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Western Mass. organizers hit D.C. grassroots forum

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Toussaint Losier

More than 80 members of the Springfield, Mass.-based Alliance to Develop Power (ADP) traveled to Washington, D.C., last Thursday to take part in a forum that brought community leaders from across the country together with Beltway insiders.

"Realizing the Promise: A Forum on Community, Faith and Democracy" gave the crowd — consisting of about 2,000 grassroots leaders and community members, as well as senior advisors to President-elect Barack Obama and a number of congressman — the opportunity to sit down and discuss issues facing the nation, as well as practical solutions.

"It's very important that everyday people be heard during the transition period and the first 100 days, so that the president can begin to address their concerns from day one," said ADP Executive Director Caroline Murray. "There's much work to be done in easing the country's problems; having the transition team's ear is a good start."

Among the president-elect's advisors participating in the discussions were Valerie Jarrett, who was recently appointed senior advisor and assistant to the president for intergovernmental relations and public liaison, and Melody Barnes, the incoming director of the Domestic Policy Council at the White House.

"Realizing the Promise" was an extension of the Heartland Presidential Forum, held on Dec. 1, 2007, during which then-Sen. Obama pledged that grassroots leaders would help shape his agenda as president.

At the Heartland Presidential Forum, ADP leader Dedra Lewis and her daughter Alexsiana appeared on stage with Obama. Dedra Lewis talked about the State Children's Health Insurance Program and pushed Obama to guarantee health care for all.

"A year ago, then-Sen. Obama promised he would have members of his transition team meet with grassroots leaders," said Dedra Lewis, who also spoke at a Dec. 4 immigration reform rally with U.S. Rep. Luis Guterrez, D-Ill. "Well, he fulfilled that promise."

Last week's forum also built on the work begun at ADP's Community Convention, held on Oct. 28, 2008, at which more than 500 community leaders met with Sen. John F. Kerry, D-Mass., and other political leaders to call for an America that works for all citizens.

In addition to the meetings between grassroots leaders and political advisors, "Realizing the Promise" featured two roundtable discussions moderated by Juan Williams, a journalist, author and news analyst for National Public Radio. The discussions provided a setting for dialogue between community and faith leaders, members of Congress and representatives of the incoming Obama administration about a variety of issues facing Americans, including the flagging economy, rising unemployment, increasing health care costs, the immigration debate, environmental dangers and more.

Operating in three Western Massachusetts counties, ADP has worked to transform 1,450 units of deteriorated housing to tenant-owned permanently affordable co-ops, and created worker-controlled businesses and food cooperatives that distribute 200,000 pounds of food each year, among other community-based initiatives.

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