



**REMARKS OF ROBERT L. LISTENBEE
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*REMARKS AS PREPARED FOR DELIVERY***

Good morning! And welcome.

First, I want to thank the remarkable leaders who worked so hard to bring us all together: the President of the National Alliance of Faith and Justice, Addie Richburg; the founder and CEO of the National CARES Mentoring Movement, Susan Taylor; and the president of the National Association of Blacks in Criminal Justice, Carlyle Holder.

You continue to give so generously of your time—and your expertise—and for that we are grateful.

And thank you all for having me. This audience is truly remarkable. Look around; it's not often that I see such large crowds made up of such diverse stakeholders—mentors, mentees, and criminal justice professionals.

Whether you're a professional, a volunteer, or a young student, you took the time to come here today for one reason—you believe.

You believe that EVERY child deserves an education and a chance to live the American dream—however they define that.

You believe that the problems that young men and women of color face are not inexorable. You believe there is hope. And you are right.

To quote Susan Taylor, who prior to founding her mentoring organization was inspiring young people with her words as the Editor-in-Chief of *Essence* Magazine, “Seeds of faith are always within us; sometimes it takes a crisis to nourish and encourage their growth.”

With far too many minority children pushed out of school, held back from opportunities, and even locked up and forgotten, a crisis is exactly what we are facing.

But in the face of this challenge, your faith in the promise that our children hold has grown—against all odds.

So thank you for believing. And thank you for nourishing those beliefs and helping them to grow into opportunities for our next generation.

At the Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention (OJJDP) and throughout this Justice Department and this Administration, we believe as well.

And it’s not blind faith. We have seen—and taken—concrete steps to address the persistent problems that minority youth face.

In fact, OJJDP has a clear vision of the future. We envision a nation where our children are healthy, educated, and free from violence. If they come into contact with the juvenile justice system, the contact should be rare, fair, and beneficial to them.

This vision highlights one of our core operating principles. There can be no justice without fairness. And that’s where I’d like to start today.

As most of you know all too well, today, despite the many strides we have made, minority youth are still overrepresented in our juvenile justice system.

Our most recent statistics show that the residential placement rate for black youth was more than 4.5 times the rate for white youth.

Disproportionate minority contact is a fact, and we have to address it head-on.

One of the many ways OJJDP is continuing to address Disproportionate Minority Contact, or “DMC” as we reference it, is by advocating comprehensive juvenile justice reform.

We are working to help policymakers and professionals across the country build a system that is grounded by developmental realities—that treats kids like kids, that

is sensitive to the traumas that children have experienced, and that leverages evidence-based practices.

While these major initiatives inform everything we do, today I want to focus on three specific areas I think are particularly relevant to your work.

To help illuminate these areas, I'd like to pose three questions:

- 1) What's the significance of supportive school discipline and how can we address it?
- 2) How is mentoring evolving to meet the needs of at-risk populations?
- 3) What is My Brother's Keeper and how does it fit with your work?

What's the significance of supportive school discipline and how can we address it?

First, I think we can all agree that kids need to be in school and engaged in learning.

We can also agree that schools must be safe and secure environments—and that discipline will at times be necessary.

Unfortunately, several decades of so-called “zero tolerance” policies have led to kids getting suspended and expelled from schools at alarming rates—often for minor infractions, like tardiness or dress code violations.

In fact, a groundbreaking study of nearly 1 million students in Texas showed that almost 6 in 10 were suspended or expelled at least once during their middle or high school careers.

It gets worse. Students who were suspended or expelled for a discretionary violation—or a violation that does not, by law, have to be punished—were nearly three times more likely to come into contact with the juvenile justice system the following year.

And the harsh discipline isn't applied uniformly. African-American students were 31 percent more likely to be suspended or expelled than their white or Hispanic counterparts. And nearly three-quarters of students receiving special education services were suspended or expelled at least once.

At the Departments of Justice and Education, we are working together to address this issue. We call our collective efforts the Supportive School Discipline Initiative, or SSDI.

Launched by Attorney General Eric Holder and Education Secretary Arne Duncan in 2011, SSDI stresses positive approaches to modifying behavior within the context of school, rather than suspending and expelling students.

It also focuses on reducing the disproportionate use of exclusionary discipline when dealing with students of color and students with disabilities.

SSDI is a wide-ranging effort, so I'll just focus specifically on two areas that are integral to reducing gender and racial disparities.

The first is the SSDI Consensus project, which was conducted by the Council of State Governments.

Just last month, the Council released the *School Discipline Consensus Report*. This impressive work is the result of more than 700 interviews with justice and education experts, parents, students, and others—and contains more than 60 recommendations for overhauling our approach to school discipline.

The recommendations focus on improving conditions for learning, responding to student's behavioral health needs, tailoring school-police partnerships, and minimizing students' involvement with the juvenile justice system.

The report also highlights something that cannot be overemphasized—the importance of school climate. Students, teachers, and families have to feel supported and engaged in their schools.

Perhaps most importantly, the report reflects a true consensus on this issue—it carefully weaves together the experiences and knowledge of justice, education, health, court and police experts, as well as the vital perspectives of youth and families.

And let me also add that this isn't a work of theory or research; it's a practical, working document—one you can put to work TODAY in your community.

Finally, I'll just note that the report highlights early on how difficult addressing disparities is—and openly admits that there is no quick solution.

However, there is a clear first step—and that includes identifying and quantifying the problem through quality data collection.

We have to be transparent about the existence of racial and gender disparities. Only after identifying trends can communities and schools truly address disparities by adapting the recommendations in the report to meet their specific needs.

Another of the areas that SSDI has advanced is our work to help public schools better understand and meet their obligations under the Civil Rights Act.

The Departments of Justice and Education released legal guidance in January on how to avoid discrimination in the use of discipline.

The guidance includes recommendations for evidence-based alternatives to exclusionary discipline, tips for monitoring and addressing disparities, and tools to make schools safer and more inclusive.

Although there is no easy, one-size-fits-all answer for addressing disparities, there are some great tools that schools can adapt to fit their needs.

Now we want you to use them.

I've brought some handouts that point you to all the resources available through SSDI—and there are many more than I can highlight today. Please use them. And tell us what you think. We welcome your feedback, and we need your help to make this initiative work.

Now, I'd like to turn to something I know is near and dear to all your hearts: mentoring.

How is mentoring evolving to meet the needs of at-risk populations?

I know I don't have to tell you that mentoring works—that good quality mentoring relationships can really change the trajectory and the outcome of a child's life.

However, I do want to tell you a bit about some of the innovations we've seen in the field of mentoring.

There is so much more to mentoring than just matches. That's why we're focusing on better meeting the needs of underserved populations.

One such population is children of incarcerated parents. An estimated 1.7 million youth under the age of 18 have at least one parent in prison—millions more have a parent in jail.

To better understand this issue, OJJDP partnered with the White House to hold a listening session last fall featuring national experts, service providers, parents, and youth.

The knowledge gleaned from this session was compiled with relevant research into a report that includes recommendations to advance the availability and effectiveness of mentoring for children with an incarcerated parent.

The report is available now on the OJJDP website. Among other points, it highlights a problem I know you have all faced—engaging high-quality mentors from diverse backgrounds. It also specifically addresses the challenge of performing timely and affordable background checks.

We're already looking at how to institute these and the other recommendations included in the report.

For instance, the report calls for an increased exchange of information and resources. To help facilitate this exchange, we have funded the OJJDP National Mentoring Resource Center—which will help with all types of mentoring programs.

The center is the first of its kind focused solely on mentoring and is designed to improve the quality and effectiveness of youth mentoring across the nation. Through the Center, mentoring programs can apply for no-cost specialized local technical assistance provided by experts.

The Resource Center will fully launch later this year, but programs can apply now for technical assistance, including help with training materials, recruitment plans, screening processes, and match analysis.

Another area that the report on mentoring for children of incarcerated parents touches on is the importance of increasing the evidence base for effective mentoring for this population.

As a first step to address this need, we are providing funding this year for a practitioner and researcher partnership to develop and evaluate new mentoring practices to serve youth whose parents are incarcerated.

This is just one of several of the programs we are currently undertaking to examine what works when it comes to mentoring—and to provide tools to those of you in the field who can best use them.

In addition to supporting mentoring programs for at-risk children, we're also looking at strengthening families by mentoring parents—specifically young fathers who have been incarcerated.

We released a solicitation for this project through the Second Chance Act last month, and it is still open. I encourage those of you who are working with eligible organizations to apply.

I'd be remiss if I didn't mention NAFJ's impressive PEN OR PENCIL program, or POP, which is now growing as a result of a partnership with NABCJ.

POP has already contracted with the National CARES Mentoring Movement to expand mentor outreach and recruitment and to target hard-to-reach mentors, including African American males.

By customizing delivery and recruitment, you have exceeded projected outcomes.

Perhaps most impressively, you have served far more youth than originally anticipated. To date, in just 3 years, POP has reached 20,000 youth through group mentoring.

And now NAFJ is taking the next steps in yet another partnership, with NABCJ. This collaboration is bringing together law enforcement and criminal justice professionals with educators and youth-serving organizations to offer structured mentoring activities that will help kids stay in school and out of the penitentiary.

We already know that these collaborations between community organizations work and I personally want to commend your progress and your commitment to evidence-based practices.

Those are just a few of the many exciting things going on in the area of mentoring. We really have made enormous strides toward meeting the unique needs of special populations and making mentoring overall more effective.

More information about the tools I've mentioned is available at our table in the back of the room.

Finally today, I'd like to highlight the work being done through My Brother's Keeper.

What is My Brother's Keeper and how does it fit with your work?

In February, President Obama unveiled my Brother's Keeper, an interagency initiative to address the persistent opportunity gaps faced by boys and young men of color, and to ensure that all young people have the tools they need to succeed.

As part of this effort, the President has already created a Task Force that has been asked to review programs and practices to determine which efforts are working and how to expand them.

On May 28, the Task Force delivered its 90-day progress report. The report includes recommendations in a range of areas—from pathways to college and a career, including issues arising from school disciplinary action, to access to mentoring services and support networks.

During a meeting with his Cabinet to discuss the report, President Obama called on Americans interested in getting involved in My Brother's Keeper to sign up as long-term mentors to young people.

A call many of you in this room have already answered. OJJDP recently announced that we will be expanding our own efforts to answer this call.

We are participating in the My Brother's Keeper Mentoring Campaign, a collaboration of the Corporation for National and Community Service, the Justice Department, and the Administration for Children and Families at the Health and Human Services Department.

The program aims to recruit individuals, including men of color, to serve as mentors to youth for at least 1 year.

We have to work together to close the mentoring gap. A recent survey projected that more than one in three young people—an estimated 16 million—will never have an adult mentor. As you know, this gap affects male youth of color in particular because of the challenges involved in recruiting and retaining adult mentors with similar skills and interests in their neighborhoods.

So, I think you can see how this is directly related to—and supportive of—the work you are already doing. I want to encourage all of you to enroll your program at mentoring.org.

I'd also like to ask you to help us promote the My Brother's Keeper Mentoring Campaign via social media.

We at OJJDP are so excited about this Presidential campaign and the opportunity it presents to raise the visibility of mentoring as an effective tool to improve the wellbeing of our youth, including boys and young men of color.

Conclusion

I'll end where we started—with those "seeds of faith."

As Ms. Taylor said, they "are always within us." And in this group, they are flourishing.

Now, we just have to continue to "nourish and encourage their growth," and this crisis—this scourge that is destroying the lives of our sons and daughters—will finally be eliminated.

Our children need and deserve safe schools that treat them fairly and strong communities filled with positive role models and mentors.

With partners like you, OJJDP can—and will—make our vision for the future a reality.

We have made enormous strides; we have seen many successes; and we believe that the future holds immense promise.

So again, thank you, for your unerring faith and for your work every day to help young men and women of color enjoy enriching childhoods that lead to fulfilling lives.

Thank you for your time.