

Inside the White House: Letters to the President

[BIRDS CHIRPING]

PRESIDENT OBAMA: These letters, I think, do more to keep me in touch with what's happening around the country than just about anything else.

Some of them are funny; some of them are angry. A lot of them are sad or frustrated about their current situation.

MIKE KELLEHER: In his first week as President, he asked for ten letters every day and every day since, we've given it to him.

[MUSIC]

We get 65,000 paper letters every week, we get something like 100,000 e-mails, 1,000 faxes, 2,500 to 3,500 calls per day. And our job is to take all that information in, to do it -- the best analysis we can about what we're hearing from the public and respond individually to all those folks so they know that the President is listening.

Anyone that sends a message to us, it comes into our offices. Our staff sorts through them. They identify those that meet our three tests: Are they something that's representative of the mail that's coming in? Is it representative of something in the news? And, is it something that's a compelling message? They pile that mail together; some of it ends up here on my desk. I sort through it, categorize it by issue, and then every day I go through them and pick the ten that best represent what's happening right now.

It's a good dialogue -- a direct relationship between constituents who have these concerns and the President who desperately wants to get those messages. The President's talked about being in a bubble, and our job is to make sure that he gets out of it every day.

MIKE KELLEHER: Hey, Joni.

JONI: Hey, Mike.

MIKE KELLEHER: How you doing?

JONI: Great, how're you doing?

MIKE KELLEHER: Good. How's everybody doing?

JONI: Thank you. Everyone's doing well.

[MUSIC]

MIKE KELLEHER: Hey, Katie.

KATIE JOHNSON [Personal Secretary to the President]: Thank you. So this is for tomorrow?

MIKE KELLEHER: Yep.

KATIE JOHNSON: Okay.

MIKE KELLEHER: Is that good?

KATIE JOHNSON: Yep. I'll give it to him.

He probably replies to somewhere between three and four a night, so over the course of the week, you're writing 15 to 20 letters. So he writes a lot. And he hand writes every single one of them. Some are longer, some are shorter, and the issues totally vary.

[MUSIC]

PRESIDENT OBAMA: Lately, I've been getting a lot of health care letters and this is a good example: "Dear Mr. Obama, my son-in-law, age 42, had a heart valve replaced two years ago. His wife and two children pay \$1,200 per month for health insurance. They cannot get another provider because he has a pre-existing condition. He's now unemployed, so my husband and myself are helping them. We're in our mid-60s and this is draining our retirement."

There's so many letters like that that I'm receiving every day. You know, here's another one. A woman whose husband retired from AT&T at 61 is waiting to get on Medicare. You now have the company in negotiations with the union and may decide to stop health care for retirees.

Got another one, an antique business in Alabama, they are on the verge of losing their business because they just can't afford to pay the premiums -- their premiums increased \$70 per month just this month.

So a lot of the stories are heartbreaking. People who work hard -- a lot of times they'll say, "I've never written to a President before, I'm not looking for a handout, all I want is just a fair shake in." And it ends up being a powerful motivator for me when we try to move this health agenda forward.

Now, some of them are more cheerful and, you know, this one for example: "With all the huge money difficulties facing our country, I thought you might like to see how someone spent their \$250 stimulus money. Thank you for all the pleasures from tending my raised bed and from the vegetables I hope to enjoy." So she set up a vegetable garden and she sent me a picture.

There's a beautiful letter that I got just a couple of days ago I'm going to be responding -- from a woman who had found a letter and she's forwarded it to me, a letter from her father when he was fighting in World War II. She had just been born and he had just gotten news of her birth and he sent this letter, "My Dearest Daughter..." And explained what he was doing in Europe during World War II and why this was so important and what the country meant to him and that someday she'd be old enough to read it and understand why this was so important.

You know, you get letters like that and it -- it gives you a sense of what's best about America and inspires you, and makes you want to work that much harder to make sure that that -- that spirit is reflected in our government.