



Remarks as Prepared for Delivery by Community Relations Service Director Ondray Harris at the 45th Anniversary Celebration of the Community Relations Service (CRS)

Good morning. I am pleased to welcome you to the 45th Anniversary Celebration of the Community Relations Service (CRS). Many of you have traveled from around the country to be here today, and I welcome you. Thank you, Attorney General Holder, for being here, and thank you, Congressman Lewis, for your inspiring words. In addition, I would like to recognize the staff of the Community Relations Service who came from 14 offices across the Nation to celebrate this milestone. We also have many distinguished guests and friends of CRS with us today, including former Directors and their families, civil rights leaders, law enforcement, community leaders, and others who have worked with CRS over the years. We are happy that you have come to celebrate with us today.

On July 2, 1964, President Lyndon B. Johnson signed the Civil Rights Act into law. His signature created the Community Relations Service to be the Nation's peacemaker during a time of racial tension, violence, and strife. A unique task for sure, we are still the only federal agency charged with this great mission. Seeking to heal the wounds of discrimination, bigotry, and racial bias, the Civil Rights Act was an important step in the fight to unite our country. After signing the Act into law, President Johnson said, "We have come now to a time of testing. We must not fail. Let us close the springs of racial poison. Let us pray for wise and understanding hearts. Let us lay aside irrelevant differences to make our Nation whole."

The pioneers of this Agency understood President Johnson's great challenge. Communities across America were experiencing heightened racial tension, especially after the passage of the Civil Rights Act. They were struggling with the effects of the new civil rights laws, including equal access to public facilities, voter-registration difficulties, police-community relations, and the desegregation of public schools. CRS conciliators were on the ground in these communities to assist with the transitions. Their responsibility was to bring together representatives from the fragmented groups within a community to air their grievances, state their goals, and seek solutions ----together. Often times, CRS employees were trying to keep the peace in volatile situations, while also attempting to implement the greater goals of the Agency, which, according to its first Director, Governor LeRoy Collins, was "nothing less than the death of discrimination and the birth of full equality for all Americans." This great challenge was met by the dedicated workers of this Agency under the inspiring leadership of its past Directors.

As time passed, it became apparent that responding to individual incidents of conflict was only the first step. If Americans did not address the source of these conflicts directly, the tensions would never be alleviated. Peaceful resolutions on a case-by-case basis were successful, but we as a Nation needed to do more.

At this time CRS expanded our services to include training, cultural awareness programs, and education initiatives. Understanding the differences of other races and cultures was necessary in promoting peaceful relations. These CRS initiatives helped to open the lines of communication; to ease a sense of distrust amongst the different racial groups; and to bring together those previously divided by misunderstanding. President

Johnson's call for unity remained in the hearts of all in this Agency, who were fighting to make a difference in our Nation.

Over the past 45 years, our Nation has continued to grow and change. With the accompanying demographic shifts, new frontiers of social change have emerged. With these new dynamics, come new challenges-- and new opportunities. The work of CRS continues to make a difference in communities experiencing racial and cultural growing pains as a result of these changes. The work that we do helps to resolve disputes and prevent violence that often divides neighborhoods, diminishes the effectiveness of schools, and stunts the capacity of communities to reach their full potential and effectively serve the people. While we continued to respond to community conflicts, CRS has also expanded its program initiatives to address the sources of these conflicts, including post-9/11 issues, immigration, police excessive use of force, and American Indian tribal land needs.

As the Director of CRS, I pledge to continue to do my part to meet these honorable goals. Your help, however, is critical in this endeavor. Great progress cannot be maintained in any country without lasting peace. Initiating the difficult dialogue of race, color, and national origin, is essential to promoting understanding and achieving peace. With your help, the Community Relations Service can continue to make a difference in this country, and unite us all.

As we recount and celebrate our rich history as an Agency and acknowledge where we are today, we must look forward to the future needs of America. President Johnson's call for unity must still persist today. Therefore, I challenge you today, to go

to work in your communities and your States, in your homes and in your hearts, to eliminate the last vestiges of racism, bigotry, and injustice in our beloved United States of America. As I have stated before: We must be a Nation of inclusion. A Nation of tolerance. A Nation of compassion. While it is important for all of us to celebrate our own unique heritage, we must rid ourselves of the terms “us” and “them.” We must endeavor to embrace each other first and foremost as Americans -- steadfastly united in the concepts of the universality of freedom and equality.

Thank you.