

REMARKS
AS PREPARED FOR DELIVERY

OF

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ASSISTANT ATTORNEY GENERAL
OFFICE OF JUSTICE PROGRAMS

AT THE

BUILDING COMMUNITY TRUST:
JUSTICE, BIAS, AND RECONCILIATION
CONVENING

ON

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WASHINGTON, DC

Thank you, Eddie [Martin]. I appreciate that kind introduction. It's great to welcome everyone to the Office of Justice Programs. I'm delighted to see so many leaders here today to talk about ways we can build and sustain strong and productive relationships in our communities.

I want to thank Eddie, Betsy Pearl, Jeff Hunt, and the outstanding teams from our Center for Faith-based and Neighborhood Partnerships and the OJP Diagnostic Center for bringing us together, and for all they do to support and strengthen America's communities.

Finally, I want to acknowledge and thank Melissa Rogers from the White House. Melissa and her staff have been wonderful partners as we work to deliver resources to our allies in the faith-based and community sector. I'm very glad to have her with us today.

It's a point of pride for me – and for Eddie and my OJP colleagues – that we in the Obama Administration have helped to make trust integral to the conversation about justice and safety in this country. We have a President and an Attorney General who recognize that a system of laws designed and enforced by people must exist within a framework of higher principles – of fairness, equality, and human dignity. In the absence of those guiding ideals, laws are in danger of losing their moral force.

We have an obligation – as policymakers, as professionals, as leaders in our communities – to make sure that the safety of our neighborhoods is tied to the uplift of our citizens. Safer communities go hand in hand with social improvement and expanded opportunity. That's why your contributions are so vital, because they complete the link between lawful behavior and a higher form of citizenship.

Your work has never been so important. While our nation is safer than it has been in decades – despite spikes in violence in some cities – and though rates of imprisonment have begun to fall, many communities are still suffering. People of color, particularly young black and brown men, are arrested and locked up for far too long. Too many black males are killed or victimized by violent acts. And many minority families and communities are torn apart by high incarceration rates that, in fact, have done little to make us safer.

These conditions can lead to a sense of exclusion, alienation, and hopelessness – a feeling that, once again, these same marginalized groups are being left out. It's our job – more than a job, a calling – not to let this sense of hopelessness take root. We have to find a way to make sure that our criminal justice and social service systems work for everyone and that historically disadvantaged people can see a way out of their situation. In short, we must replace despair with opportunity.

That is the goal the President set when he launched his My Brother's Keeper initiative, an effort that the Office of Justice Programs is centrally involved in. OJP has been working with communities and other federal agencies to give young people the

chance they need to become productive, successful members of their communities and to rise to meet their full potential, no matter what they look like or where they come from.

Among other efforts that fall under My Brother's Keeper, we have joined the Department of Education in encouraging school districts to re-think school disciplinary policies that send kids to court for minor behavioral infractions. These practices are counterproductive because they often lead to continued justice system involvement, and they disproportionately penalize minority children.

We are also leading an effort called the National Forum on Youth Violence Prevention, which brings together an array of local and federal stakeholders to tackle youth crime in our cities by helping these communities develop and implement comprehensive data-driven strategies to prevent youth violence.

Last year, we launched another program that seeks to break the cycle of violence in our urban centers by helping young male victims find support and healing. Too often, these young people are seen narrowly – and very often wrongly – only as perpetrators when in fact many are also victims.

We're also making strides in reforming our juvenile justice system, working to limit youth contact with the system and to make it both fair and beneficial when contact can't be avoided.

And one of the centerpieces of our involvement with My Brother's Keeper is a Justice Department initiative, led by my office, to strengthen relationships between justice system agencies and the communities they serve. I see this issue of building trust as one of the defining social challenges of our time. We just went through a long and bitterly contested presidential campaign that underscored deep divides in our country. It might seem tempting to view this election cycle as a sign, or a confirmation, of unbridgeable differences. I see it differently. I see it as a call to action, a charge to work even harder to find common ground.

In my view, what's going on across the nation is being played out every day in our communities. What we see are two groups of people standing on opposite sides of a great chasm. We have police and other justice system professionals on one side and community residents on the other – each with their own grievances, their own biases, and their own interpretations of history.

As hard as it may be to admit sometimes, both sides have a legitimate perspective and a voice that should be heard. But we're often unable to hear those voices because of all the angry noise that drowns them out. And that's a shame because, when it comes down to it, we all really want the same thing – safe neighborhoods, good schools, opportunities for gainful employment, a chance to make a difference in the world.

In his great speech in Selma, Alabama, the President said, “action requires that we shed our cynicism. For when it comes to the pursuit of justice, we can afford neither

complacency nor despair.” He was issuing a challenge for us today – to remain engaged and to remain hopeful. And I believe we have every reason to be optimistic.

We’re seeing wonderful work being done in places like Birmingham; Fort Worth; Minneapolis; Pittsburgh; Gary, Indiana; and Stockton, California – the six cities we’re funding through our National Initiative on Building Community Trust and Justice.

This initiative is building on what we know about procedural justice, implicit bias, and racial reconciliation to help communities begin to heal those historic rifts that are so often centered on the justice system. We’re working with several private and academic 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 justice system agencies and the citizens they serve.

The OJP Diagnostic Center – our premier technical assistance resource – is working closely with the six sites to help them identify solutions to community challenges and to help them build sustainable responses to those challenges.

And Eddie’s team is lending its resources and expertise to the effort as well. From their work with the National Forum on Youth Violence Prevention, they’ve developed a community of practice advisory group made up of faith-based and community stakeholders. These leaders convene regularly to share best practices on issues like effective reentry, the role of violence interrupters, evidence-based programming, and procedural justice.

We’ve heard from community of practice participants about some of the fear and frustration they’re seeing, but we’re also hearing about the visionary actions that faith and community leaders are taking to strengthen relationships between justice system agencies and citizens. The Center for Faith-based and Neighborhood Partnerships is helping us put a finger on the pulse of these communities and find ways to overcome barriers to trust.

But this is not a challenge that we at the Department of Justice can meet on our own. In fact, finding answers depends primarily on the outreach and the work that you do in your communities. Advocates and leaders from all faiths and traditions have always been critical to solving problems, mediating differences, and creating safe havens where citizens and stakeholders can meet and resolve difficult issues. Your guidance and insight will remain critical to the safety and health of our communities.

Even during these challenging times, when bitter divisions have been exposed and people are struggling to find common ground, we know that there is hope for transcending our differences. But it will take work. As Dr. King said, the march of progress “is neither automatic nor inevitable.”

Positive change is something we must commit to every day and at every turn. But there is no reason to believe that we won’t ultimately succeed – by working together, by

modeling unity, and by giving those we serve reason to hope. This is our calling, and it's one we share together.

Thank you.

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