

REMARKS

OF

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AT THE

NATIONAL CENTER FOR VICTIMS OF CRIME  
ANNUAL CONFERENCE

ON

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Thank you, Jim [Letten]. I'm thrilled to join you here in New Orleans. And let me say how much we in the Office of Justice Programs appreciate all you and your staff do to keep the communities in your district safe. Let me also say it's fitting we have a conference focused on healing and rebuilding in a city that continues to show resilience in the wake of hardship.

It's wonderful to be here and to, once again, be part of this terrific conference. Having been involved in this event for several years, I truly appreciate everything that goes into bringing it off – and I want to commend and thank Mai [Fernandez] and her great staff for all their work.

My thanks also to Mark [Mandell] for his excellent leadership and for continuing a long line of visionary Board chairs at the National Center for Victims of Crime. It is remarkable to consider the scope of NCVC's contributions over the years. The Center has broadened our base of knowledge about victims' rights and services. It's helped to expand legal assistance to victims. And it has raised the profile of victims and victim advocates through media outreach and public awareness in a way that only they could. The victims field is stronger, smarter, and more responsive to those it serves thanks in great part to the work of NCVC.

Having been part of this field for many years, and having cared about these issues from the start, I'm struck – as I'm sure many of you are – by how much things have changed. The current landscape of service specialties and victimization categories, the thousands of victim-centered laws on the books, and the sheer number of programs devoted to crime victims, in many ways bears little resemblance to the spontaneous grassroots movement I knew from the early 80s. We really have come a long way.

We should acknowledge our growth as a field, and it's appropriate we should celebrate our progress. But at the same time, we shouldn't forget that one of the reasons we've been so successful is that we have always been willing to explore how we can do better. The fact is, for all the growth we've experienced and for all our hard work, not every victim has access to services today – and not all communities have a place where victims can go for support. Many victims don't even come to the attention of the authorities. Do you know that, according to a recent report from our Bureau of Justice Statistics, almost half of violent crime victims never report to police?

There's still much more we need to do, and it's incumbent on all of us in the field – and throughout the justice system – to work together to meet the challenges that we – and all victims – continue to face.

Over the last two years, our Office for Victims of Crime – under the direction of my colleague, Joye Frost – has been leading a major effort to re-assess the state of the victims field and to re-define its role in American society. It's called *Vision 21*. Many of you have heard about or have been involved in it in some way. NCVC has been a major player.

The idea behind *Vision 21* is to determine how we can best meet the enduring challenges confronting victim services, as well as the emerging challenges. Our goal is pretty simple but far-reaching: We want to expand the vision and strengthen the impact of the victims field. In short, we want to re-frame the role of victim services in the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

This is both a daunting and an exciting prospect. Joye and her staff have met with stakeholders from across the country to talk about what the challenges are and what we need to do, collectively, to meet the needs of victims. OVC and its partners are in the final stages of a report encapsulating what we've found, outlining a strategic vision of what the victim service field should look like going forward, and offering recommendations on how we can make that vision a reality. The report will be ready soon, and I want to take this opportunity to provide a preview of what you can expect to see.

To begin with, it establishes that change cannot be piecemeal and cannot address only the symptoms; it must happen across the system and at the most fundamental level. What we heard from stakeholders is that victim assistance in this country should be as universal as law enforcement. This is a bold proposal, but its aim is true. What we need to do – and this involves all of us – is to make victim services part of our criminal justice and human services infrastructure. In other words, we need to institutionalize access to rights and services.

How do we do that? Well, first of all, victim-serving organizations, advocacy groups, and government agencies should engage in cross-cutting strategic planning. This should focus on coordinating and linking services, it should use evaluation, and it should consider how to diversify funding to ensure a continuum of services. The focus should be on maximizing limited resources and sustaining programs for the long term, and the process should be inclusive, with all stakeholders at the table.

We also need to end the research gap. We've accumulated a good deal of knowledge about crime and victimization over the years, thanks in large measure to the work of our Bureau of Justice Statistics and National Institute of Justice. But our understanding of the impact and scope of victimization is far from where it ought to be. Through the National Crime Victimization Survey, we've learned valuable information about the extent and nature of victimization, but there is no comprehensive body of empirical data capturing the types of services needed and available to guide policymakers and practitioners. Until we have that kind of information, our ability to plan strategically will be seriously impaired.

I'm pleased that we're already taking steps to address this problem. At Joye's urging, I approved a transfer of funds from OVC to our Bureau of Justice Statistics to expand our data collection efforts. And I'm happy to report that just last week, we awarded a grant to the Rand Corporation – in partnership with NCVS – to develop a statistical system to collect detailed data about the services provided to victims and about the organizations that provide those services. This will be the first time we've tried to

capture basic information about these organizations, and once we have that information, we'll be in a position to support strategic planning efforts in states and communities across the country.

As we work to expand our base of research and data and close the knowledge gap, we've also learned that we have more to do to build the capacity of victim services, particularly by enhancing our use of technology. It should probably come as no surprise that in a field run on shoestring budgets, victim service providers haven't been able to fully capitalize on the latest tools. But it may be that this has less to do with resources than with not having a full understanding of the ways technology can be useful. For one thing, it can support victim assistance organizations in their record-keeping and reporting activities, which – as we all know – are so important when it comes to applying for grants.

But technology can also aid service providers in their work with victims, whether it's through online hotline services or through an Internet-based case management system like the one run by the Denver Victim Services Network. Another very promising technology-based approach is telemedicine, which makes medical experts available remotely to walk local health care providers through medical exams.

In fact, I'm very pleased to announce that OVC – in partnership with our National Institute of Justice – is awarding almost \$3.3 million to create the National Sexual Assault Forensic Exam Telemedicine Center. The project will be run by the Massachusetts Department of Public Health, and it will provide expert medical forensic examiners to work with providers at four pilot sites to provide consultation on sexual assault forensic medical exams. OVC is also working with the Department of the Navy and the Indian Health Services to provide services to military and Native American sexual assault victims. The initiative will take advantage of technology to enable service providers to assist victims in hard-to-reach areas.

Finally, *Vision 21* underscores the need to develop comprehensive services that reach every segment of the victims population. We know that the needs of crime victims vary widely, depending not only on the crime, but on family and cultural background, the victim's stage of life, and the community of which the victim is a part. For example, young black males suffer victimization at disproportionate rates. Homicide is the leading cause of death for this group, greater than the next nine leading causes combined.

Children are also particularly vulnerable. They're exposed to violence at high rates – on the order of 60 percent. A new study being released today by our Bureau of Justice Statistics finds that about 2.8 million children live in a household in which at least one person 12 or older experienced a non-fatal violent crime. Thankfully, that number is down significantly from almost 20 years ago, but it's still much too high. Fortunately, we know that early intervention can be effective in mitigating the impact, and we're supporting these efforts through the Attorney General's Defending Childhood Initiative.

Military personnel who are sexually assaulted are another population in need of additional support. And I'm very pleased to join General Patton and General Dunbar to announce a collaboration with the Department of Defense's Sexual Assault Prevention and Response Office. This new project will provide an interactive training course for military Sexual Assault Response Coordinators and Sexual Assault Prevention and Response Victim Advocates.

Under a separate project, we'll also be providing training and technical assistance to support community-based sexual assault programs near military installations as they collaborate with their military counterparts. We've already developed and pilot-tested the training curricula, and we'll be offering both a training of trainers program and a series of trainings by request.

I'm really excited about these programs as they build on other efforts in my agency to address the needs of military personnel who come into contact with the justice system.

Our partnership with the military is part of our work to promote the change envisioned by *Vision 21*. As the report will make clear, the time for change – not incremental change, but transformative change – has come for victim services. We've outgrown many of the methods we relied on 30 years ago, when President Reagan's Task Force issued its first-ever report on crime victims. Victim assistance is no longer a grass-roots movement, but a bona-fide profession and a national force.

We're ready to take the next step, and *Vision 21* will help lead us to the place we need to be. I hope we can count on all of you to be part of this journey.

I look forward to our work together, and I thank you for your time.

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