



Middle Class Task Force Begins Work and Wants Your Advice

By: Patricia A. O'Malley

Originally published in the *51 Corridor Community Newspaper*, February 26, 2009

On January 30, President Obama announced the creation of a White House Task Force on Middle Class Working Families, to be chaired by Vice President Biden. Its purpose is to raise the living standard of middle class working families. They want to hear your opinions.

President Obama said: "The strength of our economy can be measured by the strength of our middle class. That is why I have signed a memorandum to create the Task Force on Middle-Class Working Families – and why I have asked my Vice President to lead it. This is a difficult moment. But I believe, if we act boldly and swiftly, it can be an American moment - when we work through our differences and overcome our divisions to face this crisis."

The task force has five goals: expanding education and lifelong training opportunities, improving work and family balance, restoring labor standards, including workplace safety, helping to protect middle-class and working-family incomes, and protecting retirement security. In addition to Biden, members include the Secretaries of Labor (Hilda Solis, designate), Education (Arne Duncan), Health and Human Services, and Commerce, as well as the Directors of the National Economic Council (Lawrence Summers), the Office of Management and Budget (Peter Orszag), the Domestic Policy Council (Melody Barnes), and the Chair of the Council of Economic Advisors (Christina Romer, designate).

The task force will work with the relevant federal agencies and with representatives of labor, business, and the advocacy communities. It will propose executive orders, recommend reforms, and develop new policies, programs, and legislation. Many of its working sessions will focus on initiatives in the new American Recovery and Reinvestment Act (ARRA). That's the stimulus package.

There is some question about identifying the "middle class". Because there is no formal definition, there are conflicting opinions on the boundaries. We know that a family of four with an annual income of \$22,050 or less lives in poverty. We know that Bill Gates is wealthy. Middle class lies somewhere between those extremes. According to the US Census Bureau, median annual family income in 2007 was \$61,335. The National Opinion Research Center found that Americans earning from \$45,000 to \$200,000 defined themselves as "middle class". Task force Executive Director Jared Bernstein plans to use a broad working definition of the term.

At its first meeting on February 27 in Philadelphia, the task force will focus on "green jobs". Members will meet with advocates and providers of products and services to conserve energy and natural resources, reduce pollution, and recycle waste. By using newer approaches, methods, and technology, "green" companies can open many new jobs for workers. The ARRA includes funding to upgrade federal buildings and facilities to make them "greener".

In the future, the task force will address infrastructure, child care, health care, college affordability, retirement, workplace safety, and other issues.

Biden says, "This Task Force will be an important vehicle to assess new and existing policies across the board and determine if they are helping or hurting the middle class. It is our charge to get the middle class—the backbone of this country— up and running again."

In keeping with Obama's promise and policy of transparent government, all materials and reports relating to the task force will be available to the public on the Web site, listed below. You can see them whenever you like. You can also offer your opinions and suggestions through the site or by contacting the vice president's office.

Come on. Everyone gripes that government never helps working people. Well, they do now. This is your chance to speak up. Don't lose it.

For more information go to www.whitehouse.gov/strongmiddleclass, or write to Vice President Joe Biden, The White House, 1600 Pennsylvania Avenue NW, Washington DC, 20500. 202-456-1111.

*Pat O'Malley is a consultant to nonprofit agencies.
Contact Pat at communitymatters@patomalley-consulting.com.
Read past columns at www.patomalley-consulting.com*