. If the issue is food, the coach finds a way to help with groceries. If it's work, NAZ strives to find not just a job, but training that leads to a career.

The Northside program is not about patching the holes in the lives of a family temporarily. It's about infusing an entire community with the expectation of success. When one family sees it can be done, another will join the effort. And family-by-family, they will build their own culture of continued success. It's an inspiring story, and certainly a great start. But right now the Northside Achievement Zone is working with about 600 children, and there are 3,000 living in the target area. And how many hundreds of thousands of other children are living in similar conditions across America?

The good news is we know what works: giving children and their families a healthy start with early childhood development programs. And building healthy communities that provide the means and the opportunity to make healthy choices.

Last month, I met an inspiring group of people from Rancho Cucamonga, in southern California. Anyone been there? Heard of it? I hadn't either until last month. Five years ago, the city council there decided it wanted to seriously promote sustainability, and part of that included healthy living. What they discovered was the community seemed especially hungry for the health initiatives and really responded to actions like a city ordinance requiring farmers' markets to actually sell food instead of flea market items, and free cooking classes teaching folks how to cook fresh produce. Residents asked for help affording good food, and the city established vouchers allowing them to buy twice as much from the farmers' market with food stamps.

Today, the program touches on primary care, education, and the planning of the city's infrastructure. It is so popular that Rancho Cucamonga is officially branding itself as "Healthy RC." And residents who never thought they could play a part in shaping public policy have become sophisticated, active community leaders who understand how to use tools like zoning to increase healthy choices in their neighborhoods.

Stories like this are why we have reconvened this Commission, and asked you to provide new recommendations to guide not just a few cities here and there, but our entire nation toward better health.

Commissioners, I'd like to also ask you to do one more thing. As you listen to the expert presentations today—as you weigh data and deliberate—keep the questions of equity, and the root causes of violence, foremost in your minds. Forty-seven years ago, Dr. Martin Luther King said:

"Of all the forms of inequality, injustice in health is the most shocking and the most inhumane."

I was a child when he spoke those words. Now, I'm a grandmother, and still the disparities linger. The issues of inclusion and equity are not simply moral questions; they are a matter of economics that affect every one of us.

Nobel Laureate Joseph Stiglitz says, "The magnitude and nature of the country's inequality represent a serious threat to America," and, "alleviating it and promoting growth are intertwined, complementary goals."

One way to quantify the extent of this imbalance is to use a measurement known as the Gini coefficient—named after the Italian statistician Corrado Gini. In a nutshell, the Gini coefficient aggregates the rift between people's incomes. And it shows that over the past 30 years the level of inequality in America has increased by 30%. Of course, there are many reasons for this. But one thing we know for certain: early childhood experiences have a powerful impact on a person's ability to succeed later in life.

The first Commission stressed that America will never become a healthy nation until *all* of our children can attain a quality education from the youngest age. And yet, too many still do not attend pre-school. Too many live in neighborhoods with no place to play. And too many must cope daily with the stress and threat of violence in their families, on their streets, and in their schools. Education, particularly early education, safety, economic opportunity, they all are ingredients in the complex recipe for healthy communities.

In Los Angeles, there's an organization called Homeboy Industries that provides job training and entrepreneurial opportunities to young men and women who were once gang members. Their motto is: "Nothing stops a bullet like a job." And I would add—a job with a future. It's all connected, and they know it. You know it too.

You know that introducing grocery stores into urban food deserts not only provides healthy food to families, but also creates jobs, tax revenues, and community cohesion. You know that opening neighborhood health clinics not only increases access to dependable care, but also provides careers for local residents, and gives families a safe and trusted place to turn when they need help. If you provide a cocoon of support for a child as early as possible, you know that you can help her avoid serious health problems, and point her instead toward a lifetime of greater academic and economic promise.

The power of the Commission's first report was that, instead of shying away from the most daunting challenges, it confronted them with practical and actionable recommendations. Commissioners, we need to take that approach again. We must empower people to lead healthy lives from the very start. And get rid of the obstacles that keep them from flourishing. It's that simple. That difficult. And that important to our nation's future. In 2009, this Commission called on *all* of us to nurture a national culture of health. At

the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation we've set out to catalyze that by making it the crux of our vision for the future: Our north star.

So, what would a culture of health look like? We believe it is an America where all the people live longer, healthier lives—regardless of their ethnic, geographic, racial, or socio-economic circumstances. It is an America that considers being healthy and staying healthy a core social value. A nation where the health of our entire population guides public and private decision making. And business, government, and organizations work in concert to create healthy communities.

I want to thank the Commission for helping us set our compass toward that goal. For agreeing to build on the improvements that we're already beginning to see. And for hastening our transformation into a much healthier nation. Commissioners, you are being asked to give voice and visibility to these critical issues. To create the zeal *and* the drive to get the job done. And to do it sooner rather than later. It's that simple. And that difficult.

Remember that what you accomplish will benefit Americans today, tomorrow, and for generations to come. What could be more important? So, before you get to work, let me leave you with the words of the great Margaret Mead, who said:

"Never doubt that a small group of thoughtful, committed citizens can change the world. Indeed, it is the only thing that ever has."

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