

REMARKS

OF

THE HONORABLE KAROL V. MASON
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Thank you, Ms. Rose. I appreciate being part of this panel, and I thank my fellow panelists for sharing their time with me.

Let me say, first of all, that I appreciate your interest in hearing what we're doing at the Department of Justice to support the growth and development of Native American children. Not everyone understands and appreciates the link between adverse childhood experiences and healthy development, and I'm grateful that you're taking on this issue.

Let me begin by telling you a little about my agency, the Office of Justice Programs, or OJP. OJP's role is support tribes, states, and localities in their efforts to improve public safety and enhance the effectiveness of their criminal and juvenile justice systems. We do this in a number of ways: through funding, through training and technical assistance, by supporting promising practices, through information – including research and statistical information – and by bringing together stakeholders to brainstorm ideas and map out strategies aimed at addressing major issues.

One of those major issues, and one of my agency's highest priorities, is supporting kids who've experienced childhood trauma and helping them to return to normal patterns of development. We know through research in developmental psychology and neuroscience that early encounters with violence and trauma can radically – and destructively – affect a child's physical and mental health. Studies have found exposure to violence can damage a child's DNA the way smoking or radiation exposure does, which that means it can significantly shorten life. So this issue of childhood exposure to violence is serious.

One of the many negative outcomes of early exposure to violence is a greater risk of involvement in the juvenile and criminal justice systems. In other words, violence experienced at a young age can make a young person more likely to commit crime later.

One of my agency's major initiatives, and one of the Attorney General's signature efforts, is something called Defending Childhood. This is a comprehensive effort that looks at what the research is showing us about what works to reduce children's exposure to violence and how we can mitigate its effects.

OJP is leading this effort. Our goal is to improve our knowledge about what works and to support promising and effective programs. We know there are great programs out there that can reverse the damage done by violence, and we're working to raise awareness of these approaches and get them into communities where children are at particular risk.

As part of Defending Childhood, two years ago, the Attorney General appointed a national task force to study the issue of children's exposure to violence. This stemmed from a long-standing interest in this issue on the part of the Attorney General, going back to his days as U.S. Attorney and Deputy Attorney General in the Clinton Administration.

But it was also a response to a report we released in 2009 showing that more than 60 percent of children in the United States are exposed to some form of violence, crime, or abuse.

This exposure ranges from brief encounters as witnesses to serious violent episodes as victims. The study also found that almost 40 percent are direct victims of 2 or more violent acts.

I think you'll all agree that these are disturbing numbers. The Attorney General put it best when he said that kids "are living with violence at rates that we, as adults, would never tolerate." The task force held several hearings, including one in Albuquerque that focused on native children's exposure to violence.

The task force heard two basic things from tribal leaders and others who work with children in Indian country. First, they heard that we don't know enough about this issue. We have some studies that show the risk of abuse and neglect among Indian children, a study that shows high rates of Post Traumatic Stress Disorder among native youth, and statistics that reflect high rates of violence generally in some tribal communities. But we still lack comprehensive data that can really give us a complete picture of native children's exposure to violence.

The other thing the task force heard was a consensus that, regardless of what the statistics do or do not show, violence is a prevalent experience among native children, and tribal leaders and others who work with children are gravely concerned about it. They made a forceful plea for further study and further action.

The task force submitted a final report in December 2012, which included 56 recommendations for action. One of the first was to create a separate task force to study the issue of children's exposure to violence in Indian country. So early this year, the Attorney General appointed that new task force.

It's anchored by two groups. The first is a Federal Working Group that's identifying immediate, short-term actions that federal agencies can take. For example, they've been working to expand educational services inside juvenile detention facilities managed by the Bureau of Indian Affairs. The idea is that too many native youth enter the juvenile justice system after a history of being exposed to violence, and we need to be sure these detention facilities are addressing the underlying problems that lead to delinquent behavior and helping them change that behavior.

The second group is a Federal Advisory Committee. This is a group of 12 tribal and national experts whose job is to hold hearings and consult with others to improve our understanding of native children's exposure to violence and to make recommendations for long-term, systemic changes in the way we respond to native youth. It's chaired by former U.S. Senator Byron Dorgan and the Iroquois composer and performer Joanne Shenandoah.

The Advisory Committee held its first hearing in December in Bismarck, North Dakota, and it will hold a second hearing next week in the Salt River Pima-Maricopa Indian Community in Arizona. Two more hearings are being planned, as well. Each focuses on a different set of issues.

For example, the first looked at the issues of child sexual abuse, violence in the home, and the link between child maltreatment and domestic violence. There was a great deal of

discussion about how a history of displacement, forced assimilation, and cultural suppression has led to an elevated risk of child maltreatment in tribal communities.

The hearing taking place next week will focus on the juvenile justice system and the role that system can play in supporting native children who've been exposed to violence. By the end of this year, the Advisory Committee has been charged with compiling a report for the Attorney General recommending ways that policymakers, practitioners, and researchers can address this issue. The Attorney General is looking for a roadmap for countering the effects of violence among native children.

This is a high priority for the Attorney General – and for the Department of Justice – and it's a top personal priority of mine. Before I became Assistant Attorney General at the Office of Justice Programs, I served as Deputy Associate Attorney General where I helped coordinate the Department's tribal efforts. One of my proudest achievements was overseeing the development of our Coordinated Tribal Assistance Solicitation – or CTAS, as we call it.

CTAS consolidates many of our competitive tribal programs under a single solicitation so that applicants only have to submit one application. This covers not just my agency, but the Department's COPS Office and Office on Violence Against Women, as well. Since we launched CTAS four years ago, we've made almost 1,000 grant awards totaling nearly \$440 million to address a range of public safety issues in Indian country.

We've heard from tribal leaders that this is working really well – and we're always looking to improve upon it. I think what's made it successful is that we're listening to tribes and making sure we're addressing tribal needs and concerns. We've held a number of listening sessions and consultations with tribes throughout this Administration, and it's the feedback we're getting from these sessions that's really strengthening our approach.

It's in that spirit that the Attorney General commissioned this new task force – to hear directly from those who see and know this problem first hand so that we have the best information and can be responsive to the needs of the field.

Our goal – and our role – is to support tribes in this work. We know there are promising and effective programs out there, many of them rooted in tribal customs and traditions. We want to find out what makes those programs work – and share that information. And we want to make sure that those who work with native children have access to the resources they need.

As difficult and complex as this issue is, it's not beyond our collective capacity to address. Kids are resilient and can bounce back after being exposed to violence. Children who experience trauma can return to a pattern of healthy development and realize their full potential. But it takes all of us working together – identifying innovative and effective practices, looking at promising models, and sharing information and ideas.

I think the work we're doing is leading us in the right direction. I think we've made great strides already. And I'm very hopeful that these efforts, embodied in the task force, will help put us on a path to securing a bright future for our children.

Thank you.

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