

REMARKS

OF

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

AT THE

CHILDREN OF INCARCERATED PARENTS
DELIVERABLES AND PANEL DISCUSSION

ON

WEDNESDAY, OCTOBER 8, 2014
WASHINGTON, DC

Thank you. I'm very pleased to be here with my colleagues, Pam [Hyde] and Charles [Samuels], both of whom are outstanding leaders doing excellent work to support children of incarcerated parents. I want to thank our partners and friends at the White House for leading today's discussion and for their strong commitment to this issue, which affects so many children – particularly children of color – across America.

I'm grateful for the opportunity to highlight some of the important work we're doing at the Office of Justice Programs to support children of incarcerated parents. I'm especially pleased to see that this issue is getting the attention that it really deserves. Millions of children in the United States have a parent behind bars, and we don't always realize just how deeply – and how differently – they're affected. We can't always see the impact, at least not right away, because often kids aren't able to articulate, or even understand, what's going on. This makes it a challenge for us. We don't know exactly what to say to them, or how to say it, and we don't always know immediately what they need from us to deal with this upheaval in their young lives.

Now, just because a parent is incarcerated, it doesn't mean a child is destined for the same outcome. But, what we do know is that this life-altering experience is going to have an impact – whether it's emotional, health-related, financial, or all of the above – and that if we don't respond, a disruptive situation could become a lasting problem. Specifically, we know that maintaining connections with parents is important, both for the kids, who need the stabilizing presence of a caring adult, and for the parents, whose chances of success after incarceration depend to a large degree on the maintenance of family ties.

We're working hard to strengthen these ties through the work of the Federal Interagency Reentry Council, which is chaired by the Attorney General and involves cabinet-level leaders and heads of 22 federal agencies. The Council is taking on the full range of reentry challenges, from employment and healthcare to substance abuse treatment and housing. Addressing the needs of children is very much part of their efforts.

The Department's Center for Faith-Based and Neighborhood Partnerships, led by Eugene Schneeberg – whom you'll hear from today – and our Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention and Bureau of Justice Assistance have also been working hard to support programs that focus on giving these young people the help they need.

We know that one of the best ways to help kids is through mentoring, and the way to ensure that mentoring programs are effective is by using evidence-based practices and developing partnerships between practitioners and researchers. OJJDP just awarded funding to two terrific organizations that are in the room today – the Mid-Atlantic Network of Youth and Family Services and the Center for Evidence-Based Mentoring at the University of Massachusetts – to design, implement, and evaluate a new set of mentoring practices that will better support children with incarcerated parents.

Under the Second Chance Act, OJJDP is also awarding funding to organizations in five states – Missouri, New York, Ohio, Pennsylvania, and South Dakota – to support mentoring and comprehensive transitional services that emphasize parenting skills to incarcerated individuals who are young fathers. It's critical that we reach this group. The Survey of Youth in Residential Placement estimated that 1 in 5 youth in custody have or are expecting children. These young parents need particular support if they're to meet their familial and civic responsibilities. The idea behind this program is to provide young fathers with mentoring and transitional services, matched to their assessed risks and needs, both while in confinement and out in the community. The ultimate goal is to reduce recidivism and improve outcomes for these young men and their families.

Finally, we know that a parent's contact with the justice system doesn't have to lead to incarceration in order for it to negatively affect a child. A parent's arrest can also be terribly traumatic, depending on the way it's handled. We've got to make sure that when law enforcement officers carry out their investigative and arrest duties, they're doing their best to limit children's exposure to trauma.

Our Bureau of Justice Assistance partnered with the International Association of Chiefs of Police to release a model policy on police interaction with children whose parents are arrested. The guide is called *Safeguarding Children of Arrested Parents*, and it offers strategies to help law enforcement improve their procedures to minimize the adverse impact on children. The IACP is also developing training based on the model policy, and the Deputy Attorney General has directed the Department's own enforcement agencies – the FBI, DEA, ATF, and Marshals Service – to review their policies and training to determine whether modifications can be made to reduce the likelihood that children will be adversely affected by federal law enforcement operations.

I'm proud of the work we're doing to support the children of justice-involved parents. Their numbers are large and their needs are too often overlooked. For the sake of their well-being and development, and for the sake of our families and communities, we owe it to them to give what help and guidance we can.

I'm grateful for the work all of you are doing in your communities, and I invite you to let us know how we can support you. We want to make sure we're getting it right.

Thank you.

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