

REMARKS

OF

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AT THE

DISTRICT OF COLUMBIA  
OFFICE OF THE UNITED STATES ATTORNEY  
VICTIM/WITNESS ASSISTANCE UNIT  
“CHILDREN EXPOSED TO VIOLENCE: STRATEGIES FOR  
INVESTIGATION, PROSECUTION, AND TREATMENT” CONFERENCE

ON

THURSDAY, JUNE 6, 2013  
WASHINGTON, DC

Thank you, Jelahn [Stewart]. I'm really glad to be here, back among old friends.

As Jelahn mentioned, my connection to the U.S. Attorney's Office is deep, and I have a special place in my heart for the Victim/Witness Unit. When I served as U.S. Attorney, I always felt the Unit's work to be at the core of the office's mission. I believed – and still believe – that true justice depends on whether we're meeting the needs and honoring the rights of victims and witnesses, especially when those victims and witnesses are our children. So I want to thank Jelahn for the terrific work she does as head of the Unit and all her staff for the tremendous work they do.

Also, my kudos to them for putting this conference together. I know the planning and labor was all handled in-house, so nice work pulling this off. And by the way, I have to single out my colleague, Kris Rose, who's on loan to the Victim/Witness Unit from OJP. I know this has been a great experience for Kris. I have to say, though, we can't wait to get her back!

I also want to thank Ron [Machen] for his fantastic leadership as U.S. Attorney and for being such a wonderful partner to OJP. Ron is one of those rare prosecutors who truly understands the importance of victim services, and he really cares about the child victims and witnesses his office comes into contact with.

And I want to acknowledge my colleague, Joye Frost, the head of our Office for Victims of Crime, who was here yesterday and who put up the funding for this conference. Joye has a knack for knowing how to invest her office's resources wisely – and I know this was a terrific investment.

Finally, let me recognize my colleague, Bob Listenbee, who's with me today. You'll hear from him in a moment. Bob is the new administrator of our Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention. He comes to OJP with an outstanding reputation in the juvenile justice field and was co-chair, along with Joe Torre, of the Attorney General's Task Force on Children Exposed to Violence. We're so thrilled to have him at OJP.

I know some of you attended yesterday's breakout session on the Department's Defending Childhood Initiative. Those who did got a good overview of what that effort is all about. I'd like to put that into a little context and tell you why this initiative is so important.

Let me begin by saying that the issue of children exposed to violence is one in which the Attorney General has a strong and long-standing personal commitment, going back to his days as U.S. Attorney and superior court judge here in D.C. He saw, as all of you have seen, the destructive impact of violence on kids, and he understood that the system can and should play a role in mitigating the effects of violence.

When he became Deputy Attorney General under Janet Reno in the 90s, he decided he wanted to do something on the policy front to improve the system's response

to these children, so he helped launch the Department's Safe Start Initiative. This was an earlier version of Defending Childhood that really focused on translating research into practice.

When he returned to the Department as Attorney General in 2009, he wanted to pick up where we had left off. One of his early speeches as AG was to the American Academy of Pediatrics, where he announced the findings from the National Survey on Children Exposed to Violence, which showed just how prevalent violence is in children's lives. He said at the time that children are "living with violence at rates that we, as adults, would never tolerate." He said it's a problem we can no longer afford to ignore.

So, in 2010, he launched Defending Childhood, which the Office of Justice Programs – and Bob's office, in particular – are spearheading, with significant contributions from other parts of OJP like our Office for Victims of Crime, as well as the Department's Office on Violence Against Women and COPS Office.

The goal of Defending Childhood is two-fold: It's to improve our understanding of the issue – the scope of children's exposure to violence, its consequences, what interventions are most effective – and support efforts to translate that knowledge into practice. In addition to funding research and public awareness, we're taking direct action in communities across the country to reduce childhood exposure to violence and improve trauma-informed care for these children. For example, we're supporting demonstration projects in eight sites to implement innovative strategies for mitigating the effects of violence on children.

The purpose of these demonstration projects is to bring stakeholders together to collaborate in responding to children, bringing together service providers with law enforcement and prosecution, and others from across the system. For example, in Cuyahoga County, Ohio, there are at least 60 organizations involved. In Grand Forks, North Dakota, which is a more rural area, over 30 organizations are participating. So partnerships very much define the approach we're taking.

The incidence of violence among children is troubling, but the good news is that we know there are effective interventions out there, and we know that kids are resilient, especially when these interventions are applied early. So one of our goals is to connect practitioners to information about programs and approaches that can be adapted to fit their community's needs.

One of our most important tools is an online database of evidence-based programs called CrimeSolutions.gov. You can hear more about this resource at one of the concurrent sessions a little later this morning from Thom Feucht in our National Institute of Justice. In a nutshell, this is a Web site with almost 270 programs, covering the full range of criminal and juvenile justice activities, including 50 that address children exposed to violence. All the programs are rated, either as effective, promising, or showing no effects, based on an intensive review process.

A number of the most highly rated programs in this area are therapeutic approaches that many of you may know. CrimeSolutions.gov includes a program profile for trauma-focused cognitive behavioral therapy, which is designed to help both children and parents overcome the negative effects of traumatic events, from sexual and physical abuse to natural disasters. That received the highest – “effective” – rating. Multisystemic therapy is also rated effective. For those who don’t know, MST focuses on treating adolescents within the environments that foster problem behaviors. CrimeSolutions.gov also includes profiles of lesser known programs as well as more general violence reduction programs.

These and all the programs in the database include user-friendly descriptions and other helpful information, and they’re designed to be intelligible and useful to practitioners. That’s the purpose of CrimeSolutions.gov – to aid policymakers and professionals in adapting these approaches in their own communities.

We also have something we call the OJP Diagnostic Center, which is a “one-stop” crime consultation service for state, local, and tribal policymakers who are looking to identify and implement evidence-based public safety strategies. The idea is to help assess community strengths and challenges, and match those with evidence-based interventions. This, too, is a resource we have available for the field. In fact, the Diagnostic Center has had an engagement here in DC in which we worked with the U.S. Attorney’s Office on assessing best practices to support victims and hold offenders accountable.

I know Bob will talk about the Attorney General’s Task Force and our response to its report. I’ll just say that I had the opportunity to participate in one of the task force meetings – in Detroit – and the one message that really came through to me is that we really have to pay close attention to how our policies and practices are affecting children. One young man spoke about growing up watching his mother get beaten by his father. Child and family services responded by taking him and his two siblings out of their home and sending them to three different foster homes where they were out of contact with each other and their mother. Meanwhile, his abusive father was allowed to stay in the home.

This was an example of how one agency responding in isolation, not coordinating with other parts of the system, can do damage in spite of intentions – and I think it’s a cautionary tale for all of us about the importance of communicating across disciplines.

I applaud the U.S. Attorney’s Office for addressing this problem head-on. And I commend all of you for understanding how critical it is that we work together to address these difficult issues. The Office of Justice Programs and the Department of Justice are proud to support you in your work.

I thank you again for your time, and for all you do to protect children in the District of Columbia.

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