



UNITED STATES DEPARTMENT OF JUSTICE

**REMARKS OF ATTORNEY GENERAL JANET RENO
COURT SERVICES AND OFFENDER SUPERVISION
AGENCY FOR THE DISTRICT OF COLUMBIA
RIBBON CUTTING CEREMONY FOR
THE RE-ENTRY SYSTEM LEARNING LAB
Wednesday, November 1, 2000**

WASHINGTON, DC

REMARKS OF ATTORNEY

GENERAL RENO

(4:50 p.m.)

GENERAL RENO: Thank you so much, Mr. Ormond. This is a wonderful day for me. I've just come from listening to two young men, Seneca Wells and Larry Quick, representing Life Pieces, who just are remarkable young people. I have just come from hearing the Watts Elementary School Glee Club sing the most beautiful songs, and there's so much to say about the youth of the District of Columbia. They are extraordinarily special.

(Applause.)

GENERAL RENO: Just a couple of months ago I was walking in an area trying to see how the buildings were changing and what was happening, and three men were on the corner.

One was on his bicycle, and they saw the wire in the detail's ear and they said, oh, Secret Service, and then they figured out who I was under my floppy hat and the man on the bicycle pedaled over to me and he said, hey, Ms. Reno, I just got out of jail after 19 years. Can you buy me a sandwich?

And I said, I'm sorry, I didn't bring money with me, but can I talk to you, and he said, sure, and I said, what are we going to do to keep you from getting back into trouble, and he said, don't worry about me. See that place across the street there, that run-down house, get that house rehabbed and make it a center and get these kids off the street.

That man, after 19 years in prison, cared enough to think about the young ones, but we cannot forget about him. The police officers can't forget about him if we want to ensure public safety. We can't forget about him if we care about humanity, and after talking to him, he was so bright that he would make a positive contribution if we can get him off on the right foot.

We talked a little bit longer, then he reached over and gave me a big hug and pedaled off.

(Laughter.)

GENERAL RENO: I can't forget him, and he is my symbol of what we are here today for. I'm gratified that the House and Senate conferees included \$30 million for the Department of Justice re-entry initiatives.

(Applause.)

GENERAL RENO: It has not passed yet, but it's getting there.

We're looking forward to working with the Departments of Labor and Health & Human Services in a brand-new collaboration that recognizes that prison won't make any difference if the person is returning to the apartment over the open-air drug market where they got in trouble in the first place, or if they're returning without after care and follow-up opportunities.

We want to address every element of the re-entry challenge in the group of high-risk communities with a common group of offenders, including juvenile offenders. When I talk to young people who are in trouble, the juveniles, I say, what

could have been done to keep you out of trouble?

Somebody to talk to. Somebody -- some adult who understands how hard it is to grow up in this country today, who could give me a pat on the back when I deserve it and give me a good talking to when I deserve it, but treats me with dignity and respect, and doesn't hassle me and put me down. That is a wonderful trait to have, and we have got to figure out how we can teach all of us to talk to young people in that way.

We recognize that re-entry is a criminal justice problem, but it's also a public health problem, it is an economic problem. As a result it needs to be tackled just as Mr. Ormond described, as a partnership, a wonderful partnership. Under our collective vision the Justice Department will dedicate funds to offender re-entry initiatives, the Department of Labor will dedicate funds to job-related programs, and the Department of Health and Human Services will dedicate funds to substance abuse and mental health treatment.

There are wonderful things being done in mental health treatment and in substance abuse in Miami. About 12 years ago we had one drug court, one drug court in the Nation operating on the carrot-and-stick approach that said work with us and we will get you into drug treatment and give you a chance at job training and placement, but if you don't, you face a more certain sanction each step of the way.

Well, we can apply the same principle with the re-entry court. We can utilize the resources wisely with case loads small enough that judges can manage them, and we are seeing mental health courts have a great effect when the resources are equal to the challenge.

Sooner or later, as Mr. Ormond pointed out, most of these offenders will return to the community, and we ought to be prepared. Common sense dictates it. This year, more than 585,000 offenders are expected to return to their communities across America. They will present common

challenges. They came to prison with significant problems, with drug abuse. Only 10 percent are receiving drug treatment in State prisons, and about 179,000 State prisoners have self-reported mental illnesses.

Many offenders come into prison as drop-outs or illiterates. They come into prison without life skills, without a job or a prospect of a job. Too often, they come out with the same problems, as well as the added stigma of being an ex-con.

It is not surprising that Nation-wide two-thirds of State prisoners are re-arrested within 3 years of release, and 41 percent return to prison or jail.

Now, some people say, you're just a do-gooder. You're not interested in punishing. I think people deserve to be held accountable with a fair, firm punishment that fits the crime, but after they've done the time, and done it right, then they need to get off on a fresh start, and we need to give it to them.

We have got to work together to create these partnerships. In many instances, the system should begin before incarceration and continue as the offender leaves prison and re-enters the community, beginning the drug testing upon arrest and following through immediately with drug treatment offered to them from trial to pre-sentence investigation to incarceration to prepare him for what it is going to be like on the outside.

Given the high percentage of prisoners with a history of drug abuse, this element of re-entry is particularly critical. Research shows that drug treatment in prison, when combined with drug-testing and a system of graduated sanctions after release, can cut recidivism by as much as 80 percent. Now, if that's an overstated figure, I'll take 50 percent. I'll take it for one life.

Over the past year, the Department of Justice has been working to develop several different approaches. We're working with 17 communities across the country to test two

new ones, the concept of a re-entry court and a re-entry partnership.

A re-entry court oversees the offender's return to the community after release from prison or jail. The court uses its authority for positive reinforcement, just like drug courts do. It's modeled on the same approach. The message is, stay clean, stay out of trouble, we will help you get a job, we will help prepare you in terms of a skill, but if you come back and test positive for drugs, if you commit a further crime and you violate the conditions of your release, you're going to pay through some more serious sanction.

But the judge is going to know, because too often you make one mistake, and right back in. The judge is going to -- our hope is that the judges have the skills necessary to know, a man going back for a day or two or a week, but we're going to give you another chance. That person that has that magical sense of when to lower the boom and when to give them another positive reinforcement makes such a difference.

But you know who can make a tremendous difference? What would happen if a judge in the District sentenced somebody to 5 years in prison, and the church stepped forward, or a private not-for-profit group, or a community police officer, who would work with young people after his shift is off at 3:00 in the afternoon and the judge said, now, this person is willing to take you on as a mentee and sponsor you and write to you and communicate with you while you are in prison, and try to help you reestablish yourself as you come back with your children, with your family, with a job, with the community, but we expect that you will make it a two-way street for us.

We can do so much if we have people who will sponsor and make a difference. We could make a real difference in the offending rate in this Nation and make our community safer.

The re-entry partnership will focus on preparing communities for returning offenders. Many communities are

not equipped or mobilized to deal with the drug or mental health problems, nor do they have allowances in place to deal with other problems relating to returning offenders, supervision, job placement, family services, community services, which are so critical.

And sometimes, ladies and gentlemen, it's just a 24-hour hotline, somebody you can call that you're about to lose it because somebody has put you down, you haven't been able to find a job yet, and you're just holding on with your bare knuckles, and that one phone call to a person who understands makes such a difference.

Your efforts here in the District are great examples of how our partnership -- I know it's not always easy to get people to work together, because we all have a thousand ideas about how it should be done, but we have one common understanding, and that is that we should not lose one person if we could possibly help it.

Some people say, this generation, we can't do anything. That guy on the bicycle is a reminder to me that everybody can be reached, and can be helped if we work together, and it's exciting to see that learning is going on here at the Learning Lab. Re-entry programs cannot work unless we prepare offenders for employment and help them find it.

I'm impressed by how much the community has embraced this initiative. Without the support of citizens living in the neighborhood, re-entry programs aren't going to work. Working together, we can end the culture of violence.

I will end with one story. Last Martin Luther King Day I was in St. Louis to do volunteer work, as we have done in the Cabinet. I went to the site where I was to assist in rehabbing a building. It had turned to ice and snow, and so they were going to have us work outside but we went inside.

The television cameras were right behind me and these young men, half of them were trying to keep from going to prison and the other half were trying to keep from going back to prison, looked at me and thought, well, she'll be gone when

the television cameras leave. The television cameras left and I was still there, and they said, do you want something to do?

(Laughter.)

GENERAL RENO: I said, that was the general reason I got here. So they gave me some studs to nail up with three-penny nails, and I nailed them all, my nails, without bending them, and they decided I was okay so they started talking to me.

You know what they wanted first of all? They wanted the right to vote, and that is a huge step.

(Applause.)

GENERAL RENO: The second thing they talked about was, how do I get along with policemen? I said, well, why don't you go ride with them? Well, I would be laughed out of town. Well, go to the other part of town where your friends won't be there and ride with them.

I got a message after I got back to Washington. They had decided making two projects -- crime on their agenda, 1) to reach out to police and to start learning how to talk to them, and to teach them how they would like to be talked to, and they felt such hope in that, and secondly, to make sure they did everything to help people in their similar situation have their civil rights restored so that they could continue on as strong participants in a society.

That fascinated them, and they began to think a little bit differently when they discovered the Attorney General could nail.

Thank you.

(Applause.)

(Whereupon, at 5:00 p.m. the remarks ended.)