

REMARKS

OF

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OFFICE OF JUSTICE PROGRAMS

AT THE

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Thank you, Mike [Wright]. I'm pleased to be here.

I'd like to thank Mike, Scott Burns, and the National District Attorneys Association for this opportunity to meet and talk with so many of our nation's prosecutors. As a former assistant district attorney in Massachusetts and a former U.S. Attorney here in Washington, I'm always grateful for the chance to have a discussion with the men and women who help lead the fight against crime in our communities.

I know you will hear later from the Deputy Attorney General about several Justice Department priorities, including some that my agency is closely involved with and helping to lead. Our role in supporting prosecutors extends into many areas, and I'd like to talk about three issues that, I think, are and should be of great mutual interest to our organizations – crime victims, children exposed to violence, and youth crime.

Let me begin with victims. I've always felt that serving crime victims is an area where the prosecutor's role is too often undervalued. When I began my career as a prosecutor in the Middlesex County District Attorney's Office, I saw – as I'm sure many of you have seen – how the decisions made by prosecutors and other justice system professionals so profoundly impact the lives of victims. And I think sometimes it's easy to lose sight of the fact that these victims aren't experienced or even familiar with the way the system works. To them, it can be a very intimidating and bewildering process, and they're trying to deal with it at the most difficult time of their lives.

But it's also easy to forget the huge difference prosecutors can make in helping victims feel that justice has been achieved – by involving victims in decisions, referring them to services, and advocating for their rights. It really doesn't take much, and the impact is tremendous.

One thing we're trying to do at the Office of Justice Programs is help build a system that's supportive of victims from beginning to end. Over the last two years, our Office for Victims of Crime has led a major effort, called *Vision 21*, to assess the state of victim services – to determine where we are as a nation in meeting both the emerging and the enduring challenges facing victims and to figure out how we can make victims' rights and services part of, if you will, our criminal justice infrastructure. In other words, we're trying to chart a course to institutionalize access to rights and services.

We've met with victims, victim advocates, and a wide range of stakeholders to talk about the state of victim services. One of the key points made during these meetings was the need to coordinate and link services. Currently, service delivery is fragmented. System-based services like those found in DA's offices and law enforcement agencies focus on preparing victims to assist in the investigation and prosecution of their cases. Community-based services, on the other hand, often focus on specific crimes and may not offer legal assistance. So victims can't count on getting all their needs met in one place.

One recommendation emerging from *Vision 21* is for a broad and coordinated network of “wrap-around” pro bono legal services that would help victims assert their legal rights and get the specialized assistance they need. Last year, OVC issued a competitive grant solicitation to support these collaborative networks, and recently awarded funding to support several demonstration sites. These sites will create model networks to provide free, comprehensive legal services to all victims of crime to address the wide range of legal issues that could arise in the wake of their victimization.

*Vision 21* also highlights other areas where we need to focus our resources and attention. For example, we need more research on the issues facing victims and better data on victim services. We need to take advantage of available technology in providing services and case management. And we need to continue reaching out to underserved groups like the elderly, the disabled, and victims of color in urban communities.

We’re nearing the issue of a final report that will encapsulate our findings and set forth a number of recommendations for criminal justice stakeholders and others from the federal, state, local, and tribal levels. My hope – and our goal – is that this will serve as a framework for collective action to meet the current and future needs of crime victims.

Among the most underserved groups are children who are exposed to violence, whether directly as victims or indirectly. We know through our own research that the prevalence of violence to which children are exposed is very high – on the order of 60 percent for all U.S. children. And we also know that this exposure can affect children in a number of profound and destructive ways, ranging from poor academic performance and low self-esteem to long-term mental health issues and later criminal behavior. The good news is that there are programs out there that are effective in identifying and helping to prevent this exposure, and in enhancing resiliency among children who have already been exposed.

In October 2010, the Attorney General launched an initiative called Defending Childhood that my agency has the lead on. It has three broad goals: to prevent children’s exposure to violence; to mitigate the negative effects experienced by those who are exposed; and to develop knowledge about and raise awareness of the issue. We’re funding demonstration and seed projects in sites across the country, and we’re supporting research to improve our understanding of the causes and consequences of exposure to violence.

The Attorney General also appointed a task force to explore this issue, and they spent last year holding hearings across the country. Some of the witnesses gave compelling stories that underscored how much work we have to do. For instance, there was the story told by a young man whose mother was abused by his father. The response by law enforcement and child protective services was to remove him and his siblings from the home, place them with separate foster families, and send them to different schools – basically, taking them away from each other and the only support network they had. There were other stories like this that showed that we’re not doing nearly enough to protect kids, and what we are doing can sometimes be harmful.

The task force presented its final report to the Attorney General in December. It contains 56 recommendations for action – not just by the federal government, but by all sectors. The need for better coordination and collaboration between systems – a theme echoed in *Vision 21* – is one of the findings. Responding to those recommendations will be one of our highest priorities over the coming weeks and months.

Finally, as we look to improve our response to children who encounter violence, we're working to reduce the incidence of violence committed by, and against, our youth. As I'm sure many of you would agree, youth crime is one of the most complex and intractable problems in criminal justice. And because it is so complex, we've learned over time that tackling it involves many people – stakeholders from all sectors and from all levels of government.

So, the White House created a network of cities and federal partners to share information and develop effective strategies to reduce youth and gang violence. It's called the National Forum for Youth Violence Prevention, and the Department of Justice is leading it, partnering with other federal agencies – the Departments of Education, HUD, Labor, and Health and Human Services, as well as the Office of National Drug Control Policy. The Forum brings together groups from across the spectrum – local and federal leaders, law enforcement officials, educators, health professionals, community and faith-based organizations, businesses and philanthropies, citizens, and young people themselves.

It's built around three principles – multi-disciplinary partnerships, data-driven strategies, and balanced approaches that emphasize prevention, intervention, and reentry, as well as enforcement. There are 10 cities now involved, and their goal is to design and implement sound, evidence-based approaches to this problem. These approaches build on successful programs like CureViolence in Chicago – formerly known as Chicago CeaseFire – that follow a public health model of violence prevention – treating violence like a disease, attacking it at its source.

This is one of the Department's and the Administration's top public safety priorities, and it will remain an important element of our response to crime in our inner cities.

And since I mentioned evidence-based approaches, our “what works” database – CrimeSolutions.gov – now has more than 240 evidence-based programs covering issues from youth violence to reentry, each one rated on its effectiveness. And the OJP Diagnostic Center – our “one-stop” crime consultation service – is now engaged in eight communities, helping them design and implement evidence-based strategies to address complex public safety problems.

Our efforts in the areas I mentioned – victim services, children exposed to violence, and youth crime – reflect two basic principles: evidence-based programming and comprehensive approaches to problem-solving. Our goal is to bring to the table all

the stakeholders and to promote strategies that rely on sound science and effective practices. Our nation's prosecutors can and should play a vital role in this work, by using your stature as community leaders to set priorities and convene discussions.

Addressing these issues and solving the major crime and safety problems in your communities depend heavily on your involvement and direction. You are central to ensuring a sound, effective, and fair system of justice. And so I encourage you to join us in facing these challenges, which I see as some of the central public safety challenges today.

Thank you for your time, and for all you to do to protect America's communities.

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