

I've got to tell you, being here with all of you today feels a little like coming home. Because while I stand here as a candidate for President of the United States, I will never forget that the most important experience in my life came when I was doing what you do each day – working on the ground in our communities to bring about change.

As some of you know, after college, I moved to Chicago and went to work for a group of churches to help families that had been devastated when the local steel plants closed down. I knew change in those communities wouldn't come easily – but I also knew it wouldn't come at all if we didn't start bringing people together. So I reached out to community leaders – black, brown, and white – and formed coalitions on issues ranging from failing schools to illegal dumping to unimmunized children. We set up job training for the jobless, helped prevent students from dropping out of school, and taught people to stand up to their government when it wasn't standing up for them.

That work taught me a fundamental truth that has guided me ever since: that in this country, change doesn't come from the top down. Change doesn't happen just because someone in Washington says it should. Change starts when you teach a child to read, or register someone to vote, or help a family buy their first home. It starts when you heal broken bodies and troubled spirits; when you organize neighborhoods into coalitions, and workers into unions. It starts when you send leaders to Washington committed to taking this country in a new direction.

That's the kind of change you're making every single day. The theme of this conference is the work of your lives: strengthening America together. It's been the work of this organization for four decades – lifting up families and transforming communities across America. And for that, I honor you, I congratulate you, I thank you, and I wish you another forty years as extraordinary as your last.

I come before you today at a defining moment for our nation. I'm thinking of an article I read in the newspaper a while back about struggling schools in Los Angeles. The article told the story of a boy named Gonzalo, who started falling behind in the seventh grade and wasn't getting the support he needed to catch up. When his mother called the school to complain, nothing changed.

"Maybe the system is not designed for people like us," she said.

Not designed for people like us.

It was a comment about education, but it reflects a broader feeling that so many people today share – that the system just isn't working for them. And they're right. It's not.

The system isn't working when a child in a crumbling school graduates without learning to read or doesn't graduate at all. Or when a young person at the top of her class – a young person with so much to offer this country – can't attend a public college.

The system isn't working when Hispanics are losing their jobs faster than almost anybody else, or working jobs that pay less, and come with fewer benefits than almost anybody else.

The system isn't working when 12 million people live in hiding, and hundreds of thousands cross our borders illegally each year; when companies hire undocumented immigrants instead of legal citizens to avoid paying overtime or to avoid a union; when communities are terrorized by ICE immigration raids – when nursing mothers are torn

from their babies, when children come home from school to find their parents missing, when people are detained without access to legal counsel.

When all that's happening, the system just isn't working.

And I know how frustrated many of you are right now. Your jobs are hard on a good day – and having a President who cuts your budgets doesn't help. Having a President who's torn gaping holes in the safety net for the people you serve doesn't help. Having a struggling economy – an economy that's left so many people in need of your assistance – that doesn't help either.

I know that sometimes, you get tired. Sometimes, you start to lose heart. You start to feel like you're walking that long, hard road alone – like no one sees the sacrifices you make or appreciates the services you provide.

But I know how hard you're working. I know the difference you're making in our communities. And I'm here today to make you this promise: I will be a President who stands with you, and fights for you, and walks with you every step of the way.

Because here's something else I know: that when the system isn't working, people who love this country can come together to change it.

That is the history of the Hispanic community in America. From fighting to desegregate our schools and neighborhoods, to organizing farmworkers, to standing up for the rights of immigrants, you've reminded us that those words about liberty and equality put to paper over 200 years ago mean something. And you've sought to remake this nation in the shape of those ideals.

It's work that reflects the character of this community in which so many people have come here with so little, but had big dreams, big hearts, and a thirst to succeed. A willingness to struggle and sacrifice so the next generation doesn't have to. It's the same reason my own father came here from Kenya so many years ago – in the hope that here in America, you can make it if you try.

For centuries, those values – hard work, patriotism, faith and family – the values that have made the Hispanic community strong – have made America strong too.

That's what's at stake this November. This election is nothing less than a test of our allegiance to the American Dream. And it's a test of our commitment to all those who are counting on us to keep that Dream alive – the people you serve every day.

The 12 million people in the shadows, the communities taking immigration enforcement into their own hands, the neighborhoods seeing rising tensions as citizens are pitted against new immigrants...they're counting on us to stop the hateful rhetoric filling our airwaves – rhetoric that poisons our political discourse, degrades our democracy, and has no place in this great nation. They're counting on us to rise above the fear and demagoguery, the pettiness and partisanship, and finally enact comprehensive immigration reform.

Now, I know Senator McCain used to buck his party on immigration by fighting for comprehensive reform – and I admired him for it. But when he was running for his party's nomination, he abandoned his courageous stance, and said that he wouldn't even support his own legislation if it came up for a vote.

Well, I don't know about you, but I think it's time for a President who won't walk away from something as important as comprehensive reform when it becomes politically unpopular. And that's the commitment I'm making to you. I marched with you in the streets of Chicago. I fought with you in the Senate for comprehensive immigration reform. And I will make it a top priority in my first year as President. Not just because we need to secure our borders and get control of who comes into our country. And not just because we have to crack down on employers abusing undocumented immigrants. But because we have to finally bring those 12 million people out of the shadows.

Yes, they broke the law. And we should not excuse that. We should require them to pay a fine, learn English, and go to the back of the line for citizenship – behind those who came here legally. But we cannot – and should not – deport 12 million people. That would turn America into something we're not; something we don't want to be.

While we work to strengthen our borders, we need a practical solution for the problem of 12 million people who are here without documentation – many of whom have lived and worked here for years. That's why we need to offer those who are willing to make amends a pathway to citizenship. That way, we can reconcile our values as both a nation of immigrants and a nation of laws.

But there's much more to this election than resolving the status of undocumented immigrants.

This election is also about the couple I met in North Las Vegas who saved up for decades only to be tricked into buying a home they couldn't afford; it's about the Latino families who are the first ones hurt by an economic downturn and the last ones helped by an economic upturn. They can't afford another four years of the Bush economic policies Senator McCain is offering – policies that give tax breaks to the biggest corporations and the wealthiest Americans, while doing little for struggling families who need help most.

They're counting on us to restore fairness to our economy by giving tax relief to working families; by supporting our unions; by ending tax breaks for companies that ship jobs overseas and giving them to companies that create jobs here at home. They're counting on us to finally come together to solve this housing crisis that's devastating our communities. I especially want to commend NCLR for your leadership on this issue – for helping so many families avoid fraud and foreclosure. I think it's time you had a president who supported your work – and I intend to be that president.

This election is also about the Latino students who are dropping out of school faster than nearly anyone else, and the children who attend overflowing classes in underfunded schools taught by teachers who aren't getting the support they need.

They're counting on us to invest in early childhood education, stop leaving the money behind for No Child Left Behind, recruit an army of new teachers; and make college affordable for anyone who wants to go. Because that's how we'll give every American the skills to compete in the global economy, and all our children the chance to live out their dreams.

This election is about working women who can't find affordable childcare or afterschool programs for their kids; women forced to lose their wages or quit their jobs to care for a newborn baby or an elderly parent.

They're counting on us to help them make a living while raising their kids – to fight for equal pay for equal work, and for childcare, family leave and sick leave, because here in America, there should be no second class citizens in our workplaces.

This election is about the veterans – including so many men and women from this community – who've served this country so bravely, but then come home to face new battles with the bureaucracy at the VA or the deplorable conditions at places like Fort Bragg and Walter Reed. And we've all walked by a veteran whose home is now a cardboard box on a street corner. It's a disgrace.

These American heroes are counting on us to build a 21st century VA; to provide the benefits and health care they've earned, including mental health care; and to ensure that no one who has served this country ever has to sleep on the streets.

This election is about the nearly one in three Hispanics who don't have health care – people for whom one accident, one illness can lead to financial ruin. And it's about the small business owners struggling to stay afloat because of the rising cost of insuring their employees. They're counting on us to fix our broken health care system.

Here's Senator McCain's answer to our health care crisis: vote against expanding the Children's Health Insurance Program – a program that provides health care for millions of children in need. And propose a radical plan that would shred our current system of employer-based health care and tax individual workers for their health benefits for the first time in history. A plan that would be financed by a \$3.6 trillion tax increase on the middle class – an increase of more than \$1,000 for the typical family. Under the McCain plan, many Americans could lose the health care they have – and pay more in taxes for the health care they get.

I have a very different answer to our health care crisis. I'll take on the drug and insurance companies, cut costs, guarantee health insurance for anyone who needs it and make it affordable for anyone who wants it.

And today, I'm announcing my plan to provide real relief for small business owners crushed by rising costs, an idea championed by my friend Hillary Clinton, who's been leading the way in our battle to insure every American. It's a plan that would help more employers provide health benefits for their workers – instead of making it harder for them, as Senator McCain would do.

We know that small businesses are the engines of economic prosperity in our communities – particularly Latino communities. And under my plan, if you're a small business that wants to provide health care to your employees, we'll give you a tax credit to make it affordable. My plan won't impose any new burdens on small businesses. Instead, we'll help them not just create new jobs, but *good* jobs – jobs with health care; jobs that stay right here in America; the kind of jobs we need in our communities.

That's how we're going to change the system in this country.

But I can't do this alone. So I'm here today to ask for your help.

Make no mistake about it: the Latino community holds this election in your hands. Some of the closest contests this November will be in states like Florida, Colorado, Nevada and New Mexico – states with large Latino populations.

And if you have any doubt about whether you can make a difference, just remember how, back in 2004, 40,000 registered Latino voters in New Mexico didn't turn out on election day. Senator Kerry lost that state by fewer than 6,000 votes. 6,000 votes. Today, in 2008, an estimated 170,000 Latinos in New Mexico aren't registered to vote.

I know how powerful this community is. Just think how powerful you could be on November 4th if you translate your numbers into votes.

And I'm not taking a single Latino vote for granted in this campaign. We're meeting with Latino leaders across the country. We're reaching out to Latino organizations to get input on my policy proposals. We've got a nationwide Hispanic media strategy. We're recruiting and training Latino organizers. We're holding Latino voter registration drives across America. And when I'm President, I'll be asking many of you to serve at every level of government.

That's how we'll change the direction of this country – from the ground up, vote by vote, precinct by precinct, state by state. And I hope every single one of you will join us. I need your advice and expertise. I need you to organize people to knock on doors, make calls and register voters. I need you to talk to your friends and family, co-workers and neighbors, and make sure they cast their ballots on election day.

We walked together on the streets of the South Side of Chicago. We walked together when I was a civil rights lawyer, registering Hispanic voters and giving Hispanics a greater voice in City Hall. We walked together in those marches for immigration reform. And if we get to the polls this November, we will walk together through those White House doors and into a new future for this country we all love.

That's how we'll make the system work again for everyone. By living up to the ideals that this organization has always embodied – the ideals reflected in your name – La Raza, the people. I'm told that the original phrase was "La Raza Cosmica" – the cosmic people – a term big enough to embrace the rich tapestry of cultures, colors and faiths that make up the Hispanic community. Big enough to embrace the notion that we are all part of a greater community – that we all have a stake in each other; that I am my brother's keeper, I am my sister's keeper; and we rise and fall together as one people.

So to that mother and all those who feel like the system just isn't made for people like you, I say this: that system and this country belong to every last one of us, black and white, Latino and Asian, rich and poor, gay and straight, young and old. And this November, we're going to come together to turn the page on the failed policies of the past. To bring new energy and new ideas to meet the challenges we face. And together, we won't just win an election – we will transform this nation.

Thank you, and God bless you.