

REMARKS

OF

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ACTING ASSISTANT ATTORNEY GENERAL
OFFICE OF JUSTICE PROGRAMS

AT THE

NATIONAL FORUM ON CRIMINAL JUSTICE
OPENING PLENARY

ON

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LONG BEACH, CALIFORNIA

Thank you, Chris [Asplen]. I'm delighted to be here with the leadership and staff of NCJA, the IJIS Institute, and the Justice Research and Statistics Association. It's a privilege to help open what I'm sure will be a successful and productive forum on the major issues and challenges facing our field today.

I'd like to thank Chris, Karhlton Moore, and Chris Kervick and their team for the great work they've done over the years to support the criminal justice field – and for their collaboration with the Office of Justice Programs to secure the safety of America's communities. My thanks, as well, to Lisa Shoaf of JRSA and Steve Ambrosini of the IJIS Institute for their leadership and partnership with the Department of Justice.

And my thanks to all of you – the policymakers, practitioners, and researchers who guide the work we're all engaged in. We're grateful for your vision and leadership as we build a stronger and more effective criminal justice system.

As Acting Assistant Attorney General, I'm proud that OJP has been able to support you in this important work. One of the privileges of my position is that I have the opportunity to help you advance programs aimed at enhancing public safety – work that we're all concerned about, work that the Attorney General and this Administration care deeply about.

As I'm sure everyone here knows, rooting out violence, drugs, and gangs in our communities is our Attorney General's top priority. I've had the good fortune of working with Jeff Sessions for several years – during his days in the Senate and now, of course, at the Department of Justice. His commitment to the safety of America's citizens is second to none. That's why, when you hear him talk about crime and drugs and gangs, and what they are doing to our communities, you hear urgency and real concern.

Complacency is a recipe for danger, to his mind, and I think we're all well-advised to take his lead. We know that violent crime is on the rise. It's not happening everywhere, but the national trend is unmistakably upward.

In 2015, our nation saw the largest one-year increase in violent crime since 1991, and the biggest jump in the murder rate since 1968. Preliminary data for the first half of 2016 show further increases. During the first six months of last year, murders in large cities were up 22 percent compared with the same period the previous year.

The spread of illegal drugs, especially the risks posed by opioids, is another area of major concern. We know that deaths due to heroin overdoses more than tripled from 2010 to 2014, and opioids killed more than 33,000 Americans in 2015.

But the dangers aren't limited to users. Synthetic opioids are being manufactured in such a way as to put law enforcement officers and other first responders in serious danger. Contact with even the tiniest of particles is enough to cause life-threatening harm. I think we can all agree that these are very unsettling trends.

OJP has already taken significant steps to address the challenges of violence and drugs. Last month, the Attorney General's Task Force on Crime Reduction and Public Safety hosted a two-day summit in Washington, DC. We brought together nearly 400 law enforcement officials, community advocates, victims groups, and researchers to talk about issues of concern and the strategies that are working. The Vice President and the Attorney General both addressed the participants.

In his remarks, the Attorney General announced a new effort called the National Public Safety Partnership. OJP, specifically BJA, is coordinating this program. The idea is to provide tailored support to communities with levels of violence that significantly exceed the national average.

We're doing this by bringing in DOJ's law enforcement units – the FBI, DEA, ATF, and Marshals; our grant agencies – OJP, the COPS Office, and the Office on Violence Against Women; and the U.S. Attorneys' Offices, and we're sharing resources and expertise with local officials. I feel it's important to point out that the federal role is to support local violence-reduction strategies, not to dictate what those strategies should be.

Twenty-two cities are participating – cities from all across the country. You can visit our new website at nationalpublicsafetypartnership.org to find out more about the program. This new initiative will be a centerpiece of our violence reduction work.

We're also part of the Department's strategy to blunt the impact of illegal drugs. BJA is funding opioid treatment courts as part of its drug court program, and our online naloxone toolkit is available to support law enforcement as they respond to opioid-related events. The President's budget request for fiscal year 2018 proposes to build on this work. It asks for \$20 million for a new Comprehensive Opioid Abuse Program, and another \$80 million to support drug courts and other substance abuse programs.

The President's budget also focusses resources on another Administration priority – keeping our law enforcement officers safe. The President and the Attorney General have made their commitment to our public safety officers very clear. One of the President's earliest actions was to sign an executive order directing the Justice Department to develop a strategy to reduce violence against law enforcement.

His budget request proposes substantial investments in our Bulletproof Vest Partnership Program and in resilience training available through our VALOR initiative. We're also showing our commitment to officer wellness research and the body armor standards and testing program managed by NIJ.

Above all things, OJP's mission is to protect America's communities, and to give our state, local, and tribal partners the tools they need to do their jobs effectively and safely. And this is what the Byrne Justice Assistance Grants program is all about. I want to take just a moment to talk about Byrne JAG, because I know you have all done a

tremendous amount of work to make this vital program effective and responsive to community public safety needs.

In spite of the tough choices that had to be made in putting together the President's budget, I want to assure you that Byrne JAG remains a cornerstone program – one that I believe is critical to advancing our collective public safety goals.

BJA recently released the JAG state solicitation, and we're encouraging applicants to concentrate their resources on several areas of emphasis. We're asking states to focus on combating gun violence and enforcing firearms laws. We're encouraging funds to go toward helping law enforcement agencies make the transition to the National Incident-Based Reporting System, which will be critical because JAG award amounts will be calculated based on NIBRS data in the future. We're also focusing on officer safety and wellness, border security, and strengthening collaboration between prosecutors and law enforcement.

The overall mission of Byrne JAG hasn't changed, nor has the Department's commitment to it. We feel that emphasizing these critical areas will move the field closer to rooting out the biggest public safety problems faced by our communities. Applications for the state solicitation are due by the 25th of August, and BJA is working closely with the field to address any questions.

I want to end with a pledge on behalf of the Department. We know that resources are scarce and the problems some communities are facing are substantial. That's why the Attorney General and we at OJP are committed to making our funding directly available to you at the state and local levels, to the greatest extent possible.

OJP has a number of valuable resources that can help state and local professionals do their jobs more effectively, but we're not the ones on the streets enforcing the law and protecting citizens. The professionals who are doing those jobs are the ones who need the training, the funding, and the information that we have to share, and we're committed to making sure they have those tools.

I appreciate for all the work that each of you is doing to support our criminal justice professionals, I'm grateful for your partnership with OJP and the Department of Justice, and I look forward to working with you in the months and years ahead to advance our shared goal of safe and healthy communities throughout America.

Thank you, and best wishes for a productive forum.

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