To: NewDEAL Leaders
From: Debbie Cox Bultan, CEO, NewDEAL Leaders
Re: Stand Up, Speak Out, Lead - How to Respond to Trump 2.0

Shortly after the 100-day mark of President Donald Trump's second term, more than 50 NewDEAL Leaders gathered in Atlanta with allies and policy experts from the public, private and philanthropic sectors. The annual NewDEAL Forum Ideas Summit covered specific topics including housing, health care, clean energy, and the rise of AI.

In addition to finding real solutions to issues constituents care about, the leaders also discussed how to respond to chaos and harm emanating from the White House. The overall comments across the two-day event can be summarized as:

- **Stand Up**
- **Speak Out**
- **Lead**

Within these three broad categories, speakers provided nine tangible ways for state and local elected officials -- and others across the country -- to take action. Most recently, Trump's move to unnecessarily federalize the National Guard and deploy the military on U.S. soil amid largely peaceful protests -- and in defiance of state and local leaders and law enforcement -- has created more urgency. While the Ideas Summit took place before those efforts, the current situation reinforces the need for these approaches.

STAND UP: Now is not the time for state and local officials to meld into the shadows. Actions from the Trump White House, tacitly endorsed by a compliant Republican majority in Congress, are actively hurting Americans across the country

"In just over 100 days, this Administration has made every person in America less secure, less free and less prosperous," **NewDEAL CEO Debbie Cox Bultan** said at the opening of the Summit. "But we gather today after these first 100 days, more clear-eyed about the task in front of us."

"There is not a 'right way' to fight back," **Bultan** added, telling leaders to use their position by, "showing up every day and fighting for your constituents, engaging your communities, calling out injustices and trying to solve problems in any way you can."

1) Sue the Trump Administration: There are few more direct ways of standing up to unlawful actions than lawsuits. Since January, the Trump Administration has employed both legal and illegal means to restrict federal funding from cities and states around the country. **Jillian Blanchard, Vice President of Climate Change and Environmental Justice of Lawyers for Good Government (L4GG)**, noted that Donald Trump has issued 220 Executive Orders, or EOs, since January, with about 35 impacting grant funding.

- **Know that "executive orders are not law,"** as Blanchard said. "They are directives to federal agencies to operate within the existing law to try and effectuate new policy. That existing law includes the Inflation Reduction Act and the Infrastructure Investment and Jobs Act. Those are laws. And until Congress changes law, they continue to exist. And they are congressionally mandating this funding."
- **Look to models of the more than 135 successful lawsuits so far**
  - **Columbus, Ohio, City Attorney Zach Klein** noted that he is suing the Trump Administration over a U.S. Forestry grant that was cut off because the city is using federal funds to plant trees in a part of the city with fewer trees. And "that happens to be in a Black neighborhood, and they cut it because it's DEI."
- **Don't assume Biden-era opportunities no longer exist**
  - Until Congress successfully passes related legislation, tax credits are not being cut or challenged, particularly direct pay provisions in the Inflation Reduction Act. These can be used by cities, states, and nonprofit groups to fund infrastructure and clean energy projects.
  - **Take advantage of available resources:** Organizations like L4GG offer free support to city and state elected officials helping them hold the administration accountable for adhering to the law, particularly when it comes to funding for cities, counties, districts, and states.

2) Reject Pre-Emptive Compliance: Don't believe that if cities, states, or organizations change the way they work or who they serve, or alter language on their websites, to pre-emptively comply with unjustified demands by the Trump Administration, it will help prevent funding cuts.

- As former **Georgia legislator and NewDEAL alum, Stacey Abrams** said: "The first time you comply, the first time you weaken your stand, that's when they know they can keep coming after you… Just a little bit of compliance does not work. There has never been a little bit of surrender."
- **Activities like cleaning up website language don't work: Jillian Blanchard of L4GG** noted that some organizations removed certain phrases, like "environmental justice." Yet they still lost grants while breaking trust with constituents.

3) Hold True to Your Values: Losing elections does not – and can not – mean losing our way. "Our success comes not by being aligned across a set of metrics; it comes by being aligned across a set of values," **Abrams** said. "When you think about the big elections we won [in the past], it's not because we compromised our values; it's because we declared them."

- **Understand why Democrats' values are not connecting with enough Americans and reframe them:** Holding to these values is not static but a dynamic conversation that elected officials and allies must have with neighbors, friends, and family. "We can debate the path to inclusion, but we cannot debate the right to inclusion," **Abrams** said. "We can debate what diversity can look like and how we can do corrective action, but we cannot debate that diversity is right. We can debate whether or not equity works everywhere, but we cannot debate that equity is better than meritocracy when meritocracy is based on a flawed system that says no one else gets to play."
- **Lead with Americans' immediate concerns: Jim Kessler of Third Way** advised leaders to thread the needle of maintaining the values of investing in critical long-term issues, such as climate change and infrastructure, while making clear they are addressing immediate concerns, such as immigration and rising costs.
- **Authenticity works:** As elected officials move and interact with constituents, these values need to shine through not as slogans or poll-tested soundbites, but from a genuine place within officials. "People respond to authenticity," **Bultan** said. "We need authentic voices. We all need to be willing to speak our minds and our hearts."

SPEAK OUT: Elected officials at all levels have a platform to speak out to their communities. Now is the time to find that voice and use it to communicate clearly and unceasingly about issues that are impacting constituents.

"Today, we all know that we are living in a moment of great consequence," **Bultan** said at the Summit. "And we can't yet know how this part of our story ends." Elected officials are not bystanders to history. "People are looking to you for answers, for protection and to step in to pick up the pieces of what is unraveling before our eyes."

1) Push Back Against Disinformation: The best approach to mis- and disinformation is to respond quickly and aggressively, lest lies continue to travel further. That's the message from two experts in the area:

- **Be bold and aggressive when confronting misinformation: As Arizona Secretary of State Adrian Fontes** emphasized, "don't let narrative be set by the other side."
    - If someone makes a wild claim, repeatedly push for evidence and don't allow folks to move the goalposts. "If you are making an allegation, you have the burden of proof," Fontes said of conspiracy theories. "Try to get them to justify wild and spurious claims," he added, noting that the tactic works well "if you can bring the conversation back to the facts, because they get flustered."
- **Work with trusted community leaders from all walks of life to help validate accurate information**, especially as the rise of AI only exacerbates the spread of disinformation.
    - "We need to figure out how to get trusted people out there to help explain what is real and true," said **Jefferson County, Colorado, Clerk & Recorder Amanda Gonzalez**.
        - Gonzalez provided a hands-on approach for skeptics, and a tactic other election officials can employ: She invited members of the public to see for themselves ballot processing centers. Once people witness bipartisan teams working together to count ballots, and realize that the paper ballots are in a secure location, their skepticism drains away.

2) Use Stories, Not Only Data: As Oakland County, Michigan, Executive Dave Coulter said, "We really have to tell the story of what's happening" in places like Oakland County, Michigan."

- Collecting and reporting data on the impacts of these policies is important, but it must be paired with stories, and state and local leaders have a unique lens to find and share them.
    - Coulter shared about a small business owner in his county who makes high-end boots. However, the owner gets her leather from Mexico, and tariffs from the Trump Administration mean her costs are skyrocketing. "There's a good chance she's going to go out of business." Small businesses and farmers are among the hardest hit by retaliatory tariffs.
- **Use the plainest language possible:** Coulter talked about his success using the term "taxes" rather than "tariffs." Tariffs can sound academic and esoteric, but people understand taxes. And as residents are paying more for everything from pens to cars, Coulter emphasizes that it is the Trump Administration that is raising costs.

3) **Educate Congress:** President Trump has been moving fast, and it is difficult for anyone, even members of Congress, to keep up with the negative impacts of his chaotic, reckless policies.

- **Members of Congress need to hear from state and local officials:** "Who's suffering?" asked **Blanchard of L4GG**. "What projects are now on hold because they cannot reach their agency?" Members of Congress need to be told about these impacts.
    - The most important guardrail against harmful policies is "public opinion expressed by your constituents and public opinion expressed by you to federal leaders," said **Kellie Meiman Hock** of McLarty Associates.
- **Set the terms of the debate:** As **Andy Burke, former Mayor of Chattanooga**, emphasized, "We have to take control of the terms of the debate, and we can tell people exactly what is going on… Chaos does not create efficiency."
    - He used the example of federal funding for broadband access, which has been cut by the Trump Administration. This is an issue where local leaders can identify communities and businesses who are directly impacted by these policies, and share the specific examples with their members of Congress.

- **Don't give up on the fight for your priorities: Kristina Costa, a Deputy Assistant to the President and Director of the Office of Clean Energy Innovation and Implementation in the Biden Administration**, emphasized the need for state and local advocacy to federal officials when it comes to electricity costs. Without some of the incentives from Biden-era laws, electricity costs will increase and get passed on to homeowners and small businesses.

LEAD: These are not ordinary times, and people around the country are looking for extraordinary people to rise up and meet the moment. State and local elected officials must lead on key issues, ranging from housing to clean energy to education, and, across issue areas, show that government can work better for the people.

"We need to really listen to those who say the cost of living is too high and do something about it," **Bultan** said. "We need to meet people where they are – people who live and work differently than we do and find out what they need and help them. For those of us who believe that government can do good things, we have to acknowledge that government is too often not working and be willing to do things differently."

1) **Listening is Leading:** It is impossible to represent and serve constituents without listening to the needs of those same constituents. Good leaders know how to listen, then respond to the needs of people.

- **"Stop telling people what the most important issue is.** We have to start listening to them. Asking them. And believing them," said **Jim Kesler of Third Way** during a presentation on findings from the 2024 election. While the climate crisis may be an existential crisis, and Donald Trump may be a threat to American democracy, many Americans are focused on the high costs of groceries or worrying about paying for their next car repair.
- **Understand the problem before proposing solutions: Stacey Abrams** noted that people often express concerns in a visceral way. It is the job of the elected officials to understand why something is a problem, and then ask questions so that their responses help people where they are.

- **Open space for dialogue:** In a divisive time, it is necessary to listen to others, said mediator **Adar Cohen**, who holds a PhD in conflict resolution. We don't have to agree with everyone, but when we try to make others feel more understood, we are directly contributing to democracy's most precious resource: "our ability to talk to each other."

2) **Opposition is Necessary, but Not Sufficient:** Constituents expect state and local elected officials to oppose the most harmful and chaotic policies coming from Washington, D.C, but "we can't just be opposed to what's happening," Bultan said. "We have to simultaneously offer a message and ideas that can both attract and deliver for a majority of Americans." That means focusing on issues like:

- **Housing: Nevada Treasurer Zach Conine** emphasized that the national housing crisis is based on simple supply and demand. Conine and other leaders emphasized that there are ways to streamline regulations and red tape so that housing units can be built more quickly.
- **Artificial Intelligence:** State and local leaders can seize the opportunities of AI to make government work better.
  - **Jefferson County, Colorado, Clerk & Recorder Amanda Gonzalez** is utilizing AI in creative ways, including creating a chatbot that pulls information from a 500-page election manual, which makes it easier for all volunteers, and particularly older volunteers, to quickly find relevant information.
- **Clean Energy: Third Way's Shane Londagin** noted that barriers to clean energy production are less about financing and more about streamlining issues and red tape – areas where state and local elected officials can help. Massachusetts **state Rep. Tram Nguyen** echoed the sentiment, adding that her state is looking to partner with neighboring states on initiatives to attract private investments in clean energy.
- **Balance Makes Government Work Better: Author Marc Dunkleman** emphasized the need for balance in governing. In his keynote remarks, he noted the need for everyday Americans to have a voice, but not a veto. Progress can be made on building more housing, for instance, in a way that takes seriously the concerns of residents, but does not allow individuals to prevent progress by jamming up projects with endless objections and lawsuits.

3) **Be Prepared:** While the chaos of the White House is not within the control of state and local officials, their own actions are. And many leaders provided examples of both how preparation paid off in the past and how folks can prepare now for the future.

- **Protecting Democracy: Secretary of State Fontes** emphasized how communication and coordination among state and local officials ahead of the 2024 election paid off in response to 15 separate bomb threats across the state on Election Day. Ultimately, there were only delays at one polling location, and for only 20 minutes.
- **Protecting Your Economy:** Amid the chaos of on-agin-off-again tariff policies, **Pittsburgh City Controller Rachael Heisler** had succinct advice for preparing: "If you can buy it now, buy it now." If cities and states are able, it is best to purchase what you need now, lest those items become either prohibitively expensive or unavailable due to trade wars.
- **Build Local and Regional Resilience around Emergency Preparedness:** National security expert **Caitlin Durkovich** encouraged state and local leaders to learn how the emergency management apparatus works in your state. With the federal government threatening to do less, or even nothing, to support communities facing extreme weather and other emergencies, states will need to do more and will need to think creatively about potential solutions. Leaders should also pursue or expand regional collaborations, like reciprocal agreements to help each other following natural disasters.
- **Protect Constituents' Health: Katherine Linzer of McKinsey & Company** warned that potential cuts to Medicaid could leave large holes in state budgets, compounded by the difficulty of having enough qualified medical professionals to serve populations, particularly in rural areas. She advised looking for creative solutions, such as telehealth options for a range of issues, including around mental health.
    - **Natasha Murphy from the Center for American Progress** advised states and localities to **have the tools they need to declare emergencies,** particularly if federal agencies will be stepping back. In addition, states should:
        - **Create public health trust funds** to support local health departments wherever possible.
        - **Invest in public health data infrastructure.**
        - Find more suggestions in the Center for American Progress' recently issued report.

- **Prioritize Energy Costs and Reliability:** Costa noted that Republicans continue to be interested in solar energy, and there is increasing interest in modernizing grid infrastructure to withstand extreme weather and lower rates for consumers.

CONCLUSION:

State and local officials have a big role to fill during the second Trump Administration. If these leaders step up, speak out, and lead, then America will weather the worst of the storms while still making progress on key issues.

"The good news – and the reason I continue to have so much hope and confidence that things are going to be alright – is because of this community," **Bultan** said. "I know that the people in this room have the tenacity, the resilience, the creativity and the courage we need in this moment, and that together we will build a brighter future."