

REMARKS

OF

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

AT THE

2014 INNOCENCE NETWORK CONFERENCE  
PANEL ON DEPARTMENT OF JUSTICE GRANT PROGRAMS FOR  
CORRECTING AND PREVENTING WRONGFUL CONVICTIONS

ON

FRIDAY, APRIL 11, 2014  
PORTLAND, OR

Thank you, Maddy. I'm very pleased to be here, and I'm grateful to the Innocence Network for hosting us and for giving us the opportunity to talk about the work we're doing at the Department of Justice.

I'd like to take just a minute to introduce my colleagues at the Office of Justice Programs:

- Joye Frost, Director of our Office for Victims of Crime;
- Kristen Mahoney, Deputy Director of our Bureau of Justice Assistance; and
- Gerry Laporte, Acting Director of the Office of Investigative and Forensic Sciences in our National Institute of Justice.

I'm going to let them talk about the major efforts in each of their offices to address wrongful convictions. But I'd like to briefly set the stage for our discussion by talking about the Department of Justice's commitment to this vital issue.

One of the main tenets of the Department's mission is "to ensure fair and impartial administration of justice for all Americans." I see our wrongful convictions work as central to fulfilling that part of our mission. In other words, this isn't just about reducing and correcting errors. It's about making sure justice is never a closed door.

I know many of you here today have, yourselves, been falsely accused and convicted of crimes. I can only imagine the pain that you and your families have experienced. You have been through what can only be called a nightmare. I commend you for being here and for the work you are now doing to remedy the kinds of terrible mistakes that led to your own wrongful convictions.

Whatever the cause and whatever the circumstances, a wrongful conviction compromises the integrity and legitimacy of the entire justice system. We have a responsibility, not only to those who are falsely accused, to the victim of the original crime, and to their families and communities, but also to the principles of fairness that the system is supposed to stand for.

The Office of Justice Programs has done a great deal of work in this area. Our National Institute of Justice has devoted substantial resources to improving post-conviction DNA testing, and it continues to support research and development that builds on the foundations of the many forensic disciplines that are routinely used to help convict the guilty and exonerate the innocent.

Our Office for Victims of Crime is working to better understand the needs of crime victims who are re-traumatized by the discovery of wrongful convictions and supporting service providers who work with those victims.

Meanwhile, our Bureau of Justice Assistance has awarded almost \$12.1 million since 2009 to non-profit organizations, state and local public defenders' offices, and institutions of higher learning to represent individuals with credible post-conviction

claims of innocence. And they train members of the criminal defense community to address the challenges of investigating and litigating these cases.

We've also worked with the International Association of Chiefs of Police to develop guidance for law enforcement officials on preventing wrongful convictions. And we're leading an effort – headed by NIJ – to address what we call “sentinel events.” These are criminal justice errors – wrongful convictions being one of the most egregious – that result from a compounding of mistakes.

We're exploring how we can take a forward-thinking, non-blaming, problem-solving approach to these errors, rather than the traditional approach of fixing blame on a single person or group – because the truth is, these are organizational mistakes and rarely is one person is to blame. NIJ is now soliciting research proposals and we're funding three pilot sites in Milwaukee, Philadelphia, and Baltimore to explore the feasibility of this approach.

All of our work is bearing fruit. We've 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. All these efforts are helping us to expand access to justice for those who have been denied it.

In that vein, we also have a substantial portfolio of activities aimed at strengthening indigent defense. As I'm sure we all agree, one of the most effective ways to guard against wrongful convictions is by ensuring competent legal counsel, particularly for poor defendants. Last year, we awarded some \$6.7 million to support indigent legal defense services – everything from training and technical assistance for adult and juvenile defenders to research and data collection.

We're building on these efforts through a new initiative launched by the President in February, called My Brother's Keeper. This is a major public-private initiative aimed at, among other things, addressing the overrepresentation of African American boys and young men in the criminal and juvenile justice systems.

As part of My Brother's Keeper, last week we announced a solicitation for the National Center for Building Community Trust and Justice. The goal of this Center is to build on and expand our knowledge about what works to improve procedural fairness, reduce bias, and promote racial reconciliation in distressed communities. The Center will support a variety of activities, including an information clearinghouse, new research, and pilot sites to test innovative approaches. The idea is to address all areas in which fairness and equity are implicated, including wrongful convictions.

Our goal is to sow the seeds of trust that can lead to closer cooperation between the community and the justice system and re-establish the legitimacy of the system in the eyes of those it serves. The solicitation is open for applications until June 18<sup>th</sup>, and I encourage you to check it out and consider submitting an application.

In my view, improving trust and legitimacy and expanding access to justice are really at the heart of the work we're all doing to prevent and correct wrongful convictions. We want to do whatever it takes to keep these tragic mistakes from happening, and – just as importantly – we want to ensure that the system operates in a way that is fair, unbiased, and worthy of our highest ideals.

Now, I'd like to turn it over to my colleagues and let them talk in more detail about the work their offices are doing.

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