

[The Arizona Republic](#)

Jim Walsh

U.S. Commerce Secretary Gary Locke led by example, reading to children and cutting a turkey breast for lunch at Mesa's La Mesita family homeless shelter as he helped kick off President Barack Obama's "United We Serve" volunteer program.

Locke, the son of Chinese immigrants who grew up in a Seattle housing project, urged Americans to help each other even more during the recession through community service.

"In these times, it's even more important to reach out and help others," he said. "The message is to say we care about them, we want to motivate them, we want to encourage them to have big dreams."

Joined by U.S. Rep. Harry Mitchell, D-Tempe, Mesa Mayor Scott Smith and Mesa City Councilman Dave Richins, Locke also stressed the value of education while he read to children of recently homeless parents and inspected their artwork.

Locke joined with first lady Michelle Obama and 16 Cabinet members to fan out across the nation to ignite the United We Serve campaign, which stresses acts of charity by everyday Americans from Monday through Sept. 11, the National Day of Service and Remembrance.

"A lot of people all around the country are having a tough time," Locke, the former governor of Washington state, told the children.

The shelter is run by A New Leaf, a non-profit that operates more than 20 facilities Valleywide, including homeless and domestic-violence shelters as well as outpatient clinics for children with behavioral issues.

Last year, A New Leaf served 30,000 people and volunteers racked up 20,000 hours of service.

Locke got some telling answers when he asked the children what they liked about the shelter, and he read from messages they wrote on leaves posted on a drawing of a large tree.

"It helps my family. It helps them get back on their feet," said a boy named Raymond.

A boy named Zach said simply, "A New Leaf is a new start."

And Jeremiah said, "A New Leaf means to me that I can be safe."

Shelter officials asked that the children's last names not be used.

The shelter provides temporary housing for up to 30 families for up to 120 days and helps adults get jobs while providing care for babies and education for children.

Locke said the recession should serve as a rallying point like other difficult times in U.S. history, such as World War II and the terrorist attacks of Sept. 11, 2001.

"No matter how tough their finances may be, they can still give a little bit of their time," he said. "It's a sense of community and spirit and sharing."