

REMARKS

OF

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AT THE

MIDDLE COLLEGE OF NORTH CAROLINA  
AGRICULTURAL AND TECHNICAL STATE UNIVERSITY

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Thank you, Principal Gause. And good morning, everyone. I'm very happy to be here, and delighted to have a chance to talk to this outstanding group of young men.

As a Justice Department official, I spend much of my time meeting with other officials and professional organizations to talk about what we're doing to support our youth. I don't have nearly enough opportunities to talk directly to the young men and women we're doing all this work for. So yes, I'm thrilled to be here.

And I'm deeply impressed by what I've seen – committed leaders, top-notch faculty and staff, and a bright and talented student body that gives me hope for the direction of our country. You should all be proud of what you're doing here, and you should be excited about the contributions you will make in the years ahead.

Your creed says it all, these lines in particular: "I will be a servant to my community. I will be a reflection for others to follow. I will make success the only option." I can't think of a better way to capture what our President is trying to achieve through the work he's doing on behalf of our nation's youth.

How many of you have heard of the President's My Brother's Keeper Initiative?

My Brother's Keeper is an effort that the White House is leading to support promising young people like all of you – to make sure everyone who works hard has the chance to reach his or her full potential. This school represents everything My Brother's Keeper stands for – service, leadership, opportunity, and success.

Let me tell you a little about what we're doing, because the Department of Justice – and my office in particular, the Office of Justice Programs – are a big part of this work.

First, it's important that you know what my office does. Our job at the Office of Justice Programs, to put it simply, is to help keep America's communities safe.

Here's a one-question pop quiz for you: How many law enforcement agencies are there in the United States? By a show of hands, how many of you think there are 100? 200? 500? Try about 18,000. And almost all are run by state, county, local, and tribal governments – not the federal government. These are local police departments, sheriffs' offices, highway patrols, tribal police.

Our job at the Office of Justice Programs is to make sure these agencies have the resources they need to do their jobs safely and effectively. That means giving them equipment like communications technology, bulletproof vests, and body-worn cameras. It means training them on things like responding to active shooters and dealing with heroin overdoses. It means giving them information about best practices, like how to make arrests when young children are present.

And it's not just law enforcement we support – it's prosecutors, defense attorneys, judges, victim service providers, and people who work in the juvenile justice system.

Our role is to give these professionals the tools and information they need to do their jobs fairly and effectively.

So what does all this have to do with My Brother's Keeper and supporting youth?

I'm guided by a philosophy – and that is that if we can give our young people the services and support they need; intervene early in situations where they may be exposed to violence and trauma; and keep them in school and connected to their families and communities, we are far more likely to keep them on the path to healthy, productive lives – and we will be better able to ensure the overall safety of our communities.

Safe, healthy kids mean safe, healthy communities. That's the impetus behind My Brother's Keeper.

My office and the Department of Justice as a whole play a central role by focusing on preventing and reducing violence, improving the way the juvenile justice system works, and ensuring that those who are victimized have access to services.

First of all, we know that young men of color, in particular, are vulnerable to violence. They're also the group least likely to receive support. The effects of this trauma are debilitating and destructive. We see a greater incidence of anxiety, depression, psychological and physical health problems, poor school performance, drugs, alcohol – and violence.

Last year, as part of My Brother's Keeper, we launched a new program that helps communities plug service gaps and pull these young people out of the cycle of trauma and violence. In 12 cities across the country, community stakeholders like justice and health officials, faith-based organizations, and social workers are working together to help young male victims deal with the consequences of violence. The idea is to give them positive, healthy options and steer them away from more violence.

One thing we know about violence is that we stand a greater chance of reducing it when we rely on prevention and intervention, not just enforcement and prosecution. We also know that violence reduction strategies work better when citizens and community stakeholders own the problem and band together to find solutions.

We have another program under My Brother's Keeper called the National Forum on Youth Violence Prevention. Several federal agencies are involved in this effort – the Department of Education, the Department of Health and Human Services, the Department of Housing and Urban Development, and the Office of National Drug Control Policy – in addition to the Department of Justice, of course.

What we're doing is bringing together police chiefs, public health and school officials, business and philanthropies, community and faith-based organizations, and young people themselves to help them develop violence prevention strategies. We have

15 sites that are carrying out plans to reduce violent crime and improve opportunities for youth, and we're getting great cooperation from mayors and other city leaders.

A big part of our mission is to make sure we're doing all we can to keep young people out of the justice system. Another piece of My Brother's Keeper is a fabulous partnership we have with the Department of Education called the Supportive School Discipline Initiative.

Now, I know I'm speaking today to a group of upstanding young men who model good behavior. But there are times in the lives of many young people when they make mistakes. Maybe they've had a bad day. Maybe something's going on at home or in class that provokes them. So they do something rash. They act out, say or do something they shouldn't.

You all know that that kind of behavior is never acceptable, and the school is right to hold the student accountable for that behavior. But does that mean a suspension or expulsion is appropriate? Perhaps in some cases. But we think schools need to think seriously before they take a big step like that.

Too often, schools have what we call zero-tolerance disciplinary policies that say one mistake gets you suspended or expelled. The problem with that kind of approach is that sometimes, getting kicked out of school is the first step on the path to the court system. And we know that once you're entangled in the justice system, getting out of it is tough. We believe it's important that schools make every effort to keep kids in school because we know that education and family are key to staying out of trouble and on the path to succeed.

The goal of the Supportive School Discipline Initiative is to encourage school districts to re-think these zero-tolerance policies. We've issued guidance to school districts on steps they can take, and we've provided funding aimed at promoting positive behaviors and increasing school safety.

And finally, for those young people who do come into the system, we need to make sure they're prepared to return to their communities ready to live crime-free, productive lives. We have a program called the Second Chance Act, and we've awarded over \$400 million dollars over the last seven years to support reentry programs. These are programs that are designed to help people coming out of our prisons, jails, and juvenile detention facilities make a successful return to their communities.

Let me give you a couple of statistics. There are more than 600,000 people who come out of our nation's state and federal prisons – every year. And every year, more than 11 million come in and out of our local and county jails.

Now, what do you think happens when these individuals come back to their communities without being given any support? Do you think they return suddenly

reformed and ready to do the right thing? It's unusual. Statistics show that about two-thirds of state prisoners who are released are re-arrested within three years.

But guess what? When they do get the proper support – when they get job training, substance abuse treatment, access to education and housing, and the chance to reconnect with their families – many are capable of great things. There's actually an undiscovered pool of talent literally locked away in our corrections system. And if that sounds like a strange thing to say, we have someone working in my office who demonstrates what I mean.

His name is Daryl Atkinson. Daryl served 40 months for a first-time, non-violent drug crime, and when he came out, he worked hard to earn his college and then his law degree. He's now a senior staff attorney for the Southern Coalition for Social Justice, based in Durham, and he's working at the Department of Justice as a Second Chance Fellow to help expand reentry services across the country.

Daryl is a shining example of the wonderful things that can happen when someone is given a second chance – and that's what we're trying to promote through our work at the Office of Justice Programs.

The safety of our communities depends on many things – solid prevention and intervention programs, fair and effective enforcement of the law, and supportive reentry programs that help those who've come into contact with the justice system make a successful return to their communities. Above all things, public safety depends on expanding opportunity, especially opportunity for our youth.

That's what My Brother's Keeper is all about – making sure that our leaders of tomorrow – bright young people like every one of you – have the support and guidance they need to make a difference, and to help our country realize the full promise of its ideals.

Looking at this group of amazing young men, I am excited about what the future holds. I'm optimistic that – with all of you helping to guide us – our criminal justice system will continue to strengthen and evolve, and it will ultimately fulfill its potential as a force for positive social change.

I believe our nation is on the right path, and my mind is easy because the students of Middle College are moving us forward. I'm grateful to have had this time with you, and I wish you all the very best as you pursue your dreams and achieve great things.

Thank you.

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