

REMARKS

OF

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AT THE

NINTH ANNUAL
NATIONAL MENTORING SUMMIT

ON

THURSDAY, JANUARY 31, 2019
WASHINGTON, DC

Thank you. It's a pleasure to be here this morning. I'm very glad to take part in this summit, and I'm pleased to see the tremendous support being shown for America's youth from people across the country.

I'm proud to represent the Department of Justice and the more than 600 employees of the Office of Justice Programs, whose mission it is to help make our communities safer, including protecting America's youth. OJP is the primary funding, research and statistics arm of the Justice Department, and each of our six program offices support kids in some way, whether through public safety and law enforcement grants, victim services, research, statistical data, sex offender monitoring or our extensive portfolio of child protection programs.

I want to specifically acknowledge and thank our Office for Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention, and in particular its Administrator, Caren Harp, who joins me today. Caren and her team are working hard to strengthen the nation's juvenile justice system and support youth who come into contact with it. Mentoring programs are a cornerstone of their efforts. Let me also say, on behalf of Caren and myself, that the Office of Justice Programs is honored to again serve as a Presenting Partner of the National Mentoring Summit, and we're proud to continue our relationship with MENTOR and its affiliates.

I'm a big believer that kids are much better equipped to thrive when they have good role models. As a father of five, I am attuned to the mentoring role that adults can play. I myself coached high school baseball for several years and, more recently, led a tutoring program for four years for a community of home schoolers, where I interacted weekly with about 50 kids ranging in age from four to 12.

At the Office of Justice Programs, we view mentoring as a vehicle for positive youth development, and as an effective prevention tool. Mentoring builds connections by enlisting skilled and dedicated volunteers to help youth face challenges such as isolation and dis-connection.

Our Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention has a two-decade history of investing in mentoring programs, through research, operational support and capacity-building. We're particularly proud of our work with MENTOR to support the National Mentoring Resource Center. Last year alone, the Center provided training and other support to 378 school-, community- and faith-based mentoring programs that served more than 55,000 youth nationwide, thanks to funding from OJJDP.

A prime example is an organization from my home state, Iowa, where I served as U.S. Attorney. Volunteer Iowa, which is led by Mary Sheka, runs the Iowa Mentoring Partnership, which received a three-year grant from OJJDP to work with youth affected by the opioid epidemic. We're all well aware of the toll the opioid crisis has taken on Americans as a whole. Drug overdoses claimed the lives of more than 70,000 people in the U.S. last year, the vast majority of them from opioids. That's more than the number of

people who died in car crashes, and more than the death toll at the height of the AIDS crisis.

The impact of this crisis on youth has been both profound and heartbreaking. More and more kids are living in homes with caregivers who have addiction problems. A survey of middle- and high-schoolers in Iowa found that 14 percent of the state's youth live in homes with someone who has a serious drug or alcohol problem. And they're suffering the consequences – of neglect, of abuse or of a heightened risk of addiction themselves, and all the problems that come with it. And Iowa isn't even among the states worst hit by this crisis. The grant to the Iowa Mentoring Partnership focuses on helping at-risk youth in rural areas. Six local organizations are receiving sub-grants that will allow them to recruit and train volunteer mentors. The goal is to match 150 youth with mentors.

The Iowa project is one of many promising efforts we're supporting. Another great example is the work we're funding through Big Brothers Big Sisters of America, whose President and CEO, Pam Iorio, is here today. I just returned from San Antonio, where I had the opportunity to visit a mentoring program run by Big Brothers Big Sisters of South Texas. It was impressive to see the way the program is connecting at-risk youth with law enforcement officers, community leaders and many other mentors and helping to encourage and support the youth through their mentors in developing long-term, supportive relationships.

I was especially encouraged by my meeting and discussion with three former mentees who were greatly helped by – and still benefitting from – the mentoring program and their mentors. The organization's chief operations officer, Armen Babajanian, is here in the audience. Armen and I didn't get a chance to meet in San Antonio because he was on his way to D.C., but we'll have a chance to talk later this morning. I'm looking forward to connecting with him.

Bigs in Blue in Dallas is another Big Brothers Big Sisters initiative that pairs young people with police officers in the communities they patrol. This program is run under the auspices of Big Brothers Big Sisters Lone Star, and its CEO, Pierce Bush. We're seeing great results out of that program. Youth are benefitting from the guidance of trusted law enforcement professionals, and police benefit from connections with young members of the community. Police Chief Reneé Hall helped launch a program in the Greater Dallas area that has made more than 100 mentoring matches. She gave a nice description of what mentoring is all about. She said, a mentor "provides a picture that a child can aspire to." That's the value of mentoring in a nutshell.

We're proud to support these and many other programs. Last year, our Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention awarded more than \$83 million in mentoring grants. Those grants fund a variety of mentoring efforts, including programs that focus on sexually exploited children and youth affected by the opioid crisis. We'll continue to support and promote these efforts in the coming year. I also want to make sure you are all aware that our Office for Victims of Crime has made an unprecedented

amount of funding available to support local victim assistance programs. We know that youth who receive mentoring services sometimes come from difficult home and community environments. In some cases, they have been victimized or abused. In those cases, I encourage you to reach out to your local victim service provider or get in touch with your state Victims of Crime Act program to find out what services are available.

We know that the need for these programs is great, and I am grateful for the work each of you is doing on behalf of the youth of your communities, and for providing a picture that a young person can aspire to. I urge you to continue this important work, which is so vital to public safety and to the youth who represent our nation's future.

Thank you for all you do, and my best wishes for a successful summit.

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