



**REMARKS OF ROBERT L. LISTENBEE
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AT THE
“NATIONAL TRIBAL YOUTH SUMMIT” EVENT
ARLINGTON, VA
MAY 30, 2013
*REMARKS AS PREPARED FOR DELIVERY***

Thank you for that introduction. And thank you for that beautiful traditional opening.

It's truly a privilege and an honor to be here with all of you—grantees from about 100 tribes in 22 states.

Thank you for coming here today. And thank you for all that you do for tribal youth and your continued work with the Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention.

My hope is that the next two days will be an opportunity for everyone to exchange information, share experiences, and learn from the workshops as well as from each other.

I know you all had a vital role in shaping the agenda for today. I've been told you'll be covering everything from cultural identity as a way to build resiliency in children, to alternatives to detention, to ensuring that programs are effectively sustained over time.

As many of you know, I was sworn in as Administrator of the Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention on March 26, so I've been Administrator for just over two months, and I haven't met many of you before.

I think the best way for people to get to know each other is to share their story, how they became the person they are today. In my case, my experiences as a young person had a lot to do with who I am, how I see the world, and what I have chosen to do with my life.

My vision for this country—and it's the vision of everyone at the Office—is a country where children are:

1. Healthy,
2. Educated, and
3. Free from violence

If they come into contact with the juvenile justice system, the contact should be:

4. Rare
5. Fair, and
6. Beneficial to them.

Why do I have this conviction? It comes out of my own story, my own background.

I grew up in Mt. Clemens in Michigan—just outside Detroit. In high school, street gangs with knives and baseball bats were commonplace. By the mid-1970s, violence escalated, as local gangs graduated to guns and developed relationships with violent drug gangs in Detroit.

As a result of violence in the community, I have had so many relatives murdered and friends killed. My friends and I used to count the names on our fingers when I was a young man. A lot of young people in Mt. Clemens did not wonder WHAT they would be doing at the age of 21. A lot of them were wondering IF they would reach the age of 21.

So I experienced violence up close and personal in my community.

I know what that's like, and it gave me a conviction that this kind of violence has got to be stopped. It's not inevitable. We can do something about it. We must. We can no longer accept this as a norm.

Before coming to the Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention, I was Chief of the Juvenile Unit of the Defender Association of Philadelphia for 16 years and a trial lawyer with the association for 27 years.

I defended children.

I had a lot of client files on a file cabinet by the window in the corner of my office with the word “abatement” written across the space for the last hearing.

I would look at those files and it was a solemn reminder.

Each file signified the life of a child whom we once represented before his or her untimely death on the streets of Philadelphia.

As a defender, I represented as many as 800–900 children, and I realized I could make a difference. It was a positive difference. I saw these children go out and eventually become productive adults. I’ve been inspired by their determination, their perseverance to overcome the circumstances they’re in.

But the fact that they have to work so hard to achieve this is just not acceptable. Children shouldn’t be put in these circumstances in the first place.

As I worked with the children, as we sat in the small rooms where we’ve interviewed them over time, as we’ve stood in court with them and watched them trying to figure out what’s going on, it was so clear to me that all most of these children needed . . . was a break somewhere along the line.

Children need somebody to care, somebody to step in and keep them on the right track to prevent them from getting into trouble in the first place. If children enter the juvenile justice system, they need somebody to stand up for them to make sure that the system is treating them fairly.

For every one of the children I worked with as a public defender, I believed in the possibility of change, and the possibility that their lives would become better.

If we have a conversation with a child, we let them know we believe in them, we truly believe in them, and we tell them we’re never going to give up on them, that really makes a difference.

This makes them have faith in themselves in those really dark moments, when they have gotten in fights, gotten beaten up, or gotten cut or injured in prison.

The positive difference that I made wasn’t just getting them out of jail.

As I said, most of the clients I represented never came back into the juvenile justice system. To this day, I’m proud of each one of these kids, and I think of the

positive difference I made in their lives as one my most important accomplishments.

So that's a small part of my story and how I came to be standing here as head of the only agency in the federal government that works with children who are at risk and children who are involved in the juvenile justice system.

I see this as a great opportunity to use the bully pulpit of the federal government to make a difference in the lives of all children in America.

Another part of my story is more recent. It has to do with what I experienced just last year in Indian country.

Let me step back for a moment and provide you with some background.

In 2009—The National Survey of Children's Exposure to Violence—the single most comprehensive study ever conducted on this topic, released findings that literally blew the barn doors off—all the way up to Attorney General Eric Holder. The Attorney General has often said that how well our children are doing says a lot about who we are as a nation. And, according to this study, we don't look very good.

The survey revealed that:

60 percent of children in the United States were exposed to violence, crime, and abuse in their homes, schools and communities, either as victims or witnesses—during the 1-year initial survey period.
Almost 40 percent of children were direct victims of 2 or more violent acts, and 1 in 10 were victims of violence 5 or more times.
Nearly 1 in 10 saw a family member assault another family member.

And the science shows without a doubt that exposure to violence is terrible for kids.

Research has shown that regular exposure to violence can interfere with brain development, emotional attachment and healthy relationships, physical health, and educational success.

If these public health needs go unaddressed, this becomes a serious juvenile justice problem. These kids are the frequent flyers in our emergency rooms; they're also often the repeat offenders in our juvenile detention centers, prisons, and jails. Attorney General Holder was so startled by survey findings that he said we have to do something, and we have to do something NOW.

So in 2010 he launched the Defending Childhood Initiative, which marshals resources across the Justice Department to address this issue and raise public awareness about the extent of the problem.

Eight demonstration sites in the Defending Childhood Initiative have received funding to develop strategic plans to prevent and reduce the impact of children's exposure to violence in their homes, schools, and communities.

Two of the sites are in Indian country:

Chippewa Cree Tribe, Montana
The Rosebud Sioux Tribe, South Dakota

And as part of his initiative, Eric Holder appointed a Task Force on Children Exposed to Violence to hold hearings across the country and offer recommendations for a coordinated national effort to reduce exposure to violence.

I was co-chair of the task force along with the baseball legend, Joe Torre, who himself witnessed domestic violence as a child and now is chairman of the board of the Joe Torre Safe at Home Foundation.

In 2012, we held a hearing in Albuquerque, NM, where we heard from so many people about the problems they face on a daily basis in rural and tribal areas.

American Indian and Alaska Native youth are over-represented in the juvenile justice system.

Justice may be thwarted by other instances of systems failure, such as the placement of tribal youth in foster care outside their tribe where their own tribe's traditions and cultural practices are unknown.

And we know that a justice system's failure to be guided by Native traditions, preferences, or sovereignty is an enormous impediment to healing the wounds of broken families.

I was really stunned by the reality of what some tribal children have experienced. Members of the Wind River Indian Reservation in south-central Wyoming told us that in their community, 66 percent of families have a history of domestic violence, 45 percent of children have run away, nearly 20 percent of children have been sexually abused, and nearly 20 percent of children have attempted suicide.

I will never forget the words of Mato Standing High, Attorney General of the Rosebud Sioux Tribe, some of whose esteemed members are here today.

“For us in Rosebud, our reservation,” he said, “The question is not who has been exposed to violence, it’s who hasn’t been exposed to violence?”

These comments and the testimony from so many others are of really deep concern to me. But I came away with a tremendous feeling of hope.

Why am I so hopeful?

It was the strength of Native cultures that kept shining through even the most difficult testimony. It was the:

- Passion
- Commitment
- Dedication
- Insight
- Wisdom
- Prayers, and

The very thoughtful connection with both the land and the people and with tribal history.

These were things that I was just not really aware of before I came on the task force. That experience opened my eyes, and I know there is so much more to learn about the scope, breadth, and impact of trauma and violence on children in Indian country as well as the strength and resiliency that tribes and tribal people have.

I’m happy to report that in December 2012, our task force released a final report with more than 50 recommendations for launching a coordinated national campaign to reduce children’s exposure to violence.

In April, Attorney General Holder signed off on the action plan, which means things are being set in motion.

There are too many parts of this national campaign to summarize here, but a major part of our action plan is for the Justice Department to set up a special task force with the Department of the Interior focused completely and solely on addressing children's exposure to violence in Indian country.

The most important thing I want to emphasize is that the task force will:

Support American Indian and Alaska Native tribes as they define their own responses to this issue, and involve tribal youth closely all along the way in developing solutions.

Native American and Alaska Native individuals, whether located in cities or on traditional lands, each have a unique story to tell about the how they've experienced violence. And individuals and communities differ also in their paths to healing.

State and federal governments can and need to listen to the stories and consult closely with tribes and tribal people and work together to address the needs of youth.

Tribal youth are the future of tribal nations. It is our responsibility to support your work to give them the best opportunity to flourish.

We look forward to working with stakeholders throughout Indian country to reduce exposure to violence and put this issue of children's exposure to violence in tribal lands front and center in the national conversation.

Now, I'm going to turn from a discussion of Justice Department-wide items like the Attorney General's Defending Childhood Initiative to a discussion of changes going on right now within the Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention—and how these developments will affect the work we're doing to help tribal youth.

I'm going to talk about the:

- The reorganization of our Office.
- The FY 2013 budget and the impact of sequestration.

- The Office's revamped tribal youth leadership Initiative.

So . . . to start with the reorganization.

I know many of you recently received new program managers and have noticed some changes with who and how you're communicating with our staff. Why did we restructure the Office?

The new structure helps us to better align similar functions as well as similar areas of focus.

It truly reflects the full breadth of the work we do every day: state and community development; audit and compliance; juvenile justice system improvement; youth development, prevention, and safety; and innovation and research. The structure clearly presents how our Office goes about carrying out its mandate and its vision for youth justice and safety.

Our new Youth Development, Prevention, and Safety Division highlights not only child protection, but also emphasizes the high priority the Office places on prevention and positive youth development.

Tribal prevention and intervention programs, such as truancy prevention, skill building for youth and families, academic and afterschool programs, and mentoring will be administered in this division. The work done here will support my vision—our Office's vision—of working toward a nation where children are healthy, educated, and free from violence.

Our new Juvenile Justice System Improvement Division oversees programmatic grants and policy initiatives that promote juvenile system reform and improvement—a key priority at the Office. Many projects related to law enforcement, the courts, corrections, and other justice system components are now coordinated and managed together in this division. So tribal court-directed diversion programs, juvenile system reform, as well as detention and reentry programs will be handled by our team in Juvenile Justice System Improvement. The work we're doing in this division reflects our second goal: If children come into contact with the juvenile justice system, the contact should be rare, fair, and beneficial to them.

I can tell you that I'm absolutely confident that the reorganization will enhance our Office's ability to support tribal nations and the broader juvenile justice

community in their efforts to keep children safe and improve our juvenile justice system.

Change is not easy for anyone, so I ask for your patience as we make this transition.

By the end of today, you'll have had the opportunity to meet your new program managers and begin this next chapter in our partnership.

We have a wonderfully talented staff with expertise in a wide range of areas, and I know this will all result in more coordinated and effective service to our tribal partners.

So the reorganization is one important development at our Office.

The second development I want to talk about is the recent finalization of FY 2013 congressional budget appropriations to our Office. I also know you are interested in the impact of sequestration on our Office in general and on tribal programs in particular.

One of my biggest concerns in coming to the Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention was that I would be asked to join in making decisions about furloughs of staff that had worked at the office for many years.

I am very pleased to inform you, if you have not already heard, that the Attorney General announced that our staff will not be furloughed this year, which means our commitments to tribal youth initiatives can continue full steam ahead.

In addition, the sequester does not affect any current Tribal Youth Program, Tribal Juvenile Detention and Reentry, and Tribal Juvenile Accountability Discretionary Grant Program funds that have already been provided. (In other words, the grants you all already have because you're here. It won't affect those.)

Overall, on the budget front, unlike many other agencies, the Office received a slight increase in FY 2013—from \$277 million to more than \$298 million.

With the sequestration decrease (about 5 percent), this brings us close to the same level in our overall budget as last year. Given the current economic environment, this is a really positive sign for the Office and for juvenile justice programs.

There are two parts of the budget that primarily fund the Office's tribal grant awards, which are now offered through the Coordinated Tribal Assistance Solicitation:

These are the Tribal Youth Program and the Tribal Juvenile Justice or Tribal Juvenile Accountability Discretionary Grant Program purpose areas in the Coordinated Tribal Assistance Solicitation.

The Office's commitment for the coordinated solicitation was funded at \$10 million in both FY 2012 and FY 2013.

While these numbers are down from the \$20 million available in FY 2011, our Office remains committed to providing programmatic grant funding and training and technical assistance to tribes, including specialized technical assistance for Alaska.

We know how important and sometimes difficult the work is that you all do on behalf of tribal youth every day, and our Office is committed to continuing to support you in these efforts with whatever resources we can.

And now . . . to turn to the third development at the Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention.

As part of our continued commitment to supporting tribal youth and the important work you all are doing for tribal youth, we are also revamping our tribal youth leadership initiative.

For the past several years, as you all know, we have held highly successful youth summits once a year, where hundreds of youth from tribes all over the country gathered for leadership training.

Looking ahead, we will be expanding youth leadership opportunities through the National Intertribal Youth Leadership Development Initiative—a more comprehensive approach that will create national and regional gatherings, trainings, and other culturally relevant opportunities to promote youth leadership development.

I am personally excited about this expansion of opportunities for tribal youth engagement leadership. In everything we do at the Office, we need youth at the table.

They are our legacy.

They will be leading tribal communities in the decades ahead.

Now, before I finish, I want to introduce a remarkable young person. I said earlier that it is young people who will be strengthening and rebuilding Indian country in the years to come.

So . . . I think it is so fitting that the next speaker is Seanna Pieper-Jordan, a very inspiring young woman.

Ms. Pieper-Jordan is a descendant of the Blackfeet tribe in Montana and Native Hawaiian people. She is a former foster care youth.

She graduated from Yale University with a Bachelor of Arts degree in Sociology.

Currently, she is serving as an intern at the Center for Native American Youth at the Aspen Institute in Washington, DC, and hopes to continue a career in advocacy for indigenous youth.