

MORINO INSTITUTE

Taking Action:

A Business Commitment To Youth

*An address by Mario Morino,
Chairman of the Morino Institute,
for the Greater Washington
Business Philanthropy Summit
April 7, 1998*

Good morning. I want to thank the *Washington Business Journal* and Greater DC Cares for bringing the business community together for this important discussion. I also want to thank the Fannie Mae Foundation and AT&T for their sponsorship and express my appreciation for the opportunity to be a part of this program.

Today I'd like to share some thoughts on how business can—or I should say must—take a stronger, more active role in creating a better future for the Greater Washington region. And that future is our youth.

Business has the strength, the leadership, the skills and the rationale to get involved and make a difference in the lives of our children. And I don't mean by just sending a check, although such efforts help. What I want to emphasize is “engagement”—a concerted, cooperative, and committed approach by business. We should be asking, “How are we involved? What impact are we having?” not “How much are we giving?” For the more effective approach is a strategic one.

Ernst Volgenau, the CEO of SRA, a technology services company based in Arlington, has been involved with our community for a long time. SRA has worked with inner city learning centers for more than a decade. They've partnered with two elementary schools in northern Virginia, where their employees tutor kids. And they have done a lot more. For Ernst, these activities reflect the company's values and are a part of its mission. “It's in our culture, in our blood,” he says. “We like to think it makes SRA a special place.” Efforts like these need to be emulated if we're truly going to address the problems our young people face.

I worry about what happens when our children grow up in the absence of caring adults and without the support of a healthy community. My greatest fear is that youth today will not have the opportunities I had when I grew up—opportunities that many here enjoyed as well. As poor as we were, I was rich in community, in family, and in caring adults.

Taking Action: A Business Commitment to Youth

Many kids in our region—even wealthy ones—will never know those riches. That is why so many lose hope and a reason for being. What could be more remote from our American ethos and entrepreneurial spirit than such hopelessness and despair?

The problems are especially acute in our lower-income neighborhoods, where children face ever-mounting obstacles to healthy and productive lives. Throughout Washington, northern Virginia and suburban Maryland, we are increasingly alarmed by high rates of suicide, drug use, and pregnancy among teens for whom schools are often inadequate or irrelevant.

These are not just the problems of distant neighborhoods. Many of us here today have families with young children. We cannot assume the more prosperous neighborhoods we live in and the schools our children attend are free from danger. Just read the headlines in **our** communities: A 17-year-old former student at Marshall High School in Fairfax shot to death. Two students in Montgomery County arrested after a pipe bomb is found in a locker. A youth prostitution ring uncovered in Reston. Murder for hire by teens in Anne Arundel County. These are scary incidents—ones we can no longer treat as exceptions. They are everyday realities for many of our children. One 13-year-old girl, quoted recently in ***The Washington Post***, confessed her anxieties about the future as well as her dreams, when she said, “I just want to become someone I can be proud of.”

Seeing kids like these makes us want to help. In addressing these ills, we have the opportunity to create a better future for the region and ourselves. When we reduce poverty and violence, we benefit from the stronger communities that emerge. When we strengthen our communities, the region becomes a more attractive place to live, learn, work and socialize in. And when we improve our schools, businesses gain access to a better prepared work force. Our challenge is especially urgent because we are the heart of the nation. Every action we take, every problem we solve resonates far beyond our region. As does each problem we neglect. This is America's capital. We can and must set a powerful example.

So I appeal to you to become engaged—to make a serious commitment. If you have already done so, see what more you can do. If you have not yet acted, then get

“We can and must set a powerful example.”

involved, because you have so much to offer and so much to gain. Helping youth succeed may well be the most important investment you can make in our community and in our country's future.

The Presidents' Summit for America's Future, held last year in Philadelphia, put forth a set of goals for our youth. They bear repeating and renewing today:

to provide every at-risk child in America access to five fundamental resources needed to lead healthy and productive lives: an ongoing relationship with a caring adult, access to safe places and structured activities to learn and grow, a healthy start, a marketable skill through effective education and an opportunity to give back through community service.

Achieving these outcomes has become much more challenging in light of two developments. First, cuts in federal spending and corporate donations have led to a decline in services for children and their families. The expectation that non-profits can pick up the slack is simply unrealistic. They are already doing more than their share with increasingly fragile support.

Second, children face a different and more complex set of hurdles as the New Economy takes shape. This economic shift brings enormous opportunity to our region. While some of us reap its rewards, too many of our neighborhoods are shut out entirely from the rapid advances in technology that are behind this development. Children from these communities often lack decent schools—let alone access to technology—and, therefore, the skills they need to make it in this new world. We run the risk of substantially widening the gaps in our society, instead of narrowing them.

What can we do to give these kids hope? To give them a chance in life? Certainly, concerned citizens have responded to their plight. And business has participated, too. But we can do so much more and be so much more effective. We must take a strategic approach. And we must leverage our actions. Only then can we begin to tackle our worst problems.

Taking Action: A Business Commitment to Youth

Consider Kaiser Permanente. This non-profit HMO is a model of effective strategic partnership. Although Kaiser has traditionally provided care for the underprivileged, its local office formed an official partnership with Fairfax County 11 years ago. Kaiser pediatricians then began treating 35 uninsured kids through the county's Medical Care for Children Partnership. The program, designed by Sandy Lowe, has proven so successful that it has been replicated around the region, indeed, as far away as Illinois and Florida. Fred Nebel, director of community relations at Kaiser, says, "We get far greater leverage by partnering with organizations such as MCCP than by doing it ourselves. We're now working with more than 1,000 children."

Doctors, applying their skills to treat uninsured kids. This is strategic action. This is the leverage we need.

Consider what business brings to the table. The gains business has achieved over the past two decades are nothing short of remarkable. Companies have responded to adversity, whether in mounting competition from overseas or renewed struggles at home by innovating and adapting, so that American business is once again the envy of the world. In the process, we have learned new methods of management, organization, technology deployment and other important disciplines. We can share that valuable knowledge with the non-profit world—and at a time of critical need.

We could proceed alone, each tackling a single facet of the problem. But how much more effective to work together—as a community—learning about each other's needs and strengths, discussing our options, then acting to achieve sustained results. The partnership between business and the non-profit world offers so much potential.

How does business benefit? Better, healthier communities, first off. A landmark study several years ago by the Conference Board, the business research group, found that 90 percent of companies with volunteer programs saw an improvement in their communities. Nearly the same number said the programs enhanced the corporation's public image, as well as the impact of their monetary contributions.

Other notable findings: these volunteer programs build teamwork skills, attract better employees, enhance training and increase employee retention. These benefits are so

“Community service may be the best way to close the ‘trust deficit.’ ”

important, especially in our region, where work force issues are critical. Doesn't finding and holding on to good staff keep many of you up at night? If so, please listen further. Morale was up to three times higher at companies where employees were involved in community activities. Pacific Northwest Bell, in a study of 5,000 workers, found a significant relationship between volunteer activities and job satisfaction.

Two professors analyzed companies in the Standard & Poor's 500 and found a direct correlation between social and financial performance. They described this relationship as a “virtuous circle.” John Whitehead, the former chairman of Goldman Sachs investment bank, commented, and I quote, “You'll get rewarded right away because you'll be known as a company that is conscious of its social responsibility and you'll attract better quality employees.”

At a time when a large portion of our nation is disillusioned with government and corporate institutions, community service may be the best way to close the “trust deficit.” Time and again, companies report how gratified employees feel about their work in the non-profit sector. So it isn't only a question of helping the less fortunate. It's about helping ourselves. But even further, of fulfilling ourselves, of doing something valuable—a sense that we have helped to turn the tide.

What must business do to turn the tide? Let me suggest seven strategies:

1 Find your passion

Focus on what engages you and your employees. Without a sense of ownership, people won't get involved. And more to the point, if they're not passionate about what they're doing, their commitment will flag. As Ernst Volgenau at SRA says, “I'm not just sitting here like an old geezer on top of the pile pontificating. There are people from SRA out in the trenches working with kids or cleaning up a river bank or planting trees on a garbage dump or taking kids to cultural events or serving food to people in need. So it's kind of a ground swell within.” Get involved in issues you are passionate about, which you care about. You will be able to sustain your efforts and your sincerity will be obvious to the youth you reach.

2 **Employ your resources creatively**

Your company has a lot to offer, and so do you. The assets that you might take for granted, like your skills, can be what's really needed to provide important help to a changing non-profit world. The Medical Care for Children Partnership, the Fairfax group, relies on multiple companies, non-profits and government agencies to accomplish its mission of treating uninsured kids of the working poor. Quoting Sandy Lowe who heads MCCP, "You ask people for things they are good at." She relies on Kaiser, among others, for doctors but depends on other partners for social services, transportation, translation, housing, counseling, employment services and marketing expertise. A web of relationships supports these kids and their families. MCCP is a model of collaboration!

3 **Identify and support leaders**

Paul Brainerd, who helped found Social Venture Partners in Seattle, a non-profit group that assists social entrepreneurs, says, "People with new ideas are at the grassroots level. They're also the ones who need the most help. Your expertise can help them create a plan of action to refine their strategy." Get behind the people in the community making a difference, people like Sandy Lowe, the leaders working on the ground level in our neighborhoods, making things happen. Find them, explore what they are doing, gain their trust and offer your support. You can help them be more effective and expand their capacity.

4 **Listen, don't tell**

The quickest way to alienate an organization on the front lines is to assume you know all the answers before you've taken the time to ask questions. Find out what's working and what the organization needs. Discuss how your core competencies might help them. And after you have explored the issues, offer suggestions. Just as you would if they were one of your clients.

*“We’ve talked ourselves to death.
Youth need our help now.”*

VOA Associates, a Chicago architectural firm, donated staff in its Washington office to design the Ronald McDonald House in Fairfax. The facility offers beds to parents whose children are hospitalized. When the firm took on the project, they organized a four-day focus group composed of hospital staff, parents and children to learn what was needed. They take this approach with all their clients. They listened. They contributed their skills. And four to five architects worked on the project full-time for two years until it was completed.

5 Explore new models

Think about new ways to work outside of the traditional models of philanthropy and volunteerism. We should learn from innovative approaches like the Charge Against Hunger campaign, a four-year partnership between American Express and Share Our Strength, a non-profit that exists to eliminate hunger in our country and around the world. The campaign generated more than \$21 million dollars for the non-profit, heightened public awareness about hunger and increased usage of the American Express Card. Bill Shore, who founded SOS, and his sister, Debbie, who really runs the organization, are with us today. Bill has formed a new company, Community Wealth Ventures, as a for-profit arm of Share Our Strength. It assists non-profits in creating revenue-generating programs, whether through product sales, licensing, or cause-related marketing partnerships. Bill is literally writing the book on new models.

6 Get engaged personally

The greatest thing an executive can do is to lead by example, encouraging others to climb aboard as well. Landmark Systems, a computer software firm, under the leadership of company founders Kathy Clark and Pat McGettigan, partnered with Edison High School in Alexandria. The company rewards students who make the honor roll with a pizza party, and organizes ice cream socials for pupils showing the most improvement. Landmark employees pitch in money for scholarships, given not only to students but also to teachers seeking to sharpen their skills. Finally, executives hold mock employment interviews with students. Landmark's program is a model of personal engagement.

7 Create a Compact For Youth

Solving the problems facing our young people requires sustained action and commitment, not just from business, but from every sector of society. We must spell out, with broad-based support, what we as a community need to achieve for the children in the greater Washington region. And we must move beyond dialogue. We've talked ourselves to death. Youth need our help now. It's time for strategic action that will break the status quo and, over time, lead to systemic change. We need to improve neighborhoods, restore hope among kids and give them a chance to succeed. We need to ensure that the 13-year-old girl quoted in *The Washington Post*—and the many children she represents—has the chance to become the person she can be proud of.

Business can lead in this effort, not by making unilateral decisions, but by getting all the players involved. We need to gain broad-based commitments—from maintenance workers to CEOs, from the PTOs to the National Education Association, and most of all, from the people within our own neighborhoods. We need to come together as a community. And we must promote a culture of collaboration.

Together, we must try to find lasting solutions to the problems we face, whether reducing violence, combating illiteracy, or ensuring that every child is afforded those five basic resources so clearly laid out at the Presidents' Summit. And with this compact for youth in place, everyone—business, philanthropic foundations, government, and non-profits—will be accountable for results.

We have a considerable task in front of us, but there are so many fine people already leading the way in the streets of our communities. Think what more they could do with our help. If we join with them, our small day-to-day actions will evolve into something much larger and more significant.

As Fred Nebel says about Kaiser's experience with the Medical Care for Children Partnership, "This group got together and started out providing medical care and low cost health insurance, but I think it's really evolved into a group of people who advocate

“Be as strategic and thoughtful, as you are in your businesses.”

for the health and well-being of children. And because they come from different segments of the community, it is a really powerful entity.”

Over the last year, I've noticed a growing desire among business leaders from Maryland, Virginia and the District to think regionally. People are beginning to recognize that the challenges facing the District are ones that the entire region must confront. The renewed commitment by the White House to the nation's capital has brought critical support and help. And it has heightened the country's—and to some degree, the world's—awareness of the challenges that our nation's capital, and, hence, our region, faces. There is a sincere desire for change. The timing is right and we have a window within which to act.

When you leave here today, commit to doing one thing to help our region's youth. And make it a long-lasting commitment. Be strategic and thoughtful, just as you are in your businesses. Think of how much you can help and how much you can benefit. In doing so:

- *Find your passion*
- *Use your resources creatively*
- *Support those community leaders already making a difference*
- *Listen to them before you offer advice*
- *Look beyond the status quo*
- *Explore new models*
- *But, most of all, get personally engaged*

As we act together to solve the problems of this region in bold and innovative ways, we can set a standard for the rest of the nation to follow.

Thank you.

THE MORINO INSTITUTE

Incorporated: 1994 in the Commonwealth of Virginia

Status: Morino Institute is a public charity tax exempt under section 501(c)(3) of the Internal Revenue Code.

Application information: The Institute administers a directed grant program and does not accept unsolicited grant applications.

Contact: The Morino Institute

1801 Robert Fulton Drive

Suite 550

Reston, Virginia 20191

Telephone: 703-620-8971

Fax: 703-620-4102

Email: info@morino.org

Web sites: <http://www.morino.org>

<http://netpreneur.org>