

REMARKS OF HONORABLE RUBÉN HINOJOSA

**HOUSING ASSISTANCE COUNCIL AND THE ECONOMIC EQUALITY COALITION'S:
ECONOMIC EQUALITY CONFERENCE ON CAPITOL HILL**

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It is a pleasure and a privilege to be here today in such distinguished company.

I want to thank the Economic Equality Coalition for all the good work that they do and for organizing this important conference.

I also wish to thank my colleagues on both sides of the aisle and all the other organizers, speakers, panelists and participants of this week's conference. Only by coming together to share ideas, debate solutions and take action will we be able to begin to make headway in closing the income, wealth and opportunity gaps that persist in our economy.

Finally, I wish to thank the Housing Assistance Council, and especially Moises Loza and Stephen Sugg, for the tremendous good work that they do and for helping put on this conference. Throughout my two decades in Congress, I have worked closely with HAC and its partners to advance homeownership and provide opportunities for rural families. I am always impressed by HAC's commitment to bettering the lives of low-income, rural Americans, and by their effectiveness in doing so.

Over the past four decades, we have seen a steady erosion of our middle class, both in terms of income and wealth. According to the Pew Research Center, since 1971, each decade has ended with a smaller share of American families being part of the middle class. While in 1971, 61% of Americans were middle class, by 2015, that number had dropped down to 50%. Instead of comprising the majority of Americans, the middle-class is now matched in number by those in economic tiers above and below it.

The simple truth is that middle class is getting squeezed with more and more of our national income going to higher-income families, and less to the middle class and the poor. The gap between middle class and upper-income families is widening each year. Moreover, the Great Recession of 2007-2009 devastated wealth accumulation for the middle class due to the fact that housing has assumed a greater role in the middle class's portfolio.

The middle class makes up the heart and engine that powers our economy. With a shrinking middle class, it is no surprise that we are seeing a decrease in the growth of the nation's GDP and wage stagnation. To be sure, our economy is still recovering nearly 7 years after the Great recession.

If our nation hopes to get back on track, to 3%, 4% or even 5% year-over-year economic growth, we need a more balanced economic pie, a more robust middle class, and increased resources and opportunities for residents living in underserved communities.

Economic equality is about empowerment and opportunity. If we want a more equal economic system and increased economic growth, we must empower

our fellow citizens and provide them with the tools and resources they need to achieve the ‘American Dream.’

I believe the best way to empower our nation’s youth and adults is to provide them with an education. A good education is the great equalizer in our society, a transformative *key* that has the power to unlock unlimited potential and opportunity in all who hold it.

In fact, the evidence is quite clear on the economic benefits of education. Our increasingly global economy rewards high skilled professionals. From 1971 to 2015, only one group of Americans continued to fare well in the economy: college graduates. We know that over the course of their lifetimes, college graduates earn more than adults who did not graduate from college or high school.

It’s important to note that during the Great Recession, college graduates had much lower unemployment rates than individuals without a college degree or a high school diploma.

I am particularly concerned that groups with lower educational attainment levels, such as Latinos, other historically underrepresented groups, and individuals residing in rural communities have also fallen behind with regard to income, wealth building and social mobility. While young Latinos are entering college like never before, Latinos continue to lag behind other groups in obtaining a four-year degree. In 2013, among Latinos age 25-29, just 15% earned a bachelor’s degree or higher.

Without basic literacy skills, a high school diploma and a college degree, it is extremely difficult for anyone to access good paying jobs and fully participate in society and our democracy. We can grow the ranks of the middle class and strengthen our democracy by pushing more of our Latino and low-income youth to pursue a college education.

For these reasons, I have spent the better part of my civic and political life working to improve educational opportunities and increase literacy for all - from cradle to career, but especially for disadvantaged children, youth, and adults.

As Ranking Member of the Subcommittee on Higher Education and Workforce Training, I have fought to expand accessibility and affordability in higher education. Through “hard won” battles and by creating strong coalitions, I have worked to increase federal investments in Pell grants for millions of needy students; reform how student loans are financed; and strengthen the capacity of Hispanic-Serving Institutions, HBCUs, and other Minority Serving Institutions, particularly in the STEM fields; and expand education opportunities for all.

As the son of Mexican immigrants and a first-generation college student, I believe that education is the key to success. A college education opened the doors of opportunity for me and my family, and has allowed me to have a successful career in public service.

Having been born in the small rural town of Edcouch in Deep South Texas, I did not know I would one day have the privilege of representing the 15th

Congressional District of Texas in Congress, and were it not for my education, it would not have been possible.

In my congressional district, the increased focus on education has made a remarkable difference. During my tenure in Congress, not only have high school graduation rates in our region increased from 72% to 87%, but we have seen astounding economic progress. Employment in my district has increased at a faster, steadier pace than in the United States, Mexico or Texas as a whole: with the unemployment rate dropping from a whopping 22% in 1997 then, to 7.7% today.

Moreover, college enrollment and graduation rates continue to rise. Institutions of higher learning in my district continue to expand and provide a catalyst for economic development and empowerment.

We in South Texas accomplished these milestones by working with so many talented and committed individuals. This includes the tireless work of my congressional staff together with the outstanding leadership and work of many dedicated individuals – superintendents, teachers, doctors, administrators, advocates, organizers, parents, local elected officials, community groups and other extraordinary people who care and who have started grassroots efforts to stand up and make their homes, my district, a better place to live in.

Investing in human capital is one way in which I have worked vigorously to address economic inequality and to improve the quality of life of South Texas residents and beyond. While we may face many hurdles in life, the lack of educational opportunity should not be one of them.

We must renew our commitment to building a strong middle class by ensuring that youth and adults have ladders of opportunity and career pathways that lead to family-sustaining jobs. With strong investments in education and underserved communities, I remain confident that we can do so.

Ladies and Gentlemen, thank you again for inviting me to talk with you today. It has been a pleasure addressing you. I look forward to working with you on tackling our economic issues and seeing what great ideas come out of this week's conference! Thank you and have a great day!