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National Academy of Public Administration President and CEO Terry Gerton's Remarks at the Social Equity Leadership Conference

WASHINGTON, DC – National Academy of Public Administration President and CEO Terry Gerton spoke at the Social Equity Leadership Conference at the University of Nebraska in Omaha on June 2nd. The following are her prepared remarks:

Good afternoon! It's such a privilege to be with you all. I don't get out of DC very often, and so I especially appreciate leaving the mid-Atlantic rain behind for the sun of Nebraska these past couple of days. I've really enjoyed the breakout sessions as well—you all are covering such a diverse array of public administration topics with so much passion and rigor...it gives me great hope for the future of our field.

I've been the President of the National Academy of Public Administration for just about five months now—for those of you academics in the crowd, I figure that's roughly equal to one semester, so I'm still learning. But one thing I have learned is that the Academy is a unique and invaluable organization and a national treasure.

The National Academy of Public Administration helps government leaders solve their most critical management challenges. Since 1967, our congressionally chartered non-partisan nonprofit Academy has provided expert advice to government leaders in building and managing more effective, efficient, accountable, and transparent organizations. Our national network of over 850 Fellows includes former cabinet officers, Members of Congress, governors, mayors, and state legislators, as well as prominent scholars, business executives, and public administrators.

With the support of our full-time professional staff, our Fellows bring their insights, experiences, successes, and lessons learned straight to our clients through independent thought leadership, in-depth studies and analyses, advisory services and technical assistance. Nowhere else can government leaders consult such a broad array of relevant expertise in one place.

This year, we will celebrate our 50th Anniversary. That's 50 remarkable years of influence in some of the toughest challenges that our government, at all levels, has faced. But I thought today, it might be interesting to take a look back over those 50 years at the

Academy's role in the evolution of the theory and practice of social equity in public administration.

From its beginning, the Academy not only responded to requests from agencies such as NASA and the Congress for assistance, but also sought to identify problem areas in which it could effectively develop solutions. By 1970, the areas of urban affairs, environmental affairs, human resources programs and international development had been targeted as warranting the Academy's attention. Several management areas were also identified as being of high interest to the Fellows, including federalism and the machinery of government, organization and management processes, and education and training for public administration.

One of our earliest Fellows was George Frederickson. George, of course, along with Dwight Waldo, Phil Rutledge, and others, was creating a new approach to public administration in the 1960s, and developed his theory of social equity just about the time the Academy was being established. As a result, George's influence, and the inclusion of social equity as a precept of public administration along with economy, efficiency and effectiveness, can be seen in many of the Academy's early reports. And, his articulation of the value of social equity is still informing discussion today.

The Academy continued to grow through the 70s, and by 1984, its membership had increased from 129 in 1971 to 321 Fellows. We were also getting more diverse. There was, for example, only one woman (having been elected in 1968) among the 129 Fellows in 1971. In 1984, the number had risen to 32 out of 321. The Academy's first minority Fellows were elected in 1969.

About that time, the Academy formalized its standing panels. These groups had gathered off and on since the early 70s, but in 1982, four panels were officially established. They were:

1. **The Panel on the Management of Governance.** Its scope included continuing concern with the executive branch, legislative-executive relationships, the judiciary, regulatory administration, government and the private sector, and government and the citizen.
2. **The Panel on the Public Service.** This panel's charter included monitoring and evaluating the implementation of civil service reform, and all matters affecting the quality of the public service.
3. **The Panel on Intergovernmental Systems.** This panel was charged with identifying and assessing major issues related to the future workability of the Federal system. It was expected to address such matters as the future of state governments, the restructuring of local government and the advancing of "civic collaboration."
4. **The Panel on International Affairs.** This panel's charter focused on International and Development Administration.

And the Academy retained that structure, four standing panels, with separately funded study panels, until 2000, when the Board, at Phil Rutledge's urging, voted to add another standing panel, **The Standing Panel on Social Equity**. They appointed Phil Rutledge as its Chair, because no good deed goes unpunished ☺. The other original members were George Frederickson, Bill Hansell, Gail Christopher, Valerie Lemmie, Sy Murray, and Costis Toregas. The panel had a broad scope of work that included:

1. Reviewing and evaluating developments in public administration that have to do with critical matters in social equity and governance, and providing guidance to the Academy on those issues;
2. Initiating educational meetings to communicate with the public administration community on social equity issues in public administration;
3. Preparing papers for public release on social equity and governance;
4. Serving as a forum where fellows interact on issues of social equity and governance; and
5. Serving as a means of identifying ideas, issues, and projects in social equity and governance.

This group got straight to work, and in October of 2000, published an issue paper and work plan which included a seminal definition of social equity in public administration that many of you probably know by heart: "the fair, just and equitable management of all institutions serving the public directly or by contract; and the fair, just, and equitable distribution of public services and implementation of public policy; and the commitment to promote fairness, justice, and equity in the formation of public policy." In 2005, this group also produced a Call to Action to increase commitment from individual public administrators and scholars to practice the principles of social equity. This panel has had only three Chairs since its inception: Phil Rutledge, Costis Toregas, and its current Chair, Blue Wooldridge

Also in 2005, The Academy published a comprehensive strategic plan that established four goals to invigorate and advance the Academy's work. Goal #2 was to incorporate and model social equity in Academy activities and operations. Specifically, the Academy committed to pursue social equity with the same success as it pursued the other pillars of public administration, and committed to four related objectives:

1. To increase recognition of the Academy as a leader in social equity governance by defining social equity benchmarks, barriers, and best practices.
2. To increase the diversity of Fellows and staff, and provide opportunities for minority and female professionals to serve as associates on panels, work groups, and other initiatives.
3. To improve the academy's capacity to address social equity issues by building social and intellectual capital among fellows, staff, and clients.
4. To pursue social equity concerns in studies and programs, and develop a series of papers and tools that outline operations and implementation approaches to do so.

So, where are we today, more than a decade later? The active roster of fellows participating in the Standing Panel on Social Equity is approaching 30, with hundreds of

associate members. Many of our Fellows are active writers and researchers in the field—and several of them are at this conference. In 2011, the Academy published “Justice for All-- Promoting Social Equity in Public Administration” with many of our Fellows contributing to its chapters. Other fellows are putting the principals of social equity into practice every day as they manage cities across the country, plan smart communities that improve access to opportunity, and serve in federal agencies and state governments delivering basic services to our citizens.

Social equity themes continue to underpin much of the Academy’s study panel work. For example, we are currently working on a project with the Environmental Protection Agency to create a definition and framework for community affordability focused on wastewater and stormwater programs. That may not sound very sexy, but it gets to the very heart of social equity principals, making sure that individuals are not disadvantaged or put at risk because of their income or because of the neighborhoods they live in.

At the core of the EPA study is the effort to identify a more accurate and effective framework for assessing Community Affordability of Clean Water ...not drinking water, but wastewater for the purpose of our study.

- A key component is addressing the current benchmark that clean water costs should not exceed 2% of median household income. This measure is deemed ineffective and creates a scenario in which those below the median household income are often highly burdened. Diverse communities with both affluence and poverty often create the most burden for their low-income residents.
- Many engaged in this debate are advocating strongly for changes to the framework to better identify both communities and individuals who are struggling to afford clean water. Individuals in those communities may be forced to choose between paying a water bill and buying groceries.
- Many of the communities struggling with affordability issues are in older, urban areas that have high populations of poverty and issues with old, crumbling infrastructure so inevitably, the poor and underprivileged are more adversely affected.

The good news is that EPA has initiatives to address environmental injustice. Their Toolkit for Assessing Potential Allegations of Environmental Injustice provides tools and other reference materials to assist Agency personnel in assessing allegations of environmental injustice. The document provides a framework for understanding national policy on the subject of environmental justice, which they describe as being at the intersection of social, environment, health, and economic issues.

The Academy’s research has begun to address the challenges in getting to a more just environment and the Panel and study team recognize the need to engage at all levels-- Federal, State and Local--and to collaborate with Congress and advocates to ensure that everyone has access to swimmable, fishable, drinkable water at a cost that is not prohibitive to the community and its residents.

The issue of social equity is not any less urgent today than it was when it was first formulated in the 1960s. In fact, it may be even more urgent as demonstrated by our

most recent presidential election. Whether you want to talk about inequality related to income, wealth, health, race, gender, geography, religion or other preferences, our government is struggling to apply the principles of freedom, equality, fairness, and justice in its delivery of public services. And yet we know that achieving the goals of social equity in public administration and governance is possible. I'd like to give you an example from my own experience.

In June of 2013, I became the Deputy Assistant Secretary for Veteran Employment and Training at the U.S. Department of Labor. VETS is the agency specifically tasked with managing programs designed to assist veterans with finding, and retaining, sustainable employment. When I got there, the veteran employment rate was running close to 7 percent, having peaked in January of 2011 at nearly 13%. What happened in those 18 months to cause a nearly 50 percent reduction? And what happened over the next 3 years that allowed us to drive veteran unemployment down to 3.6%? Well, part of it was the beginning of an economic recovery following the recession of 2009. I always said I was happy to take credit when the economy moved the numbers in my direction and to blame the economy when the numbers went south. But it was so much more than just the economy.

The nation came to a consensus that these high levels of veteran unemployment were unacceptable. As President Obama said, "No veteran who fought for our nation should have to fight for a job when they come home." And so, we mobilized. Congress passed, and the President signed, the VOW to Hire Heroes Act in 2011. Among other provisions, the VOW act made it mandatory for service members separating from the military to go through a one-week transition class that included a three-day workshop on how to find a job. The Post-9/11 GI bill was expanded to give more service members the opportunity to earn a college degree. First Lady Michelle Obama established the Joining Forces initiative to encourage companies to increase their hiring of veterans. Companies could get tax credits for hiring veterans, and greater credits for hiring disabled veterans. The Small Business Administration extended capital for veterans to support entrepreneurship. Veteran Service Organizations and other non-profits developed job placement functions. The Federal Government increased veteran hiring preferences and targets. And, the Department of Labor through the public workforce system established priority of service for all veterans to facilitate access to individual job readiness counseling and training.

The interventions were comprehensive, including all levels of government, and extending into the public, private, and non-profit spheres. And, they worked! Veteran unemployment has varied around the 4% level or lower for most of the past year and remains consistently below the non-veteran level—a significant accomplishment. In fact, the program has been so successful that there are now the rumblings of a backlash. Federal agencies are starting to argue that the focus on veteran preference keeps them from hiring the best qualified applicants. DoD even tried to get veteran preference requirements loosened. The non-profit sector outside of VSOs is showing evidence of veteran fatigue. Many private companies remain committed to veteran hiring initiatives, no longer in response to the patriotic duty motivation, but because they recognize that more veterans in their workforces helps reduce costs.

All of this raises the policy question of—Are we there yet? Are we done? What now? We’re unlikely to drive veteran unemployment much below the 3.7% it hit in April—so do we continue this level of effort or start to shift resources to other, more urgent, programs? It looks like the answer, from the President’s 2018 budget submission, is to keep going for now.

I use the veteran example because I am one and so I can talk about it more freely. But, you could substitute any other problem, like homelessness or criminal justice or health, for unemployment. And you could substitute any other group for veterans, and you are right back to the broad issues surrounding social equity. I think the question facing us now is, “Can the public administration sphere design and implement similar interventions for other problems and other groups?” Can we develop for other problems and groups the public policy consensus we developed around veteran unemployment?

The Academy is proposing to start a discussion along these lines in the fall. We will be getting out of Washington and taking our show on the road, conducting four separate one-day conversations under the banner of “Governing Across the Divide.” We’ve intentionally not identified which divide, leaving that to the participants, but our objective is to gather influencers from the various perspectives on specific topics together to identify gaps and explore solutions. We’re still working on the particulars, but I can give you the general outline. Our first session will be hosted at the University of Southern California in early September, and we will look at the changing role of states in delivering government services. At the end of September, we’ll gather at the LBJ School in Austin to look at innovations in cities. In early October, we’ll be at the Maxwell School at Syracuse to explore the role of the individual in citizenship and public service, considering how public, private, and non-profit organizations are taking on service responsibilities that used to belong only to government. And, in late October, George Mason University in Virginia will help us pull all of these insights together using infrastructure as a framework to examine how we can build capacity at the state/local/individual level to meet the public service delivery challenges of the future. Each of these day-long sessions will be reprised at our fall meeting November 16-17, and we will leave the fall meeting with a thought leadership agenda for the Academy going forward.

I don’t know about you, but I am really excited about this program. I believe there is a critical need to explore ideas about governance and public service program delivery in the “spaces” between federal, state, and local governments, and I am convinced the Academy, with the rich resources and expertise of our Fellows, can be a leader in developing practical solutions for these really tough problems. As we’ve been discussing over the last two days, issues of social equity underlie most of our thorniest governing challenges. The Academy has been at the forefront of the social equity discussion since its founding, and my intention is that it will remain so for the future. I am committed to seeing the Academy’s vision, “Government that works, and works for all,” become reality.

About the National Academy of Public Administration

Chartered by Congress to provide non-partisan expert advice, the Academy is an independent, non-profit, and non-partisan organization established in 1967 to assist government leaders in building more effective, efficient, accountable, and transparent organizations. Learn more at www.napawash.org

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