

REMARKS

OF

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

AT THE

NATIONAL CORRECTIONAL EMPLOYEES WREATH LAYING CEREMONY  
AND HONOR GUARD COMPETITION

ON

SATURDAY, MAY 3, 2014  
WASHINGTON, DC

Thank you, Tom. I'm proud and humbled to be here representing the Department of Justice as we pay tribute to 11 extraordinary public servants for the lives they led and the sacrifices they made.

I want to thank you, Tom, for all that you and your organization do to honor our nation's corrections employees, and for bringing us here so that we may pay our respects to our fallen comrades.

I stand with you today as we remember the exceptional devotion to duty of these brave men and women. They served in every corner of our nation – in California and Nevada, Colorado and Michigan, New York and Pennsylvania, Florida and Louisiana, and in the territory of Puerto Rico. They worked in county jails, in state prisons, and in federal penitentiaries. And they died bravely fulfilling their responsibilities to their institutions – and to the American people.

They gave their lives to carry out one of the vital functions, and one of the most difficult challenges, required of a democracy: the care and protection of those committed to the custody of the state. Correctional officers perform some of the most dangerous jobs in all of criminal justice. Indeed, there are few jobs in any field as demanding, as stressful, and as open to risk as that of a corrections professional.

Yet thousands of men and women report to work every day at America's prisons and jails committed to carrying out their critical responsibilities. They believe the risks are worth taking because they know that at stake is a just and orderly society. As a nation, we are grateful that these brave and dedicated individuals have dared to answer the call.

I'm proud that the Department of Justice can call all of you our partners and our friends. The Department's mission – to enforce the law and defend the interests of the United States, to ensure public safety, to help prevent and control crime, to punish the guilty, and to ensure the fair and impartial administration of justice for all Americans – depends on the work that you do each and every day. There can be no justice in the absence of your contributions.

And just as we count on you to keep our corrections facilities and communities safe, so we have a responsibility to do all we can to keep you safe. This part of our mission is very personal to the Department of Justice. Last year, the Department lost one of its own. Bureau of Prisons Senior Officer Eric Williams was bravely performing his duties when he was brutally attacked and killed by an inmate at the United States Penitentiary-Canaan in Pennsylvania. Officer Williams was a career law enforcement officer who is remembered as a dedicated and selfless professional, and as a loving son, brother, and friend.

His memory, and the memory of all the men and women we honor today, deserve our best efforts. That is why the Attorney General launched the VALOR training initiative to help prevent violence against corrections and law enforcement officers and

improve officer resilience during violent encounters. More than 500 corrections officers have completed this training.

We're also providing officers with the latest in life-saving tools and equipment through our Bulletproof Vest Partnership Program, and we are continually working to improve the quality and reliability of this equipment through our Body Armor Safety Initiative.

Under the leadership of Director Charles Samuels, the Bureau of Prisons has taken steps in its own facilities to guard against the kind of attack Officer Williams sustained. It has increased the number of staff working in housing units in high-security institutions during critical hours of the day. It has found ways to equip its officers with protective devices like pepper spray to quickly resolve dangerous encounters. And it has enhanced searches and installed thermal-imaging fences and other security technologies to prevent contraband from entering federal prisons. These protective measures represent a pledge from Director Samuels to support our federal correctional officers in every way possible, and they reflect a commitment on the part of the entire Department of Justice to protect the safety and welfare of all those who work in our nation's prisons and jails.

And our responsibilities extend beyond those who wear a corrections officer's uniform. They encompass their family members and loved ones, who share the sacrifices in equal measure. Through our Public Safety Officers' Benefits Program, we have worked to ease the burdens on families of those who have fallen or been severely injured. We are working diligently to expedite claims for benefits and to streamline the claims process so that families of officers can have the support they need without having to deal with unnecessary delays or red tape. In this way, we are giving back to those who have given so much.

Ultimately, however, the best way to honor the memory of these heroes is by continuing the critical work they began – not only to keep their institutions safe, but to keep America safe. The men and women we remember today shared a goal, one we all hope to see achieved: that the inmates under their watch would return to their communities with changed minds and mended hearts.

We can carry forward their legacy by working to ensure that those who come into our jails and prisons are equipped with the attitudes and skills they need to remain crime-free. The Department of Justice is helping to make our correctional institutions a turning point in the lives of inmates, so that when they return to their communities – as almost all of them do – they will stay clean and become the law-abiding citizens we expect them to be.

Because effective reentry programs have the potential to improve public safety and maximize the assets of the corrections field, the Attorney General has made them a top national priority – and he is joined in his commitment by corrections leaders across the country. Through the Federal Interagency Reentry Council, which he chairs and which involves Cabinet-level officials and heads of 20 federal agencies, we are

dedicating our resources to programs and policies aimed at keeping inmates from returning to jail or prison.

Under the Second Chance Act, we're supporting adult and juvenile reentry programs across the country. These programs not only give inmates the substance abuse treatment, job training, and other support they need to be productive citizens, they create an atmosphere of positive change that enhances the safety of the officers and other personnel assigned to watch over them.

And Director Samuels is focusing Bureau of Prisons resources on ensuring that reentry planning begins from day one of incarceration and that staff are not only guarding inmates but mentoring them, supporting their rehabilitation, and serving as role models. Because that is, after all, what corrections professionals are: role models to those in their care, and examples to all of us.

The 11 patriots we remember here today enriched us all by their own shining example. They have shown us – through their work and through their lives – that selfless devotion to duty is the noblest and most worthy cause.

They gave their all doing what they loved, and they have made us proud. Let us be inspired by their memory, and let us celebrate what their sacrifice represents: that whatever the dangers – whatever the risks – there are those standing among us who will go the distance.

Thank you.

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