



Department of Justice

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STATEMENT OF THE HONORABLE ROBERT F. KENNEDY,
ATTORNEY GENERAL OF THE UNITED STATES, BEFORE
THE HOUSE COMMITTEE ON EDUCATION AND LABOR,
IN SUPPORT OF H. R. 10440, THE ECONOMIC
OPPORTUNITY ACT OF 1964, APRIL 7, 1964

Mr. Chairman, I welcome the opportunity to testify today in behalf of the Economic Opportunity Act of 1964.

This program calls for a total attack on the cycle of poverty, frustration and dependency in which too many of our fellow Americans are caught -- millions of people who have been pushed to the wall and largely forgotten.

This program seeks to bring new hope to the hopeless, dignity to the deprived and self-respect to people who have none. It seeks to open opportunity to millions of young Americans who are uneducated, unemployed, and, sad to say, often unemployable.

President Kennedy was totally committed to confronting and dealing with these problems, and involving the national administration to a greater extent than ever before.

President Kennedy saw the national administration's role as providing leadership, pointing the way, finding answers and stimulating local communities, states and private interests to step up their efforts and run their own programs.

Now President Johnson called for a mobilization of the country's skills, energies and facilities to give priority educational help to Americans who need it, to strike at poverty through community action programs, to recruit and train skilled volunteers to fight this domestic battle, and to give special help to areas or groups of the country which have been particularly hard hit.

President Johnson asked for immediate action and certainly all compassionate people recognize that there is no time to waste.

Our system is fiercely competitive. This has produced an affluent society and given Americans unparalleled opportunities for

achievement. But if a person is uneducated or poorly educated, or is handicapped by poor health, old age, or race or religion, he cannot compete; and the gap between the prosperous world and his poverty will widen.

Lack of education, old age, bad health or discrimination -- these are causes of poverty and the way to attack it is to go to the root.

Over the past three years the Department of Justice has participated in a number of programs which have dealt directly with victims of poverty. Experience has shown what can be done, what successes can be achieved, if opportunity is provided -- particularly for young people.

Here in Washington, the Committee on Juvenile Delinquency and Youth Crime took part last summer in an effort to open summer jobs for underprivileged youth and we secured 1,120 jobs -- 1,000 of them in government offices. Seventy-two percent of them came from families with incomes averaging less than \$4,800 a year.

One boy -- I'll call him Jimmy -- had no family at all. At 18, both his parents were dead, his sister had thrown him out, and he stayed with anybody who would give him a place to sleep.

Our local project, Washington Action for Youth, learned that this boy had somehow managed to stay in high school, and stay out of trouble with the law -- but he was becoming increasingly bitter and was a potential delinquent if there was one in Washington.

WAY found a home for him with a school teacher and placed him in the summer job program, doing odd jobs at the Woodward and Lothrop department store. Working 40 hours a week, he excelled in every task they gave him. At the end of the summer, the store offered him a raise and a promotion if he wanted to stay on and work 16 hours per week during the winter. He did, and WAY officials doubt that he could have stayed in school otherwise.

Since last summer, Jimmy's dress and personality have improved. The bitterness is gone. He has begun to think about the possibility of attending college while continuing at the store part-time.

The latest report we have is that Woodward and Lothrop is considering promoting Jimmy to a sales job -- and this boy, a year ago

was sleeping in the streets and a very strong candidate for reform school.

Almost without exception, the other boys and girls who participated in a summer job program made excellent records. This was an area which, according to dire predictions two years ago was likely to explode with violence. But it did not, and there has been noticeable improvement, particularly in the bearing and actions of the young men and women. Without a question the summer job program has been an important factor. It shows what can be done by a community. The problems of that area have not been defeated but they are being attacked and the summer job program was such a success last year that it will operate again this summer, hopefully with more jobs available.

Another boy, I'll call Ted, had been in and out of trouble since he was 14, had dropped out of school at 16, joined the Air Force, received a dishonorable discharge, then been sent to prison -- all before he was 19.

But today he is a free, useful and responsible citizen. He is in his second year of working for a wholesale supply firm and has received two promotions.

The difference in Ted's case was participation in the Halfway House program which was launched by the Bureau of Prisons in 1961 and now operates in Los Angeles, Chicago, New York and Detroit.

In this program, a boy is not released from a Federal institution and sent directly back to his home. Rather, before being released, he goes to the Halfway House, or pre-release guidance center, and trained counselors help him prepare for his return to freedom.

The boys are helped to find jobs, and gradually given increased freedom and responsibility. We have found that boys who go through this program are twice as likely to stay out of trouble than boys who are released in the traditional manner.

Since the Fall of 1961, 396 boys have lived in the Centers prior to parole. Only 49 -- 13% -- have been returned to custody for parole violations. By comparison 46% of the youth released directly from custody were returned to prison in 1963. There is still much to be learned but the program deserves to be instituted elsewhere.

In both these cases, we see boys overcoming great personal and social problems. But they are not doing it by themselves. They are getting help from many trained and concerned adults. Without that help either of them might be in prison today.

For each success story there are ten examples of where only the surface has been scratched. Two communities which have extremely serious problems -- Harlem and Charleston, West Virginia -- are trying to do something about those problems and are getting some help from the federal government. The dimensions of the task are shown by the facts turned up by the projects in Harlem.

-- In the third grade, about 30% of Central Harlem pupils are below their grade in reading ability. By the 6th grade, 80% are below grade.

-- When the average Harlem student reaches the 8th grade, he is two-and-one-half grade years behind in achievement levels of the city and the nation.

-- From the 3rd to the 6th grade, the average IQ of Harlem students drops from 90.6% to 86.3%.

Add these school conditions to the high rates of crime, addiction, infant mortality, venereal disease, and broken homes in Harlem and you begin to see what a child -- and the community -- is up against.

Or go south to Charleston, and the scenery changes, but many of the basic problems remain the same.

Of the children in West Virginia who started in the first grade in 1948, only 41% graduated twelve years later in 1960 -- 59% dropped out.

Given this rate of dropouts, it is no surprise that in Kanawha County 40% of the youths age 16-21 are unable to find work. Nor is it a surprise that more than one-fourth of West Virginia's young people leave the state each year to try to find work elsewhere. And many of these return in a year or two to give up and begin a life of indolence.

These are the cycles of despair that our nation must cope with. These are some of the complex, interwoven problems that we set out to deal with in the delinquency program three years ago.

Others have already testified about the overall problems of poverty. There is no need for me to repeat the statistics nor shall I

attempt to discuss aspects of the bill already thoroughly covered by Cabinet members who would be responsible for administering them.

Under the Juvenile Delinquency Act of 1961, authored by Congresswoman Green and Congressman Brademas and passed by this committee the President's Committee on Juvenile Delinquency and Youth Crime has had considerable experience with programs similar to the community action programs of Title II of the Economic Opportunity Act. The mandate of the Juvenile Delinquency Act called for efforts to prevent and control delinquency. Our focus has been not merely on corrective measures, although we have worked on these. We have been concerned with alleviating conditions which may breed crime among young people by developing broad programs of youth opportunity.

We have concentrated on changing an environment which breeds hopelessness and defeatism -- in which the young person is unable to move the institutions which affect him; in which he comes to feel that everything is closing in on him -- that he is powerless in a hostile world.

There is no one cause of delinquency -- and poverty. Those Harlem children -- falling further and further behind in school -- will not catch up if we merely improve their education. Some come from families which discourage education; many live in poor housing and are exploited by corrupt landlords. Their families are plagued with poor health, alcoholism, and drug addiction; by unemployment and discrimination.

These factors do not exist in isolation; they exist together, and reinforce one another. And together they overwhelm the young person. A program to deal with youth cannot merely change one or a few of these conditions. It must be a total attack on the problems of inadequate adults, illiteracy, infant mortality, dilapidated and crowded housing, inadequate community services, crime, unemployment, and mental illness.

It must be a total effort to bring about broad community change. And this cannot be done by the Federal Government. We can only help by stimulating local action. It must be done by local people and local agencies working together.

I have emphasized the juvenile delinquency program because the local organizations created under that Act are similar to the Community Action Organization of Title II. So are the techniques, although, of course, the Community Action Programs are much broader, and will use many more and different techniques.

Title II sets forth four criteria which explain the Community Action Programs well. These are not programs to bring about major structural change in the economy, or to generate large numbers of additional jobs. Rather they are programs which "mobilize and utilize... public and private resources."

This is not an easy task. It will require organization to get together and resolve their differences. It will demand that they embark on a painful process of examining their educational system, their health and welfare programs, their employment programs, and others.

Then they will be asked to present specific and long range programs striking at the roots of poverty. What can be done about housing? How can we provide employment for young people? What do we need in the way of recreation areas, lighted school grounds, additional facilities to assist newly arriving families, work-training programs, and all the rest.

Secondly, the bill calls for developing activities "of sufficient variety, scope, and size to give promise of progress toward elimination of poverty."

In Los Angeles under a unique state law, the city, county, state, and city and county school systems have joined together to pool their resources in a broad attack on juvenile delinquency. They have developed broad programs of education, health, family services, recreation, and so on.

The component programs of a Community Action Program are important. But it is just as important that, as in Los Angeles, they be built together. The institutions which affect the poor--education, welfare, recreation, business, labor--are huge, complex structures, operating far outside their control. They plan programs for the poor, not with them. Part of the sense of helplessness and futility comes from the feeling of powerlessness to affect the operation of these organizations.

The Community Action Programs must basically change these organizations by building into the program real representation for the poor. This bill calls for "maximum feasible participation of residents." This means the involvement of the poor in planning and implementing programs; giving them a real voice in their institutions.

In Charleston, those developing the Juvenile Delinquency program went into the hollows to ask the residents--those on relief and living in slum housing--what they thought they needed. The Charleston officials wanted to find out how those people feel about things--about the official agencies, what they think they are missing. They wanted to gain insight by viewing the problems through the eyes of the poor.

In central Harlem, youth of the area were involved throughout the development of the program. This project will employ, to work with other people, 2,000 young people who live in central Harlem. It will employ mothers, who are receiving welfare payments, as teachers and assistants in pre-school nurseries. Youth and adults, who live in Harlem, will sit on the five neighborhood governing boards.

Community Action Programs can have a vital effect on the number of other projects in which the Department of Justice is interested. For example, equal justice for indigents in our courts is a matter which has given us particular concern.

The Committee on Poverty and the Administration of Federal Criminal Justice, which was formed in 1961, has reported that 30% of all defendants in Federal criminal cases receive court-appointed attorneys because they cannot afford to retain their own. A great many more cannot afford to pay for investigations which may mean the difference between conviction and acquittal. Pleas of guilty in such cases are entered three times as often as in cases in which the defendant can select his own lawyer.

And we know that many persons remain in jail while awaiting trial simply because they cannot afford to post \$500 bail.

We are holding a National Conference on Bail problems next month. We have instructed the United States Attorneys to release defendants on their recognizance whenever possible. We have sponsored the Criminal Justice Bill which has passed both the House and the Senate, although differences remain to be resolved.

This is what has been done at the Federal level. A great deal of similar action has been taken at local levels. But a great deal more can be done. And this is just the type of thing that a community action program, like Mobilization for Youth in New York and the juvenile delinquency programs in New Haven and St. Louis, could spur at the local level.

Community Action Programs also would be designed to aid and assist the Indians, migratory laborers, and those in rural depressed areas like Appalachia. The plight of these people was of special concern to us in our study of Americans who might be helped by a National Service Corps.

Volunteers from Title VI of the bill could make a tremendous contribution to the Community Action Programs--providing temporary assistance to areas which do not have sufficient numbers of skilled personnel. They could work within the Community Action programs in literally hundreds of jobs--teaching, tutoring, developing recreation programs, staffing health services.

I have concentrated in my testimony on Title II, but only because I think I can be most helpful on this Title. The bill, as a whole, represents a broad attack on poverty, and its parts fit together well.

The great challenge that we have as a nation is to solve this problem. The Federal government, the states, local communities, private organizations and individual citizens must join together. If we can do what we have done around the world, in Europe, in Latin-America, in Africa and Asia, and then find we cannot effectively wipe out poverty here, then we will have failed as a society.

You have had a great many statistics and examples. In the programs in our cities--here in Washington and elsewhere--in the hollows of Appalachia and the barren villages of the West, these statistics and examples come to life.

There are children without half a chance, without proper food, without proper medical care. There are fathers who are unable to work because of illness or lack of training. There are mothers and senior citizens--all important, all individuals who feel the pain of hunger and despair and degradation.

We know what can be done. We have seen what can be accomplished by programs such as summer job programs here in the District and the Halfway Houses in the prisons, and in countless other public and private programs.

I believe that Americans, who live up to the traditions of this nation, will not weaken or give up without a great effort to make democracy a reality. Justice Brandeis said, "Those who wanted our independence believed that the final end of the state was to make men free to develop their faculties."

I believe this bill will bring us one step closer. I hope you will pass it quickly.