

REMARKS  
AS PREPARED FOR DELIVERY

OF

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AT THE

DEPARTMENT OF HEALTH AND HUMAN SERVICES  
HEALTH EQUITY FORUM

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I'm very glad to be included in this discussion and proud to be part of an Administration that works so hard, across so many agencies, to reduce disparities and expand opportunities. I'm especially grateful for the leadership that Nadine [Gracia] and her office have provided, and I thank them for inviting me here today.

We've come a long way in the 30 years since the Heckler Report was issued. In the area of public safety in particular, we've made substantial – even historic – gains. Crime is at its lowest level in decades. Incarceration rates, although still shamefully high, have finally begun to fall. In fact, for the first time in over 40 years, both crime rates and incarceration rates have declined together – and it happened during this Administration. This is absolutely something to celebrate.

But the President knows we still have a lot of work to do. We can't be satisfied when our country is locking away a quarter of the world's prisoners with, at best, dubious results. We can't be content when one out of every three black males can expect to go to prison in his lifetime. We can't be pleased that young people of color are disproportionately expelled from school for minor violations and sent to the juvenile justice system. And we can't rest easy knowing that indigent defendants remain stuck in our jails simply because they're unable to post bail or pay municipal fines, and not because they've been found guilty of a crime.

There's still a lot of work to be done. That's why President Obama has made criminal justice reform a top priority. In his speech to the NAACP last summer, he laid out his vision. Reform, he said, must happen “in three places – in the community, in the courtroom, and in the cellblock.” In other words, from the front end of the system to the back end, before justice system contact and beyond.

First, we need to reduce the number of people from the community who enter the courtroom. That means investing in sentencing alternatives like drug courts. But even before that, it means expanding opportunities for those at risk of justice system involvement, especially our young people. The President's *My Brother's Keeper* initiative is designed to do just that, and my office plays a central role.

One of our MBK efforts is a partnership with the Department of Education called the Supportive School Discipline Initiative. We're working with school districts to help them re-think zero-tolerance disciplinary policies. These practices are counterproductive because they often lead to continued justice system involvement and they disproportionately penalize minority children. We're also leading something called the National Forum on Youth Violence Prevention, which partners federal agencies and local stakeholders to tackle youth crime in our cities. And last year we launched a program that seeks to break the cycle of violence in our urban centers by helping young male victims find support and healing.

The second area of reform is ensuring that the process of moving from the courtroom to the corrections system is smart and fair. In America today, our jails are filled with people awaiting trial, many of whom languish for days, weeks, and months

simply because they can't afford to post bail. We should be making these pretrial decisions based on a deliberate assessment of risk, not on an arbitrary socio-economic condition.

Taking that a step further, we need to look critically at how fines and other court-related fees are being used to perpetuate a cycle of poverty and incarceration. As we found in Ferguson, Missouri, poor residents can't always afford to meet these financial obligations – and when they can't, they're penalized with interest fees and late payments that drive them deeper into debt and further into the grip of the justice system.

We recently held a working session to examine the way these penalties are assessed and enforced, and we followed that up with a White House event to raise awareness of the issue. We also released a package of resources, which includes a resource guide to help state and local leaders make informed policy decisions. In addition, we're assembling a national task force on fines, fees, and bail practices, and we'll be awarding grants to test new strategies around fee and fine enforcement.

The third and final area of reform is in the area of corrections – in particular, making sure that people who have had contact with the justice system are able to successfully integrate back into their communities. Over 600,000 people come out of our nation's prisons every year. More than 11 million cycle in and out of local jails. And one in four American adults has some sort of a criminal record. These men, women, and young people face a barrage of collateral consequences like denial of housing and voting privileges that follow them for years and prevent them from returning to society as productive citizens.

Since President Obama has been in office, we've awarded more than \$400 million to support hundreds of reentry programs across the country. And the Federal Interagency Reentry Council, which is chaired by the Attorney General, is working hard to remove barriers to reentry and reduce these collateral consequences.

So we're making progress. We've generated a lot of momentum. And we're committed to building on the work we've accomplished.

We know that reform won't come quickly or easily. Many of the problems we're tackling are deeply entrenched in the system. But we're already seeing major shifts and commitments from both sides of the political aisle. My hope is that, by the time the President, my counterparts, and I leave office next year, we'll be well on our way to meeting our goal of a more equitable and more effective justice system.

Thank you.

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