

REMARKS

OF

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AT THE

MEETING OF THE COORDINATING COUNCIL ON
JUVENILE JUSTICE AND DELINQUENCY PREVENTION

ON

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WASHINGTON, DC

Thank you, Caren [Harp]. I'm very pleased to welcome everyone back to the Office of Justice Programs for another Coordinating Council meeting. I look forward to another good discussion, this time about how to address child abuse and neglect.

As always, I want to thank Caren for her leadership as vice chair of the Council and as administrator of our Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention. And thanks, as always, to her staff for their work to strengthen the juvenile justice system and protect children.

I just returned yesterday from a three-day conference in Atlanta, sponsored by OJJDP, on combating child exploitation. There were more than 1,700 people who registered, almost all of them law enforcement officers dedicated to investigating these cases. It was encouraging to see such a large turn-out. At the same time, it was a solemn reminder of the scale of the dangers facing children in America.

When I served as U.S. Attorney a decade ago, my district prosecuted child exploitation cases in half of the 52 counties in my district in northern Iowa in just a five-year timeframe. I don't have any reason to believe the problem is any less prevalent now than it was then. And while our focus as federal prosecutors was on cases involving online enticement and the possession, distribution and production of child pornography, we know there's an even larger universe of child endangerment.

Child abuse, apart from computer-facilitated exploitation, remains an intractable, and serious, problem. Just to give you a snapshot, in 2017, an estimated 1,720 children died from abuse in the United States. That's almost five kids a day. And most of them – about 72 percent – were younger than three. And if kids who are abused and neglected are fortunate enough to escape lasting physical harm, there's a good chance they will suffer short- and maybe even long-term psychological and emotional injury. Abuse and neglect can impair mental development. They can affect school performance. They influence future relationships, often in very destructive ways. A study even found that people with a history of child mistreatment earned almost \$8,000 less per year than people who were not abused.

As you know, and as you discussed in your last meeting, we're also still coming to terms with the impact of the opioid crisis on children. An alarming number of kids of opioid-addicted parents are being removed from parental custody in some areas of the country. They're witnessing their mothers and fathers overdose and watching them being taken away in ambulances while they're left behind with the police and social services. And opioid-addicted newborns are being seen in hospital emergency rooms.

Child mistreatment takes many forms. It is both a pervasive problem and an urgent problem, and it's one we need to be prepared to address from both an intervention and a prevention standpoint. As the President has said, "we must do everything within our power to stop child abuse and neglect before they occur."

OJJDP is putting a large share of its resources into fighting child abuse and mistreatment. Last year, we awarded more than \$104 million to support an array of programs designed to protect kids. A significant share of that funding – more than \$20 million – went to support programs like children’s advocacy centers. In 2018, more than 880 local children’s advocacy centers served nearly 335,000 abused and neglected children. This is impressive, but we need to be sure we’re maximizing these resources, and reaching children everywhere, whether they’re in urban centers, suburban neighborhoods, or remote areas of the country like tribal lands and other rural communities. I visited two different child advocacy centers in rural Alaska recently, and both were having trouble keeping up with the demand for interviews and services.

Are there ways we can better allocate our resources? Is there a way to more effectively coordinate federal programs to address specific local problems? Are there challenges we’re missing or innovative solutions we should know about? The federal government doesn’t have limitless funding – we can’t tackle every single problem – but we do have substantial resources that we can devote to these issues, in the form of grants, training, technical assistance and research.

Speaking for Caren and myself, we’re prepared to make these important investments. But we need your guidance to help us focus our efforts. I encourage you to think critically about how the federal government can make the best use of its resources and coordinate effectively with private and nonprofit organizations to prevent and respond to child abuse and neglect.

Protecting kids is one of our most important responsibilities as government officials and public safety professionals. I hope that we’ll be able to leave here today with a better strategy for taking on the problem of child abuse and neglect, and with a clear idea of the steps we should take next.

I want to thank you all for your time, for your participation and for your commitment, and we look forward to hearing your ideas.

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