

REMARKS

OF

THE HONORABLE KAROL V. MASON
ASSISTANT ATTORNEY GENERAL
OFFICE OF JUSTICE PROGRAMS

AT THE

WRONGFUL CONVICTIONS MEDIA EVENT

ON

TUESDAY, DECEMBER 3, 2013
WASHINGTON, DC

Thank you, Walt. I'm very happy to be here with my colleagues, Joye Frost – Director of our Office for Victims of Crime – and Greg Ridgeway – Acting Director of our National Institute of Justice. I also bring greetings from the Director of our Bureau of Justice Assistance, Denise O'Donnell, who regrets that she's unable to join us today.

I want to thank Walt and the International Association of Chiefs of Police for their vision and leadership on this issue and for their excellent work on this project. I also want to express my appreciation to Barry Scheck of the Innocence Project for his years of advocacy and for helping the law enforcement community take an active role in reducing wrongful convictions.

The release of today's report, titled, *National Summit on Wrongful Convictions: Building a Systemic Approach to Prevent Wrongful Convictions*, marks an important step in our nation's efforts to address a serious criminal justice problem, a problem we all want to see resolved.

For too long, a disproportionate share of the blame for wrongful convictions has been laid, unfairly, at the feet of law enforcement. This is terribly unfortunate because, as the report points out, every day "officers make thousands of arrests based on quality investigations that lead to successful prosecutions and convictions," and they "have no tolerance for the arrest of the wrong person."

In fact, there are many factors that contribute to a wrongful conviction. No one person or action is responsible.

This report moves beyond fault-finding and identifies ways that law enforcement can lead us away from individual blame to collective problem-solving. It includes a number of forward-thinking recommendations on how we can work to reduce the potential for error. And it offers ideas on how practitioners, scientists, and policymakers can guard against these miscarriages of justice.

Notably, it calls for an ongoing self-assessment and critique of information and methods to ensure we remain focused on accuracy instead of expediency. It encourages law enforcement to re-think how it handles investigations by looking carefully at the evidence and not aiming simply at a speedy resolution. In short, it emphasizes the role of law enforcement as a catalyst of positive change in our system of justice.

The report is a healthy start in building a systemic approach to preventing wrongful convictions. It's commendable that the IACP and the law enforcement community are out in front on this critical issue. They recognize that wrongful convictions, whatever the causes, compromise the integrity and legitimacy of the entire justice system. And they know that these mistakes have life-altering consequences – for the falsely accused, for the victim of the original crime, and for their families and communities.

I'm very proud of the role the Office of Justice Programs is playing in supporting these efforts. Our National Institute of Justice and Office for Victims of Crime have devoted substantial resources to improving post-conviction DNA testing and supporting crime victims who are re-traumatized by the discovery of wrongful convictions.

Our Bureau of Justice Assistance has played a strong role, as well, through its Wrongful Prosecution Review Program. Since 2009, BJA has awarded almost \$11.5 million dollars to 37 non-profit organizations, state and local public defenders' offices, and institutions of higher learning to represent individuals with credible post-conviction claims of innocence.

BJA is also supporting training through the National Association of Criminal Defense Lawyers to help members of the criminal defense community address the challenges of investigating and litigating these cases.

This work is bearing fruit. We have contributed to the exoneration of several wrongfully convicted individuals. We're expanding our base of knowledge about what works to reduce wrongful arrests and prosecutions. And we're giving practitioners the tools they need to minimize the potential for error.

But our work is far from over. The issues around wrongful convictions are complex, and the challenges are significant. This report is a good start toward meeting those challenges.

It's clear from this project that our law enforcement partners take this issue seriously and are determined to find solutions to what is, after all, a system-wide problem. I applaud them for their commitment, and I look forward to continuing to work with them to build a system that inspires the confidence of the people it serves.

Thank you.

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