

REMARKS
AS PREPARED FOR DELIVERY

OF

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

AT THE

NATIONAL ORGANIZATION OF BLACK LAW ENFORCEMENT EXECUTIVES
PRESIDENT'S RECEPTION

ON

FRIDAY, FEBRUARY 12, 2016
HOLLYWOOD, FL

Thank you. I'm delighted and honored to join President Thomas and so many of our nation's law enforcement leaders here today. And I'm proud to stand in the company of two women, Ms. Triplett and Dr. Scott, who have done so much, not only for this great organization, but for policing and public safety in America.

I took the time last weekend to listen to that wonderful interview with Ms. Triplett from a few years ago that was part of the NOBLE podcast series. It made me proud to hear her talk about the central role that she, an African American woman, played in shaping our nation's response to crime and violence in the 70s. It was her foresight and resourcefulness, along with the vision and commitment of other leading law enforcement executives of the era, that gave rise to NOBLE and helped define our approach to public safety in urban America.

I was also proud to hear her talk about my organization – or to be more precise, my organization's predecessor, the Law Enforcement Assistance Administration. The LEAA was a product of its times, an extension of concerns not only about crime and safety but about issues of justice and fairness that were cast into light by urban unrest in the 60s.

When President Johnson signed the Law Enforcement Assistance Act in 1965, it was the first time federal funds had been set aside for local crime-fighting efforts – and that role continues to this day in the operations of my agency, the Office of Justice Programs.

It was a decade later, in September of 1976, that LEAA had a hand in creating the National Organization of Black Law Enforcement Executives. The riots of the 60s were behind us, but crime was still far too prevalent in many urban communities. When Hubert Williams and about 60 other black law enforcement leaders got together at a conference sponsored by LEAA and the Police Foundation, they took a stand. They said it was time for America to finally tackle violence in the black community, and just as important, to see what could be done to ensure fairness in the administration of justice.

It's been 40 years since NOBLE was created – and throughout those 40 years, it has served ably and admirably as “the conscience of law enforcement.” Thanks to NOBLE and its partners in the policing community, we've made substantial progress. Crime rates have fallen – at the national level, they're at historic lows. Our prison population is finally beginning to decline. It's the first time since before NOBLE's founding that those two measures have dropped in the same year. That is truly something to celebrate.

But for all the progress we've made, we're still reminded, almost daily, of how far we need to go. The fact is, too many young men of color are still arrested and locked up for far too long. Too many black males are killed or victimized by violent acts. And too many minority families and communities are torn apart by high incarceration rates that have done little to make us safer.

Sadly, what we're left with in many cases are hollowed-out communities and a crisis of faith in our institutions of law and order. In other words, in some ways we're back where we were 40 or 50 years ago. We still have a good deal of unfinished business to take care of.

Fortunately, I believe we have new insight into the cause of these problems, and there's a sense of urgency and a collective will to do something about them. We know, for one thing, that the safety of our communities and the legitimacy of our justice system are inextricably linked. Research in procedural justice is telling us what black law enforcement leaders and citizens have been saying for decades: that if we expect people to respect the law and the institutions that enforce it, the law must respect them.

Our President understands this. In his speech to the NAACP last summer, he laid out his vision for reforming our criminal justice system – to make it more effective and equitable. Reform, he said, must happen “in three places – in the community, in the courtroom, and in the cellblock.”

First, we need to reduce the number of people from the community who enter the courtroom. That means investing in alternatives to the justice system and expanding opportunities, the way this Administration is doing through *My Brother's Keeper*.

Second, we should ensure that the process of moving from the courtroom to the cellblock is smart and fair. This means looking anew at the way we deal with those entering the system – using pretrial risk assessments to make informed decisions about jail time, for instance, and making sure that poor defendants aren't subjected to additional punishment simply because they can't afford to buy their way out of it.

And third, we must ensure that people leaving the cellblock are able to successfully integrate back into their communities. More than 600,000 people come out of our nation's prisons every year, and more than 11 million cycle in and out of local jails. It's imperative, from both a humanitarian standpoint and a public safety standpoint, that we equip these individuals with the tools and skills they need to be productive, law-abiding citizens.

Reform must touch every facet of the justice system, from arrest to release. That philosophy is what guides the work of my office today.

One of my top priorities, and one of our Attorney General's chief goals, is to bridge divides of trust and strengthen relationships between the justice system and the citizens it serves. In 2014, we launched our National Initiative on Building Community Trust and Justice. The basic idea of this initiative is to build on what we know about procedural justice, implicit bias, and racial reconciliation and help communities begin to heal those historic rifts that are so often centered on the justice system.

We're working with several private partners and an advisory body of law enforcement practitioners and community and faith-based leaders. These groups are

bringing their expertise to the task of repairing fractured relationships between citizens and justice system agencies. The project is tackling a number of issues, notably the strained relationships between minority communities and law enforcement. Currently, six cities are serving as demonstration sites. We've also launched an online resource center with news about the cities' efforts, and research and other information about these issues. You'll find it at trustandjustice.org.

One of the sites is Birmingham, Alabama, which I visited with the Attorney General last May. During our visit, we met with participants in something called the Youth Citizens Police Academy. This is an outstanding training program put on by the Birmingham Police that gives young people a chance to see, close up, how law enforcement works and the challenges officers face every day. It was remarkable to see how that interaction between police and citizens changed the dynamics of their relationship. The attitudes of participating youth completely transformed, from suspicion and hostility to respect and even admiration. This is the kind of thing we're trying to promote.

We see local law enforcement as the key to better community relationships, not to mention greater community safety. Local police are helping to lead our anti-violence work in cities across the country. Under our Violence Reduction Network – now in 10 cities, with plans to expand to 5 more this spring and summer – we're bringing together local law enforcement with the Justice Department's assistance and investigative agencies to tackle violence problems in some of our most challenged neighborhoods.

We started this effort in September 2014, and we've already seen remarkable success. For example, in one of our sites – Wilmington, Delaware – police have raised homicide clearance rates from 10 percent to almost 50 percent. And in Detroit, police and prosecutors have helped to reduce domestic violence-related homicides 35 percent in just over a year!

But I want to be clear: it's not just the police who have a role in ensuring safety and fairness; it's every part of the justice system. My office is working to improve pretrial practices so that poor, often minority, defendants aren't punished with jail time just because they can't afford bail. And we're trying to encourage prosecutors and judges to make charging and sentencing decisions that are proportionate and based on risk.

At the back end of the system, we're providing substantial funding under the Second Chance Act to help incarcerated individuals get back on their feet and avoid future involvement with the criminal justice system. And the Attorney General chairs the Federal Interagency Reentry Council, which involves cabinet members and heads of 23 federal agencies.

Our work carries into the juvenile justice system, as well. For example, we're working closely with the Department of Education through something called the Supportive School Discipline Initiative to make sure kids stay in school and don't land on the path to the justice system as a result of minor behavioral violations. Our National

Forum on Youth Violence Prevention is bringing together stakeholders from across disciplines and from across levels of government to design comprehensive anti-violence strategies. And when young people do come to the attention of the courts, we want to make sure they're handled in a developmentally appropriate way so that we're not setting them up for a lifetime of justice system involvement.

So our work is expansive, it's comprehensive, and through it, we're hoping to make a positive and lasting difference in the way our justice system serves America's citizens.

Our nation's law enforcement leaders and officers are in the vanguard of this work. Whether we're able to achieve the President's vision of a smarter justice system and a more just society will depend on *your* success in reflecting our highest values and greatest aspirations.

This organization was founded in recognition of the law enforcement executive's undisputed moral voice, a voice that had largely been silent until four decades ago. Now that voice is calling us to action, demanding that we look critically at past injustices and right the balance.

NOBLE has a proud history, going back to the days of its visionary founders and continuing to our present moment of progress, progress that each of you has helped us to realize. You've helped to move our nation forward. And though we're not where we need to be yet, we're moving in the right direction – and I believe that, working together, we will get there. . . soon.

Thank you.

###