

**STATEMENT**

**OF**

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**BEFORE THE UNITED STATES HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES  
COMMITTEE ON GOVERNMENT REFORM**

**HEARING ON**

**“THE SOCIAL, ECONOMIC, AND HEALTH-RELATED PROBLEMS  
OF AFRICAN-AMERICAN MEN AND BOYS  
IN THE DISTRICT OF COLUMBIA”**

**SEPTEMBER 12, 2003**

Congressman Davis, Congressman Waxman, Congresswoman Norton and Members of the Committee:

Good morning. Thank you for the opportunity to speak on this important topic, which is of vital interest to me as a citizen, a father, a public servant, and an African American.

I am Paul A. Quander, Jr., Director of the Court Services and Offender Supervision Agency for the District of Columbia (CSOSA). As you know, CSOSA is a relatively new federal agency that was established in 1997 under the National Capital Revitalization and Self-Government Improvement Act. Our function is to provide community supervision of individuals on pretrial detention, probation, parole, and supervised release. Our mission is to reduce recidivism and protect the public through effective supervision practices.

CSOSA provided supervision to over 20,000 individuals last year. Some were probationers convicted of a misdemeanor and sentenced to a few months. Some were parolees returning to the community after a period of incarceration. Almost all—over 94 percent—were African American.

We cannot speak of the difficulties facing African American men and boys in this city without speaking of the criminal justice system. The Washington Post reported in 1997 that nearly half of the city's black men between 18 and 50 were either involved with, or being pursued by, the criminal justice system.<sup>1</sup> Nationally, the rate of involvement is about one-third. So the District of Columbia, which has by far the highest incarceration rate in the country,<sup>2</sup> has an even higher rate of incarcerating black men. Among the problems young black men face in our city, that is surely one of the most significant. It is far more likely today that a black male student in the District of Columbia public schools will graduate to prison than it is that he will graduate from college.

Most of us here today have heard these statistics before. In my former job, I contributed to them. During my eight years at the U.S. Attorney's Office, I prosecuted and gained conviction of many African American defendants. Although I believed that doing the time was a just and logical consequence of doing the crime, I knew incarceration damaged the lives of

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<sup>1</sup> Cheryl Thompson, "Washington D.C., Young Blacks Entangled in Legal System," *Washington Post*, August 26, 1997, p. B1

<sup>2</sup> According to the Bureau of Justice Statistics, in 2001, Louisiana had the highest incarceration rate in the nation at 822 persons per 100,000 population. The District of Columbia's incarceration rate in 2000, the last year during which the city operated its own prison system, was 1,264 per 100,000, or approximately 50 percent higher.

individuals and the families they left behind. At CSOSA, I lead a workforce of more than 300 Community Supervision Officers who work directly with offenders to correct the personal and social damage caused by a criminal lifestyle. We do that by enforcing strict accountability standards and, in the process, effecting behavioral change. Our strategy is to combine accountability with opportunity—not just to tell the offender that life can be different, but to show him how he can create those differences for himself.

It isn't easy. On average, an offender who reaches our supervision has been arrested six times and convicted three. He is very likely to have a history of drug abuse and much less likely to have received any treatment. Chances are about even that he completed high school. Even if he did, he has few marketable job skills and a poor work history.

Sadly, many of our offenders have had far too much exposure to a life on the wrong side of the law. DC's high incarceration rate has often resulted in generations of the same family being incarcerated simultaneously. During my tenure as Deputy Director of the D.C. Department of Corrections it was not uncommon to have fathers and sons, and occasionally even grandsons, incarcerated in different institutions at the Lorton Correctional Complex. Even more common were large numbers of Lorton inmates who had grown up together in the same neighborhood and attended the same elementary, junior high and high schools. Over the years, a stint at Lorton became a sort of rite of passage for young men unfortunate enough to grow up in some of the city's more economically depressed communities, lacking both positive role models to show them the right path and resources to help them follow it.

Too many of the District's youth have had no personal experience of a man who gets up and goes to work every day at Giant Food or the post office, pays his bills, takes care of his family and gets true satisfaction from simply doing the right thing every day. Too few have had the benefit of a coach, a teacher, a minister or a neighbor who touches their lives by example. I remember one young man, a participant in our faith-based mentoring program, who said that he "just never had anyone in his life to show him right way." Many of our offenders as teenagers never held a summer job to introduce them to the discipline required for work or participated in a youth sports program to expose them to leadership, teamwork and fair play. Their fathers are often absent; their mothers, overwhelmed; and the public institutions that are supposed to look out for their welfare, crippled by lack of resources.

The great scholar of American democracy, Alexis de Tocqueville, believed that our society's strength lay in its defense not of particular rules, but of the individual's right to define his own rules by defining his community. Tocqueville wrote: "In democratic countries knowledge of how [people] combine is the mother of all other forms of knowledge; on its progress depends that of all the others." Each community defines its own norms through the groups into which citizens divide themselves—families, congregations, political parties, clubs, etc. The result of this free association is not only the individual's investment in his community's success, but the community's careful nurturing of its individual members.

Freedom of association does not guarantee that the association will be positive or beneficial. In so many cases, our young men, seeing no legitimate role for themselves in the mainstream community, have developed their own communities with their own antisocial norms and standards of behavior. Membership in these clubs is very costly—not just to the young men who join them, but to all of us. The individual surrenders his hopes, his dreams, and often his liberty; he ends up incarcerated or on CSOSA's caseload. Society pays in fear, mistrust, and the social and material consequences of crime.

CSOSA's approach to supervision requires that the offender disassociate from the negative community that may have led him into trouble. At the same time, we attempt to establish new bonds between the offender and positive social institutions. We do this in two ways: by enforcing accountability, which reduces the risk of reoffense, and by introducing the offender to positive associations—the folk who contribute to this city's well being, rather than detract from it. Our community supervision officers work directly with residents, employers, and educational and faith institutions, inviting them to embrace the offenders among them and give them a hand in reintegrating into society. That may be charity, but it's also good public safety practice. The more invested the community is in an individual, the more obstacles it's going to put between that individual and self-destruction. Rebuilding the relationship between the offender and the community is the essence of successful re-entry programming.

Many of us grew up in neighborhoods where everybody knew whose child we were, and every one of our neighbors would tell our parents if they saw us doing something wrong. CSOSA's vision is not that different. We are working to encourage the community to acknowledge and look out for the offenders, and with the offenders to recognize that the community is composed of individuals who deserve respect and safety.

Over the past 18 months, we have matched over a hundred returning offenders with mentors from the city's faith institutions. The mentors are often older, retired men and women who want to give of themselves. They have found strength in faith, and they want to share that strength. One mentor is a school custodian who has raised five children. When he was asked why he chose to become a mentor, he answered, "I guess I know something about helping young men avoid prison. All of my boys are doing well. I'd like to help a few other boys do well." Mentors like him provide the guidance and "tough love" many of our offenders have never known. They help to develop the empathy that our offenders have never had. We are grateful to them and for them.

CSOSA has received the generous support of Congress and the welcome cooperation of the District government. We can fund a significant amount of substance abuse treatment and other programming for the offenders we supervise. But criminal justice supervision is rarely a lifelong relationship. Within a few months or a few years, the offender no longer has to answer to us. It is our fervent hope that by the time his supervision ends, he will have learned that he always has to answer to the community.

For the most part, community supervision is effective at safeguarding the public. Of all the arrests in Washington last year, only about 13 percent involved offenders under CSOSA's supervision. But as you know, most crime is committed by individuals known to the system but not on supervision. It is not within our authority to watch everybody all the time. Our society is not structured to allow for that. We don't want it. But we want to be safe. For that reason, we try to involve the community in the offender's success so that the accountability remains long after we're out of the picture.

I wish CSOSA supervised only a few hundred individuals because only a few hundred needed supervision. But until many things change, the criminal justice system will remain too big a part of the lives of this city's black men and boys. The very least we can do for them is to recognize that unless we connect them to the community, the criminal justice system will be the only community they know.

Thank you again for the opportunity to appear before you today.