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U. S. Dept. of Labor

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF LABOR

ABC Event

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P R O C E E D I N G S

THE FIRST LADY: Please be seated.

Good afternoon, and welcome to the White House, and happy Hallowe'en.

Over the last several weeks, I have been thinking a lot about raising children and the obligations that we owe to our own children and other people's children. And I am convinced that there is no more important issue for any of us to be discussing these days. I am actually trying to finish a book about that called "It Takes a Village to Raise a Child," and it really says what I believe.

And increasingly, American business has a very important role to play in the village. And I am pleased today to have the opportunity to recognize and thank the many businesses and municipalities and organizations that are here today for your commitment, not only to your own families, but to the families of the people who work for you, and your communities, by creating family-friendly work places.

I suppose that there are some who still do not believe that we should try to make our work places family

friendly, that somehow that is someone else's responsibility. But I think that any of us who look into the future know that we all have a stake in what happens to all of our children. And part of what this afternoon is doing is recognizing those of you who understand that fundamental principle.

Last year, the Department of Labor asked women what they thought of their jobs. And over 250,000 of them responded. They told the Department of Labor and the President, to whom they actually wrote postcards and letters, in what was called the Working Women Count survey, that they like working. They like contributing to their family's income. They like making a contribution. But that they need to have a more supportive and understanding work place, because we all need help in making sure our work and family obligations are fulfilled.

Just a few minutes ago, I met some of the families that you see here on this stage and in this audience, and I know, as I looked around the table, what it means for the mothers and fathers that I met to feel that their employers appreciate them as full human beings, as participants with obligations to their children.

I met with Dr. Suzanne Sherman, who works for Kodak in Rochester, and relies on their emergency and back up child care for her two sons. Alma Raymond, a single parent in New York City, who would have had to have left her job at the WYCA if it did not have an employee discount on their summer camp. And Susan Cullin and Joel Silverman of Austin, Texas, who know that their children are safe and well cared for at a child care center sponsored by IBM.

The economy has changed, and with it, the stresses on American families have increased. Most families have to have two wage earners, and many families are supported by single parents. Three out of four working women have school-aged children, and it is really hard to keep body and soul together on lots of days, as I can speak from personal experience.

When you're supposed to be somewhere for your job at 9:30, and your daughter's been up all night sick, and it's now 7:30, and your husband's out of town, and she's running a fever, and your baby sitter calls and says, "I'm sick," and describes the same symptoms that you've been up with all night with your daughter, and you don't know what you're going to do -- I've been there, done that, and I

know that trying to figure out how to keep your job and do the best job you can, and to be the very best parent you can -- which is, after all, your most important job -- is not easy.

As a forty-two-year-old factory worker and mother of two said to me recently, "What do you do with your kids when you're assigned the 4:00 p.m. to midnight shift?"

So what we're trying to do is create what we're calling the Working Women Count Honor Roll, and that Honor Roll will honor businesses and local governments and other organizations pledged to make work better and work places friendlier for parents and their families. We know that there are many, many companies of all sizes out there that are already doing what needs to be done, and we hope that by next summer, we will have one thousand pledges from companies that will say they want to be part of this effort.

The changes are happening where it counts: in the work places and neighborhoods and communities around America. The city of Kansas City, Missouri has pledged to grant city employees four hours paid leave annually to participate in their children's activities, and the mayor,

Mayor Cleaver, has challenged area businesses to follow suit.

This is really important. We want parents involved in their children's education, and then we tell them: "You can't go to the parent-teacher conference. You can't go to the school performance. You can't see your child play that sports game that is so important to him." And many parents then feel a sense of powerlessness, and check out. So I know how significant this effort is.

In Texas, the Fort Worth Star Telegram pledges to broaden and formalize family friendly practices, including Flex-Time and telecommuting. It has developed a prenatal maternity care program for the early detection of pregnancy problems, and has set up a private room where employees may nurse their babies.

Now, every reporter here, I hope, will tell their paper, their station, their news service, about what the Fort Worth Star Telegram is doing to make it possible for families to stay together and earn a living.

Now, the Oregon Community Foundation's Oregon Child Development Fund has pledged to raise \$900,000.00 over three years to fund job training for hundreds of

infant-toddler child care providers. This is really important, because too many parents have to leave their -- our children -- in child care centers where the providers there are paid minimum wage, where the turnover is six out of ten workers leaving every single year, where they have very little training, where in most states, you have to do more to get a license to cut hair than take care of children.

So trying to train child care workers is important because actually the facts are that well-trained workers provide higher-quality care, and it is usually not more expensive, but many parents don't know that, and don't know quite what to look for.

Now, as it's Honor Roll pledge, the American Business Collaborative, which we recognize today, will launch a \$100 million initiative to develop and strengthen school age child care and elder care projects in communities across the country. I am so excited about this, because this is the kind of pooling of resources that I would like to see happen with more businesses.

I often visit businessess and they say they can't afford to do it on their own, and I ask if they've talked

to the business down the street, or the business next door, to get together to provide some of these services. And I think this is a really important idea that I would like to see others follow.

I'm also pleased that ABC funds an AmeriCorps program run by the National Association of Child Care Resource and Referral Agencies, where AmeriCorps members are helping thousands of families find out where they can access high-quality child care.

So all of these programs that we are honoring today are on the cutting edge of what needs to be done around the country, if we expect to have not only the kind of work force that is loyal, dependable and committed to its work, but if we expect to have our children being given the kind of support they need to develop as they should.

So I hope that we will be able to challenge other businesses to do the same. We need thousands to do so. And I want each of you to know that you really are an example for people all over the country.

And the person who has helped to spearhead this and make it happen is the Secretary of Labor, himself the father of two. The other day, a woman friend of mine was

given an award, and she got up and thanked her husband and said he had two children and he never complained about it. He just did his part. And for those of us who have followed Bob Reich as both a leader and a thinker, one of the most impressive things about him is his fathering, because he is, really a committed Dad.

So please join me in welcoming the Secretary of Labor.

SECRETARY REICH: Thank you so much.

As the First Lady was talking about child care crises, I suddenly flashed upon, in my mind's eye, years back when my wife and I had our first of many child care crises. I was out of town, and Clare --

That's even before I became Secretary of Labor. And Clare was teaching school. She's a -- she was teaching college. And our child care worker at that time was sick. And she -- her class was coming up within ten minutes, and there was no place for our two little boys. So she took Adam and Sam, and she ran into the Dean's Office, and she said, "Here."

And she went off and taught. And the Dean stood there with Adam and Sam, and that was -- he became