UNITED STATES DEPARTMENT OF JUSTICE

REMARKS OF THE HONORABLE JANET RENO

ATTORNEY GENERAL OF THE UNITED STATES

TO THE

ANNUAL CONGRESSIONAL CONFERENCE

OF THE

NATIONAL LEAGUE OF CITIES

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P R O C E E D I N G S

(2:32 p.m.)

Sunday, March 12, 2000

GENERAL RENO: Thank you so very much.

This is a special day for me, because I'm back with cities, cities that I've had a chance to visit; and it's been seven years today that I've been in this job. In addition, I just returned from Chile about three hours ago, where I headed

the delegation to the inauguration of President Lagos. This is a country that has had through most of its history a democratic tradition. Now it saw a transition of power from one administration to another, but was reminded of a period when democracy did not flourish in Chile.

You come back to this country ever so grateful for our democracy and promising yourself that you must never, never take it for granted.

(Applause.)

And no place is a better place to start upon my return than with the cities, for I have been to so many of your situations and streets and community centers and city halls. The cities are the heart and soul of America. You mayors, councilpersons, administrators are the problem solvers primarily for the people of America, and you do an incredible job of that.

You more than so many are responsible for something more in terms of public service. It's not just serving the people, it's giving the people a sense that they can cope, that they can deal with the issues of modern time, that they can overcome tragedy, that they can share joy, and that they can come out feeling stronger, better, about themselves.

It may be the 60 year old woman who's been afraid to come out from behind her doors, who now comes out and gives you a piece of her mind at the community center. Or it may be the young man who wonders why anybody cares, a young man who has been the victim of racism, a young man who has a police officer reach out and say: Hey there, how can I help, what can I do? You do so very much, and I am just very proud to be here.

Mayor Knight, I had a chance to hear a little bit of what you said and I want to commend you for your courage and your conviction in promoting understanding in this country and in helping this country work through the rejection of racism. Our country is because of your thoughtful leadership.

(Applause.)

I want to acknowledge also Oklahoma City Council member Ann Simank, Little Rock Council member Michael Keck, and Fredericksburg Mayor Bill Grinnett. You have each been very important voices in the very serious issue of domestic terrorism and domestic preparedness, and I am grateful for your good work and would like to continue to work with the cities across the country to make sure that we do what we can to help you be prepared, for you are on the front lines and you do respond so magnificently if you're given the tools. We want to try to work with you to ensure that.

(Applause.)

Finally, I'd like to acknowledge Hayward Councilman and National League of Cities Public Safety Committee Chair Olden Henson. Councilman Henson has been a leader on public safety issues and an important partner in our fight against crime. He's been very engaged in an issue that I will be addressing shortly, how we bring prisoners back to the community with a chance of a future, on the streets, in a job, in a community where they can contribute, rather than back in prison.

Since I first spoke to you in Orlando in 1993, all of us together have made remarkable strides in our fight against crime. Through the COPS program we funded more than 100,000 new community police officers. Under the Brady Act we have prevented more than 400,000 felons and other prohibited persons from buying guns. And most significantly, we have fought crime together.

You heard me then say I didn't like the feds coming to town telling us what to do; I like the feds coming to town saying: You know your community better than we do, you understand your needs and resources; how can we be a better partner?

We instituted --

(Applause.)

We instituted an anti-violence initiative in which we reached out and said: Who can do what best and how can we do it better? And as a result of these and so many other efforts, but primarily because of the efforts of people who care, who are on the front lines in the cities and the counties of America, crime is now down in almost all categories seven years in a row, from all parts of the country.

But as a prosecutor in Miami for 15 years, I know it can go up as quick as it can go down. But let's not let that happen, ladies and gentlemen. If we refuse to let our cities and counties in this nation become complacent, if we continue to use the common sense nonpartisan, non-rhetorical, and action-oriented approach to crime, if we look at hard statistics and say, what can be done to address this problem by bringing people together, we can continue in a measured, thoughtful way to bring crime down in this country and once and for all to end the culture of violence in this country.

(Applause.)

We've got a lot more to do, and I'd like to talk to you about some of the key points that I think are necessary. You're doing so much now. Some of your work with children, early intervention, work in housing projects, work in community dispute resolution programs, work in the schools -- you are bringing your community together and you are the problem-solver.

But what do we need to do? First we must address the tremendous influx of offenders being released from prison each year. We must bring the strength of our partnership to bear on this problem. Let's look at the challenge. In the vast majority of cases, when an offender comes back from prison or from the jail he comes back without the tools for a better, brighter future. He does not have a skill, he does not know how to get to work on time, he doesn't know how to follow directions, but he wants to make a go of it.

Let's give him the tools. Now, some people say that sounds like rehabilitation. I don't care whether you call it rehabilitation or public safety or the best law enforcement I know. It makes sense to give somebody the tools to cope so he's not back in prison.

(Applause.)

Common sense suggests that we should use time in prison to train, to educate, and to treat offenders. If we do so they're more likely to re-enter society successfully. But we must provide a network of support, supervision, and accountability for released offenders. If we do their futures will be brighter, our communities will be safer, and this nation will be stronger.

The number of Americans incarcerated is quickly nearing two million people. In recent years this country has imprisoned more and more people for longer and longer terms, and now many of these offenders are returning to the community. Let's look at the facts. In 1998 545,000 offenders came back from state and federal prisons. In 1999 the number was 565,000, and this year 585,000 are anticipated to return.

These numbers are startling when you consider that in 1980 there was a total of 320,000 people in America's prisons. Today nearly twice as many are coming out to our streets.

Even more alarming is the fact that many of these people are returning with little or no supervision to a relatively small number of neighborhoods and often to the apartment over the open air drug market where they got into trouble in the first place. Not surprisingly, not surprisingly, two-thirds of all returning offenders are re-arrested within three years of release. This is simply unacceptable. Released offenders should re-enter society with a chance to get off on the right foot. Instead they return to our communities with many of the same problems that brought them into prison, and many of them come out with some additional problems that they acquired in prison, including rage and prejudice.

For example, 70 percent of state prisoners have a history of drug abuse, and research by the National Institute of Justice indicates that between 60 and 75 percent of inmates with heroin or cocaine problems, they return to drugs within three months when untreated. An estimated 179,000 state prison inmates self-report having mental health problems, and these offenders are more likely than others to be under the influence of alcohol or drugs when they commit an offense.

But perhaps most disturbing is what I have already alluded to, that many offenders leave prison with feelings of rage towards the society they are about to re-enter. This deep-rooted hatred stems from a profound sense of hopelessness, a hopelessness that comes from being a perceived victim.

Let's not give them a chance to feel like they are a victim. Let's give them a chance to prove themselves and to hold them accountable and to do it in a fair, just way.

(Applause.)

We need to rethink how we manage re-entry of prisoners. We've got to minimize public safety risk and maximize an ex-offender's potential. Is more prison time the answer? Just as increased borrowing does not reduce the national debt, but only delays the day of reckoning, longer prison sentences cannot eliminate the re-entry problem. Instead, we must address the national challenge head-on and here's how we do it.

We want to work with you, the local communities, to improve supervision of this high-risk population. Together in partnership, we must develop a seamless system of offender accountability, supervision, and support, a system that begins during incarceration and continues as the offender leaves prison and re-enters the community.

The cycle of crime is well documented and studies indicate that strong re-entry services are associated with lower rates of recidivism. They are also associated with an increased likelihood of employment and a decrease in drug

use.

The first promising approach that I want to describe to you today is the concept of a re-entry court. In 1987 we started a drug court in Miami that was operated on a carrot and stick approach. There was one in the country. I went back ten years later for the anniversary and there were over 300 in the country, with 200 or more on the drawing boards.

It holds people accountable, but it gives them a chance. We can do the same thing with re-entry courts. They would oversee an offender's return to the community. The court would use its authority to apply graduated sanctions and positive reinforcement just as the drug courts do. The message: Work with us, stay clean, stay out of trouble, get a job, and we will help you in these efforts; but if you test positive for drugs, commit further crimes, violate the condition of your release, you're going to face more serious punishment each step of the way.

The re-entry court would promote the offender's return, the return offender's positive behavior and support successful re-integration into the community. It would also use a graduated range of swift, predictable, sanctions to make sure the offender stays on the right track.

Think about it for a moment. The judge sentences somebody to five years for the second burglary. They were on probation the first time, they got into trouble again. What if we had church groups, private not-for-profit advocacy groups, agree to sponsor that person as they went off to prison, developing links between children that might remain at home so that the offender writes, starting to teach responsibility, starting to look for jobs and housing, starting to provide a network that can give that offender a chance to get off on the right foot when they return.

These partners could include not only the churches, not only private not-for-profit groups, but local businesses, families, support services, victim's advocates, and neighborhood organizations.

Ladies and gentlemen, we have a golden opportunity. This past Martin Luther King Day, I worked on a building in St. Louis, Missouri. 15 young men were there for Youth Build, some trying to keep themselves out of the prison and others having returned. They were fine people, and after they discovered I could drive a threepenny nail without bending it and after the television cameras left and I stayed, they decided I might be okay.

They taught me a lot. How do I keep from getting back into prison when they are all suspecting that I did it all and I commit every crime that now happens in the neighborhood? Why don't you go talk to the police? I can't talk to the police. And I said: Well, let's see if we can't get police starting to talk to young people who are coming back from the prison.

Let's start building a dialogue. Let's start seeing what can be done when we take the professional policing that we see today on the good side, the excellence, the caring, the compassion, and start working with young people to bring a community together rather than see it split apart from distrust caused by people who are insensitive to those they serve.

Most police I have worked with want to try to do the job the right way. Let us encourage them. Let us train them. Let us use them in community policing initiatives that can help that elderly lady not only come down and give us what-for at the community center, but also become the positive leader in the community for bringing the community together.

We can do so much if we imagine a new role for a community safety officer who would manage the offender's transition. A community safety officer would hold the offender accountable, enforce special conditions geared to the neighborhood that the offender would have to meet, and connect the offender to key treatment and job opportunities.

If we make sure these courts have manageable caseloads and resources to support what we're trying to do, we can make a real difference.

Last month I was proud to announce nine pilot re-entry court sites located all across America. In each site people and organizations that care have recognized the need to work together as a community on this critical issue of re-entry.

The second approach is to do it without a court, use a re-entry partnership. It seeks to create the same accountability. Patterned after successful police correction partnerships, these partnerships will help establish key new alliances and through institutional corrections, community corrections, community policing, local businesses, and faith-based and grassroots organizations will work together to prepare for a more successful return.

But as we look at the probably, I've had a chance to see what can be done with modern technology, with computers and mapping systems that can help us identify where the problems exist within the community: Where are the recidivists, where are the drug gangs, where are the street gangs, who are they? And if federal and local law enforcement officials come together and use their resources in the wisest way possible to focus on these issues, we can make a difference.

But it still comes back to not the technology, but the people. It may be a police officer who by tone of voice, manner, and firmness conveys trust. It may be a preacher who can reach out. It may be the mayor who comes out to the park, and they sit there and look at the mayor like this. And the mayor starts talking, and they look and they say: How do we know you are going to deliver? And the mayor says: Just watch me. And the mayor delivers, and they get converts along the way and people begin to believe in the system because somebody came out there, told them they could deliver, and they did.

There are so many things that could be done if we look at people for what they are, all of us having hopes and fears, concerns, problems, doubts. We can do so much if we commit to believing in people so that we don't excuse them for

what they do, so that we hold them accountable, but we give them the tools to cope as they return.

(Applause.)

But as we look at the whole issue of what can be done to once and for all turn this country around and make it the safest big nation in the world, we've got to look at guns. That's why I'm so pleased and so proud that President Clinton has supported re-entry in his proposed budget and included $145 million for innovative re-entry programs, but he's also done much more. He has dedicated $60 million to the development of re-entry partnerships and re-entry courts. The Department of Labor will dedicate, according to this budget, $75 million in job-related programs and the Department of Health and Human Services will dedicate $10 million in substance abuse and mental health programs.

This kind of collaboration will make a difference. But it won't make a difference unless we get guns out of the hands of people who don't belong or can't lawfully use them. Every day 89 people, including 12 children, are shot and killed in America. In 1997 over 32,000 people died of gunshot wounds, and for every fatal shooting there are at least three non-fatal firearms injuries.

On the federal level, we are taking these steps. President Clinton announced a national firearms enforcement initiative including $280 million in the fiscal year 2001 budget. The President's proposal will fund over 1,000 new federal, state, and local prosecutors to take dangerous offenders, including armed criminals, off the streets. It will add 500 new ATF agents and inspectors to target violent gun criminals and illegal traffickers, create the first nationally integrated ballistics testing system, and expand crime gun tracing to assist in apprehending more gun criminals.

It will also fund local media campaigns to discourage gun violence, and it will send a tough message to would-be criminals about the penalties for breaking gun laws. It will also expand smart gun technologies.

In addition, as the President has noted, he has called for commonsense gun legislation, and if we just start using common sense and say, why should you have that gun out there without a gun safety lock, we can start making more sense of this whole crime problem.

Finally, I have asked all U.S. attorneys all across the country to work with their communities. I have asked them to analyze the particular problems plaguing their districts and make available resources and a commitment, including tough law enforcement to end this violence.

It will take local leadership, innovation, and collaboration to get the job done. I opened my mail one day and there was a letter from Louisville Mayor David Armstrong, who had called together a group of citizens to develop an aggressive strategy to end escalating gun violence. The Mayor's task force to end gun violence included top leaders in law enforcement, education, government, religion, medical, and the legal world. The task force examined the nature of gun violence in the city, its causes, and current gun laws, and prepared a report proposing some commonsense approaches.

These proposals are based on the recognition that prosecution is a critical component of any gun violence reduction strategy, but that smart, effective prevention and early intervention programs are also critical to reduce violence in our cities.

Nobody wants to see the crime happen. Nobody wants to see our children killed. Let us continue to do as much and more to build on what you have done to prevent crime in the first place, by keeping guns out of the hands of criminals and children, by providing positive opportunities, and by working to promote non-violence.

The same key concepts found in the Louisville plan are also found in the foundation of a report recently created in New Jersey. Mayor Tim McDonough from Hope, New Jersey, and a group of other New Jersey mayors identified commonsense approaches and resources to prevent youth violence.

The bottom line is for us to make meaningful inroads. But finally, ladies and gentlemen -- and I don't have all the answers -- we've got to challenge ourselves to really go after one final cause of violence that has been with us for the history of humankind. That is the issue of domestic violence. As we have watched crime go down, we have not seen --

(Applause.)

-- we have not seen violence in the home against women go down. Until we end that kind of violence in the home, until we can tell our children that they don't have to look at this violence because it is not part of their way of life, until we make sure that America understands that people who love each other or who once loved each other don't beat each other, then we can make a difference.

(Applause.)

We need to develop a continuum, and I would like to work with cities who are interested in this effort, to train police in how best to respond to domestic calls, to provide for community policing that continues to check on the family and follows through, that provides for intervention for those children who watch the violence so that they can begin to cope with the tragedy of the violence, so that we have in every community courts who understand how important it is to prosecute the case, so that we have after-care and follow-up to make sure that there is a continuum and that the cycle is interrupted.

But we have to really form new partnerships, partnerships with the faith community, with the medical community. And we have got to hear people preaching and talking about the fact that this type of violence from the beginning should be unacceptable. Pediatricians and family physicians should have information on domestic violence on their walls just as they have it on breast cancer and other diseases and perils that can be prevented in many occasions.

We can do it if we realize that nobody has a corner on what

we can do to solve the problem of violence. If public health, mayors, police chiefs, attorneys general, the lady who we got out from behind that door who's giving us a piece of her mind, if all of us come out and start talking, if we start listening to our children, if we bring our children in and say, we trust you, talk to us, let us work together, but we're going to hold you accountable, we can truly make a difference.

The reason I believe it with all my heart is because I've watched what you have done in your cities over these last seven years to bring violence down to the level it is now. Let's go back and let's try harder, and then let me visit your cities in about seven years in my red truck and see what you have done. I bet you will have succeeded.

Thank you.

(Applause and, at 3:04 p.m., end of remarks.)