

1 SPEECH BY THE
2 HONORABLE JANET RENO,
3 ATTORNEY GENERAL OF THE UNITED STATES
4 TO THE JUDICIAL CONFERENCE OF
5 THE DISTRICT OF COLUMBIA

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7
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P R O C E E D I N G S

(1:25 p.m.)

GENERAL RENO: Thank you so very much, Your Honor.

It is a great privilege for me to be here today because, as I think back on my lifetime, many of the heroes and heroines to me were juvenile court judges. They were the people who had the most difficult job of all. They were the people who never stopped trying.

But in watching my heroes and heroines in action, I have developed some perspectives on the juvenile court and I have had these perspectives confirmed now, after a little over 15 months in office, in talking with juvenile court judges around the country. I think that we ask the juvenile court judge to be everything. We ask them to be the parent, the great legal scholar on the cutting edge of legal issues. We ask them to be the social worker in our minds. We ask them to be the police officer. And we give them totally inadequate resources.

I'm not sure how in history this concept of the juvenile court judge as being everything to the child in trouble has developed, but I think all of us as lawyers and as participants in the system have a responsibility for letting the communities of America know that a juvenile court judge can't do it by themselves and they

1 can't do it with the totally inadequate resources that we
2 give them to address the job.

3 They have extraordinarily heavily burdens, but
4 without the resources to do it. They're held accountable,
5 but they're given limited authority to really affect the
6 problem that they are assigned to deal with. They are
7 doomed to failure in terms of community expectations. And
8 because they have been given so inadequate an opportunity
9 to deal with the issue and therefore the results are
10 limited, those that would provide the resources and the
11 authority are more hesitant to give it again.

12 Somehow or another as lawyers we've got to
13 change this concept. The juvenile court judge is at the
14 end of the line, a line of failure on the part of so many
15 other institutions, beginning with the family, the
16 neighborhood, the schools. We start too late to focus on
17 the problem.

18 Where do we begin? I think one of the first
19 things that we have got to do is get out of our narrow
20 focuses in the law. A juvenile court judge handling
21 delinquency cases will focus on delinquency. Another in
22 another jurisdiction may focus just on child abuse and
23 dependency. Somebody else, a teacher, may deal just with
24 truancy issues.

25 Nobody looks at the child as a whole because

1 traditionally the family looked at the child as a whole.
2 You are here today because you already know what the
3 circumstances are. There are too many children in America
4 who do not have a family to look at the whole picture and
5 to address all of the issues involved.

6 We've got to figure out a new way to do it. But
7 lawyers have helped create the impression that the
8 juvenile court can solve the problems, because lawyers,
9 unfortunately, give people the idea that you win all your
10 battles in the courtroom. Lawyers praise themselves for
11 having gotten a child off on a motion to dismiss. Another
12 praises himself because he got the child adjudicated and
13 got him into a perfectly wonderful program.

14 They think they win the battles in the
15 courtroom. But I suspect that all of you are here today
16 because you know that we will never ever win the battles
17 that we need to fight for our children if we wait to win
18 them in the courtroom. We have got to start earlier.

19 The public defender who gets his client off on a
20 motion to dismiss only to watch that client turn and walk
21 out of the courtroom in the grasp of a cocaine addiction
22 is not winning the battle for his client. We have got to
23 focus earlier on and develop new processes, systems, and
24 approaches in communities throughout America that can make
25 a difference.

1 Everywhere I go people give me the litany of the
2 problems that children face -- youth violence, child sex
3 abuse, teen pregnancy -- just a whole range of symptoms
4 that reflect to me the fact that for the last 30 years in
5 America we have too often forgotten and neglected our
6 children.

7 And when we have focused on them, it has been
8 too late, at the end of the line, when we don't begin to
9 have enough resources to change the course of that child's
10 life and to make a difference.

11 I think we should approach everything that we do
12 with the consideration of what it takes to raise a child.
13 I think raising children is the single most difficult job
14 I know to do. I have some limited understanding of it
15 because about nine years ago a friend died, leaving me as
16 the legal guardian of her 15 year old twins, a boy and a
17 girl, and the girl was in love, and I've learned an awful
18 lot.

19 (Laughter.)

20 It takes hard work, intelligence, an awful lot
21 of love, and a lot of luck. It is also one of the most
22 rewarding experiences that anybody can have. When I put
23 that young lady on the plane to send her to college and
24 when she graduated in three years cum laude, and on each
25 occasion she threw her arms around my neck and said,

1 "Thank you, I couldn't have done it without you," I
2 wouldn't trade that for anything, even being Attorney
3 General.

4 (Applause.)

5 I've learned from my own experience that raising
6 children requires love, it requires guidance, it requires
7 limits, it requires appropriate punishment for violations
8 of those limits, punishment that means what it says and is
9 carried out. And then the child who's raised right knows
10 that after the punishment is concluded there will be more
11 love and guidance and limits and support along the way.

12 We have too often created a system where there
13 is not love, where too often there is not guidance, where
14 too often the limits are confused and murky, where the
15 punishment is threatened but not carried out, and, most
16 grievously, we have too often created a system for our
17 children where when they receive punishment they deserve
18 they have no sense at all that there will be love and
19 guidance and follow-up after that punishment.

20 We've got to change the way government
21 approaches the problem of children and families and start
22 to make a difference in the child's life as a whole, not
23 just after the child has gotten into trouble, and then
24 we're going to have to follow through to make sure that we
25 bring that child back with a chance of success.

1 I would like to challenge the District of
2 Columbia. You have extraordinary burdens. I realize the
3 sensitive issues with regards to statehood, with regards
4 to how you get your funding. But you also have an
5 extraordinarily magnificent opportunity to make a
6 difference.

7 You are not a huge, sprawling city of millions.
8 I think you have about 80,000 school children, a
9 manageable number. You have a community that can be
10 galvanized to care and to make a difference. And if we
11 started focusing on the lives of children and families
12 from the beginning, we can make a difference.

13 If instead of lawyers winning their battles in
14 the courtroom, instead of placing the responsibility just
15 on juvenile court judges, without giving them the
16 authority or the resources to do the job, let us change
17 the focus of government to focus on a neighborhood or on a
18 block.

19 If we took this relatively small geographic area
20 that I now live in -- and I am proud to live in this
21 District, I am proud to be able to walk through it in the
22 morning and learn more and more about it, but it is a
23 manageable size -- and you identified a five square block
24 area and you brought community policing together with
25 social workers and youth counselors and parks and

1 recreation people and the schools in that neighborhood and
2 joined together to focus on each family, each child, to
3 make sure that from the beginning we gave them the tools
4 to do the job, to be self-sufficient, to avoid crisis, to
5 prevent rather than wait until the costly expenditures of
6 crisis had to be incurred, you could make such a
7 difference.

8 If you designed this District and took five
9 square block areas and assigned police officers who would
10 be known in the community, who would develop the trust and
11 the respect of the youngsters, not the antagonisms of the
12 youngsters, if you took a social worker who could work
13 with that police officer in addressing the family problems
14 and a public health nurse who could address with the young
15 mother the issues of parenting, the issues of nurturing
16 and bonding and infant formula, we can make such a
17 difference.

18 If you had that community police officer working
19 with the principal of the school to find out why the eight
20 year old was truant for two weeks, you could do so much
21 more than waiting for that eight year old to turn 14 and
22 to become delinquent by putting a gun up beside somebody's
23 head because nobody had supervised him along the way.

24 And if you say you don't have adequate
25 resources, that may be the case. But you could galvanize

1 at least the muscle of this government in personal terms.
2 Just imagine what it would be like if you matched this
3 effort with the responsibility of every Federal worker to
4 be responsible as a mentor or as a participant in
5 contributing to a child's life, a child who is at risk,
6 leveraging private sector to come into this partnership
7 and to make a difference.

8 I adopted Raymond Elementary School because I
9 wanted to have a place where I could care and I didn't get
10 spread too thin and I could try to make a difference, if
11 ever so slight. I've been going to that school about once
12 every two weeks since September. It has been wonderful to
13 get to know teachers, to get to know the students, to have
14 the students come up to me on the street and remind me of
15 what we talked about in their class.

16 That school, though, is a bit dingy, or was. It
17 was grey and kind of dirty. A law firm in this town on
18 one Saturday changed the complexion of that school.
19 Partners were up on the ladders painting, people were
20 planting trees, planting flowers, cleaning bathrooms,
21 cleaning the tops and bottoms off desks.

22 It was just an exciting experience to walk into
23 that school and to see it changed and to see it lighter
24 and brighter and happier, to see how that one law firm had
25 involved all the students in that school in planning, in

1 painting. Not all the students, but a sizable number, who
2 had an interest in it because somebody finally cared.
3 They cared about their school. They cared about something
4 these children cared about.

5 We have got to stop wringing our hands and
6 saying we can't do something because we don't have
7 adequate resources. There are some splendid resources out
8 there if we get them focused in the right direction. But
9 we will never be able to save the lives of our children if
10 we wait until they're 17 years old and are adjudicated
11 delinquent for the second time before we start putting
12 resources into their lives to make a difference.

13 We will never even begin to save the lives of
14 our children if we wait for dropout programs in middle
15 school, because already the child has fallen two grade
16 levels behind and already is beginning to act out in other
17 ways to attract attention to themselves because they are
18 thought of as stupid.

19 And we will never be able to if we wait until we
20 get a good first grade teacher that can make a difference
21 in that child's life, unless we start focusing early on on
22 early childhood development.

23 In short, we have got to take the burden that
24 society, that all of us, that lawyers, have permitted to
25 be placed on juvenile court judges and turn and place it

1 on a community as a whole, design new systems, new
2 processes, to develop an assurance for the children of
3 America that they can and may anticipate certain basic
4 approaches to their life, beginning with the fact that we
5 have got to do everything we can to make sure that the
6 children of America's parents are old enough, wise enough,
7 and financially able to take care of their children.

8 We have got to focus on the issue of teen
9 pregnancy. We can make a difference. We can develop
10 programs after schools and in the evenings for our young
11 women. We can start teaching them so much along the way.

12 But you know better than I, because you are the
13 people that have been on the front lines, we have got to
14 make sure that every child in America, every child in this
15 District, has appropriate health care opportunities.

16 But look what we've done. I'm not expert on the
17 District, but I met one of the prominent officeholders in
18 the District who said that she was plagued more by these
19 court orders that said she had to do this and that and the
20 other and she didn't have the money to do this and that
21 and the other.

22 One of the reasons is because we too often wait
23 for the crisis to occur, for some lawyer to take a
24 situation into a courtroom, win an injunction against a
25 community, direct the payment of some dollars, and the

1 courts are directing payments of the dollars so that the
2 government can't plan as a whole because the government's
3 resources are limited.

4 If we just took our resources and put them up
5 front and investing in human beings, rather than waiting
6 until the crisis occurred, we could make such a
7 difference, and medical care is a classic example. If we
8 organized ourselves so that with police and social workers
9 and public health nurses working together as teams in
10 areas that were of high risk, we could get primary health
11 care to children and families where it counted, where it
12 made a difference, before the illness really took its toll
13 in terms of behavioral problems down the line.

14 We should make sure that every child in this
15 district receives current and appropriate immunization, as
16 well as every child in America. And you say, why are we
17 talking about that in a juvenile court conference? I
18 don't know about you, but I looked at enough presentence
19 investigations over time that went back to the issue of
20 some medical problem that could have been avoided by an
21 investment up front in preventative medical care. We can
22 make a difference.

23 But one of the things that we tend to do is
24 still, even as we talk about early intervention, we still
25 talk about early intervention when the first signs of

1 trouble develop, when the first truancy develops, when the
2 first behavioral problems start in school. We can't wait
3 that long.

4 The studies are complete enough now. The
5 Carnegie Foundation's remarkable report "Starting Points,"
6 the research of so many fine experts around the country
7 and around the world, show that the problems that you deal
8 with today are found, their origins are found 15, 16 years
9 ago in the ages of zero to 3, in the ages where the
10 concept of reward and punishment is developed, the
11 conscience is developed, 50 percent of all learned human
12 response is acquired.

13 Those are the years that the foundations are
14 laid for the problems that you deal with today. And too
15 often there is no advocate, there is no system that can
16 step in to ensure the delivery of the foundations to make
17 a difference.

18 Unless that child is so abused and neglected
19 that the courts can step in through dependency
20 proceedings, that child just withers instead of growing
21 during the most formative time.

22 It has been wonderful for me to have as an ally
23 in these first 15 months in Washington as I've talked
24 about ages zero to three, as I've talked about early
25 childhood as critical to delinquency prevention efforts,

1 to have an ally who is two years old. She happens to be
2 my great-niece. I now see her about every three months,
3 rather than every other day, and to see the changes in
4 that child over this two-year period reminds me of how
5 important it is for all of us who care about children, all
6 of us who care about delinquency, to give to all the
7 children of America an early childhood that can be a
8 strong foundation for their future.

9 As we talk about early intervention, we've got
10 to go to the beginning. And we've got to work together to
11 ensure that our child care institutions for zero to five
12 are as automatic for those children who need them as K
13 through 12. If we wait to K through 12 we're going to be
14 doing more and more remedial programs, at a lot more cost,
15 than if we make the investment up front, where it can make
16 a difference.

17 And then we come to our schools. I've often
18 wondered as I talk to principals in my own home town of
19 Miami how people who cared so much about children could
20 get so distant from each other. You go to a principals'
21 meeting and the principals are fussing about the judges.
22 You go to the judges' meeting and the judges are fussing
23 about the principals.

24 You've asked when they've talked and when
25 they've talked with teachers and, well, they talked when

1 the principal got subpoenaed into court, but it disrupted
2 the schedule because they had to sit there all day, and
3 the principal is more worried about having to sit there
4 all day than how she and the judge can work together to
5 make a difference in a child's life.

6 But if we focus in neighborhood-based efforts,
7 we can make such a difference. But we all have a special
8 responsibility to start telling people how wonderful our
9 teachers are. I have been to schools now, not just at
10 Raymond Elementary but throughout this District, where you
11 have some miracle workers, some men and women who are
12 saints, who are making such an incredible difference in
13 their children's lives, who are teaching them so very
14 much, and they too often feel put down and unappreciated.

15 All of us have got to renew a commitment to
16 public education, to letting those saints know just how
17 wonderful they are, to doing something about a society
18 that pays its football players in the six digit figures
19 and pays its teachers what it does, that pays its lawyers
20 coming to Wall Street law firms obscene salaries compared
21 to what it pays its teachers who have jobs sometimes I
22 think twice as difficult.

23 We must do everything we can to support our
24 educational system. But we have to think of what it
25 means, because the educational system, as best it can be,

1 is dissipated by the child who leaves the school in the
2 afternoon, walks home unsupervised through streets that
3 put that child at risk.

4 We've got to develop programs afternoons and in
5 the evenings that are organized and available for all
6 children and young people.

7 I was out in Glen Arden, Maryland, this past
8 week at a midnight basketball game. I wondered whether
9 midnight basketball was a catchy phrase, but I have
10 learned over the years that it's not. I talked to young
11 men whose lives had been changed so dramatically because
12 of it, because of the workshops and the educational
13 opportunities that went with it.

14 And yet in that limited suburb of Maryland,
15 there were only two such programs, with a lot of other
16 children missing out. And TV reporters that night -- it
17 was interesting to me that it was the TV reporter who was
18 the advocate for the District -- was saying we can't get
19 it started in the District because we don't have the
20 money.

21 Somehow or another, we have got to reweave the
22 fabric of society around these children in the afternoon
23 and in the evening and, through private sector
24 initiatives, through passage of the crime bill, through so
25 many other efforts, get programs to schools and

1 communities that can provide activities for our children
2 that can make a difference.

3 Through partnerships between police and schools,
4 we can make a difference. It is so exciting to see what
5 is happening in communities where police officers are
6 reaching out to the young people at an early age and
7 developing their trust, becoming their mentors. When I
8 stand in South Central Los Angeles with an elementary
9 school that has 40 percent Hispanic students, 40 percent
10 African American, and 20 percent Cambodian, and I ask
11 those kids what they want to be when they grow up and they
12 look over my shoulder and beam at the community police
13 officer and say, I want to be a policeman, you can see the
14 differences.

15 When three young men come down from Dorchester,
16 Massachusetts, with their community police officers to
17 tell the President of the United States what a difference
18 those men have made in their lives in terms of getting
19 them straightened out and off on the right foot, you begin
20 to understand the potential for what community policing
21 can do. It can make a difference.

22 But then no matter what we do, there will be
23 children who get into trouble. And we've got to develop
24 better ways to do it earlier on. Nine years old when that
25 child is first truant, let's take action there. Instead

1 of just having the police officers pick up the child and
2 take him back to school, if the parent doesn't come to get
3 the child let's do home visits. Let's make a difference.
4 Let's find out what's causing the problem and let's
5 intervene early enough.

6 When we see the child starting to fall behind,
7 let's not wait until middle school for a dropout
8 prevention program. Let's start making sure we have
9 tutors from the private sector, volunteers, others, who
10 will make a difference after school in that child's life,
11 so they don't fall behind and they don't drop out.

12 When a child gets to be age 12 and starts
13 getting into trouble, let us do a risk assessment up
14 front. Let's analyze it up front, rather than waiting for
15 the first non-serious offense to be disposed of without
16 too much attention, and the second and the third.

17 Let us try to look at the child as part of a
18 family, focusing on what the problems in the family are as
19 well as the child. It will do us no good whatsoever if we
20 take a delinquent child, punish him the right way, send
21 him to the most appropriate program in the world, and then
22 send him home to a family that caused the problem in the
23 first place.

24 And let us start focusing on aftercare. We get
25 into these great debates about whether boot camps work and

1 what is a boot camp and does it work. We get into great
2 debates about what youthful offender program works and
3 what doesn't work. But it is clear that the programs that
4 are working have as an essential component community
5 aftercare that can make a difference.

6 We're going to have to be bolder in what we talk
7 about in terms of aftercare, because again it makes no
8 sense to punish a child the right way and then send him
9 home to the apartment over the open air drug market that
10 got him into the trouble in the first place. We've got to
11 think of alternative housing sites and creative things,
12 like, say, six youngsters with a couple renovating an
13 apartment in an area and coming in and living in a group
14 living situation far better than the situation, the family
15 situation that caused the problem in the first place.

16 But most of all, we have got to listen to our
17 young people. I talked to one of my colleagues from the
18 Department of Justice this morning and he told me of how
19 the young people had participated in this conference. You
20 have done something that few have done around the country,
21 and I want to congratulate you because our children --

22 (Applause.)

23 -- our children have such extraordinary wisdom.
24 They have such keen understanding. They have so much good
25 sense, and they've got so many things to tell you. And I

1 think one of the great problems is that we are trying to
2 find solutions for these children, some of whom have been
3 through hell, and our solutions are based on the way we
4 were raised, and most of us didn't go through hell.

5 For somebody who's been through hell and who
6 wants to make a difference and wants to teach us how to
7 help somebody who has had their experience, we must
8 listen. Punishment won't work if the child never learned
9 the concept of punishment. If the child doesn't have the
10 self-confidence or faith or belief in himself to make a
11 difference, we've got to pursue new notions of how we work
12 with children. Is it the pat on the back first? How do
13 we mix the pat on the back with the punishment? What are
14 the ingredients? How do we work together to do it?

15 The young people of America have so many answers
16 out there just waiting to be heard, and the young people
17 of America want so to make a difference. In our effort as
18 we take back this Nation, we can use our children. They
19 want to volunteer, they want to participate, they want to
20 tutor the youngster in the grade school below them. They
21 want to make a difference.

22 If we all work together and understand that our
23 problems will not be resolved in courts, that lawyers
24 fighting great legal battles will not win the problem,
25 find the solution, but if all of us, doctors, lawyers,

1 judges, police officers, teachers, work together, child by
2 child, family by family, block by block, neighborhood by
3 neighborhood, city by city, we're going to do it because
4 of people like you.

5 God bless you and thank you ever so much.

6 (Applause and end of remarks.)
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