UNITED STATES DEPARTMENT OF JUSTICE

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REMARKS OF THE HONORABLE JANET RENO,

ATTORNEY GENERAL OF THE UNITED STATES,

TO THE

COALITION FOR JUVENILE JUSTICE CONFERENCE:

YOUTH VIOLENCE: FORGING A COMMUNITY RESPONSE

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Haverford Baccarat Room
Bethesda Hyatt Regency Hotel
7400 Wisconsin Avenue
Bethesda, Maryland
Thursday, April 8, 1999

P R O C E E D I N G S

(2:15 p.m.)

GENERAL RENO: Thank you, Catherine, and thank you for your leadership and for your courage. You do one great job for the people of Nevada.

Linda, Pamela, and to all of you, thank you so very much for having me. You won't see me canoeing as much as you will see me turning over.

(Laughter.)

So I don't start until June when it's warm.

(Laughter.)

In my remarks to you on April the 18th, 1993, I talked about what I thought was one of the great public health problems of America and what I considered to be one of the single greatest crime problems that we faced: youth violence. Even with the benefit of 20-20 hindsight, I think we can still say with confidence that the problem of youth violence was getting the upper hand on April the 18th, 1993. The juvenile arrest rate for murder had more than doubled between '87 and '93. Between '88 and '94 the rate at which juveniles were arrested for robbery increased 70 percent. The juvenile arrest rate for aggravated assault increased steadily between '83 and '94. Similar increases were found in juvenile arrests for other assaults over the same period.

Now, six years later, we've seen a turn-around in juvenile violent crime. I think there is cause for very modest celebration. In the time since I last spoke to you, juvenile violent crime arrest rate has dropped for three straight years, falling 23 percent from 1994 to 1997. We've also had significant declines in every type of violent crime index offense.

When we last spoke I described my belief in a broad approach that looked at the child and the family as a whole, a broad approach that was necessary both for delinquency prevention and to enable us to have children who could grow in a strong and positive way to meet the responsibilities they would face as adults, to obtain jobs with skills that could maintain companies as first-rate companies, to maintain America.

I spoke to you of the need for early intervention, for adequate prenatal care, good education, after-school supervision. I said that we had come together to take the limited resources of government and, through partnership and collaboration, use them to develop a national agenda for children.

The challenge I gave you was to forge a new approach to children, to get involved before the child became delinquent, to get involved when the child's foundation was being formed, and, two, to work diligently to form a new bond between Washington and state and local government. I said that all of us, myself included, had to walk out of the room that day and sell America on what nurturing and bonding was all about, that somehow or other we were going to have to put our children first again in America, to reclaim lost lives and to prevent others from joining their ranks in the first place, and that we would have to do it as partners.

Ladies and gentlemen, you have done it. You have helped put children first for the first time in a long time in America. You've helped educate me and others about the need for a balanced approach to juvenile crime, one that combines prevention programs for at-risk youth with early intervention and graduated sanctions that hold offenders accountable at every stage of the juvenile justice system.

Our efforts to improve the juvenile justice system have been part of a broad, comprehensive, community-wide effort, at both the leadership and grassroots levels, to reduce the things that place juveniles at risk of delinquency and increase the things that protect them from engaging in delinquent behavior.

Inherent in this has been a focus on communities. Each community understands its needs and resources better than we do in Washington, better than we do in the state capital.

I commend you for what you have done. I salute you, because it is wonderful now to walk into a room with mayors, who greeted me in 1993 and were rather surprised that I talked about prenatal care as opposed to locking them all up exclusively. I went to see the mayors last fall and they said: We listened to you, we're doing it, and you're right.

To go to the International Association of Chiefs of Police and the National Sheriffs Association and start talking about the same thing and have the sheriffs and police chiefs start clapping and then, more importantly, have the police chiefs and the sheriffs start putting into action on the streets of their communities prevention programs that are making a difference.

You did this. You proved that prevention and intervention could work. You are remarkable.

But we cannot become complacent, because America has a tendency when it thinks it's solved a problem to turn and look at other issues, and that's what happens in crime. We get complacent when we see the crime rate go down and we start thinking about other things.

We have a golden opportunity to keep the pressure on, to keep building the blocks of a child's life and a family's life so that they can have a strong and positive future, and we can once and for all have a dramatic impact on the culture of violence in this country.

I went to Toronto last summer. Toronto had about roughly 100 or more gun

homicides over a certain period of time. Chicago, a city of similar size, had about 3,000. It doesn't have to be. Violence does not have to be in this nation, and because of you I think we can move ahead so that my great-great nieces and nephews will never ever know the violence we have known.

But it's going to require some hard work. It's going to require continued efforts. And it's going to require us constantly asking what works and what doesn't work, what's left out, what piece is missing, what's wrong, how can we do it better. We can't be wed just to one program. We've got to look at the whole picture. We've got to understand that if something doesn't work, let's give it a try, but let's discard it, but let's build on what we know that can.

The Coalition for Juvenile Justice has been a magnificent partner in exchanges with federal, state, and local governments and state advisory groups. An example of your contribution in this regard is near to me and important to me, and that's your involvement in Five Goals for Kids. The Coalition was one of the first national organizations that stepped up to the plate to take the lead in the implementation of this program and it has been an active participant in rallying community participation.

Now, for those of you who don't know what it is, Five Goals for Kids is a coalition to prevent youth violence that we launched last year with the Department of Health and Human Services, the Department of Education, and the United Way of America. It now includes about a dozen umbrella organizations with state and local affiliates who are joining in their communities to accomplish five specific goals for kids over the next two years:

To reduce truancy by one-third in at least 200 schools;

Provide constructive after-school activities to at least 100,000 more children;

Provide at least 100,000 more children with effective drug and alcohol abuse prevention programs;

Enroll at least 500,000 uninsured children for health care coverage;

And create programs in 200 communities to reduce gun violence injuries.

The coalition has used its relationship to the 57 state advisory groups to spur activities in communities around the country, making the most progress so far in Colorado, North Carolina, and South Carolina. Working with the National Recreation and Parks Association and local United Way offices, as well as other

new partners, the coalition has been encouraging state advisory groups to form collaborations with youth-serving agencies and to generate resources for activities designed especially for at-risk youth to meet the five goals.

The three Departments, the three federal Departments, are providing support, training, information, and guidance.

Let me pause for a moment. We've done something in the Federal Government that it's taken me a long time to try to forge. It worried me when I used to come to Washington and I'd go to one Department and then they would direct me to another Department, and then I would have to go to a third Department because they had a grant that might apply. And by the end of the day when I got on the plane to go home, I felt like a beggar and, instead of feeling great because I'd accomplished something, I somehow or another felt... well eecch.

I felt, wouldn't it be wonderful if you could go to Washington with one grant application that encompassed three agencies and get what you need in a way that you can use it in your community. We've just recently announced Safe Schools, Health Children, involving grant resources from the three Departments with one grant application, and I hope it's a sign of the future. Help me make it so.

(Applause.)

GENERAL RENO: One of the keys to what we do is research. I came here saying it is important that we figure out what works and what doesn't work. But sometimes we research and research and research, and by that time crack is gone and there's another problem that we don't know about and we have to start over researching and we don't get the job done.

Somehow or another, we've got to provide research with evaluation that is as prompt as possible without interfering with the scientific quality of the evaluation, while at the same time trying to figure from day to day what's working to get the job done. We've got to make sure that we carry forward what we've done.

When I go to a community, I don't often see "Republican" written across one person's shoulder and "Democrat" across the other. I'll see a Republican D.A. and a Republican sheriff with a Democratic U.S. Attorney trying to solve the crime problem, because the crime problem to them isn't a partisan issue.

If we can just carry forward with what you have helped forge, which is a thoughtful public health approach to ending violence, we can make a big

difference. We've got to keep the pressure on through showing what works and what doesn't work, through doing it in ways that everyone can understand, particularly the appropriators.

The value of partnership, a comprehensive approach to children, research-based prevention, showing programs that work, all of this is important. The efforts of the Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention in identifying, evaluating, and demonstrating promising programs and then disseminating that information to the field is very important to me. I would like to ask you, if OJJDP hasn't already asked you, if you were OJJDP how would you improve that effort? And make sure that John Wilson, myself, and anybody else -- because we want to know how we can best serve you, how we can get the information to you.

We're developing web pages. We're developing so much. But we want to make sure that it's meeting your needs. Let us know.

So much of what's happened is again the result of the Coalition's efforts, your efforts with policymakers, practitioners. The communities are implementing the programs that we're identifying and they are reaping the rewards of healthier families, stronger children, safer streets. They're building coalitions.

Just recently the National Crime Prevention Council, with assistance from the International Center for the Prevention of Crime and the Bureau of Justice Assistance, released the booklet entitled "Six Safer Cities: Ride the Crest of the Crime Prevention Wave." Ladies and gentlemen, don't make it the wave. Make it the future, and an everlasting future that is not a wave that crests and ebbs and falls back, but continues on and on and on, so that crime prevention and raising healthy children and investing in their future is a fact of life from now on in this nation, and that we will look back on this time and think it impossible that this nation for so long forgot and neglected its children.

(Applause.)

GENERAL RENO: Since 1993, OJJDP has worked to implement a comprehensive strategy for serious violence and chronic juvenile offenders. As many of you may be aware, the comprehensive strategy provides a strategic planning framework for states and communities to increase their ability to effectively combat juvenile delinquency and victimization and provide for public safety.

Based on three decades of research on what causes juvenile delinquency and what works to address it, the strategy contemplates a continuum of activities, from the earliest of prevention activities to after-care programs that make a

difference. The comprehensive strategy emphasizes the following six key principles:

First, to strengthen families in their roles of providing governance and discipline and instilling sound values as their children's first and primary teachers. In that, there's more to it. It's making sure you've got sound child support enforcement programs in your community, that you make sure that the court invests in that child support program and doesn't put somebody over there as a special master who's not interested in it, doesn't care, and doesn't learn how to administer a court so it works. It means establishing model court programs.

If we can establish a drug court, which doesn't do much more than other courts did, but focuses responsibility and focuses resources, let's establish in every state in this nation model courts for child abuse and neglect.

First of all, we've got to use different words. Most Americans don't understand what you mean when you say dependency, a dependency court, or a dependency process. But they will understand if you say this is a court that deals with child abuse and neglect and does what is necessary to properly protect that child, or should do what is necessary.

We still have too many places in this nation where children are drifting through foster care, drift for months and years at a time, where there is not a thorough evaluation up front as to what is necessary to get that child returned home, and even if there is a thorough evaluation the resources are not committed to enable the family to come to grips with its problems so that the child can be returned home.

Let us start investing in that process and we will save so much money down the line. Let us develop model courts for children. If we can develop model courts for drug abuse, let's do it for children, for every child that is abused and neglected. We don't have to stand by and watch courts dealing with this critical problem not have the resources to do the job.

Secondly --

(Applause.)

GENERAL RENO: The second key point of the strategy is to support key social institutions, including schools, churches, and other community-based organizations, that can help children develop to their maximum potential.

Third is to promote prevention strategies and activities that reduce the impact of risk factors and enhance the influence of protective factors in the lives of youth at greatest risk of delinquency.

Fourth, to work with youth immediately and constructively when delinquent behavior first occurs and establish accountability. It's as important to hold a child accountable in a firm, fair, understanding way as it is to love a child and to nurture them.

I think back to my afternoons after school and during the summer time. I always thought that there were occasions when my mother punished me unjustly, but those limits that she set for me were so extraordinarily important. And there are too many children in this world who do not have the limits, are not held accountable, do not know what punishment means, and have no conscience. We've got to make sure that those children are given the tools to live and to thrive.

Fifth is to identify and control the small segment of serious violence and chronic juvenile offenders, which in certain situations might involve transferring some of these youth for criminal prosecution. But let's be creative and innovative. It might mean transferring to the adult court to have jurisdiction over the child long enough to be able to make some changes.

But what we should be doing is fashioning programs that hold that child accountable. Let them know we mean what we say in terms of punishment and give them the chance to grow again as strong, constructive human beings. We do too much on the cheap in the juvenile court system and it's time we start showing what can be done when we make a correct investment.

(Applause.)

GENERAL RENO: Sixth is to establish a system of graduated sanctions that responds to the treatment needs of each offender while protecting the community from risk of danger. But don't stop there.

Seventh is returning them -- my created seventh is returning them to the community with a chance of success, including alternate housing if it means returning them to the family that lives in the open air drug -- in the apartment over the open air drug market. It includes call-in services, 24-hour support services, a place to go when your life is falling apart again, a place to go to try to get to understand how to deal with a police officer who may be harassing you because he knows that you have a prior record and you think, how am I ever

going to get out from under this.

The strategy is working. I'm watching it begin to work in a number of cities -- San Diego, Jacksonville. I'm anxious to see the results of other cities. But I'd like to share with you just some thoughts about some deficits that I see in the system.

Clearly, one of the great issues that we have got to confront are people themselves. We talk about programs, we talk about process, we talk about courts, we talk about great concepts. But these are human beings that we are dealing with, wonderful human beings who for the most part want to be great and grand and contribute and be a part of a process and help others and make a difference in this world.

But somebody described to me a group of teenagers that I met with last Tuesday. One had collapsed because of abuse at home; one had walked home the week before and found his sister killed, face-down; one had been jumped by gangs. It is very, very hard for some children to grow up in America today, and we've got to give them all the support we can.

But to do that, we have got to remember that it's not going to be the program that changes their life. it's going to be people that change their lives. The way we talk to them, the way the police officer talks to them, the way the court talks to them, the way their minister talks to them -- we've got to learn to talk to children. I suspect most of the people in this room do a pretty darn good job.

But we're going to have to teach police officers how to do it. We're going to have to teach others how to do it, so that children know that they are counted, that they are important, that they're loved, that they're held accountable.

Wherever I go, I try to talk to young people who are in trouble or who have been in trouble. They tell me two things they want. One are programs after school and in the summer time and in the unsupervised hours. But two, somebody to talk to, somebody who understands how hard it is to grow up in America today, somebody that can give me a pat on the back when I need it, somebody that can give me a swift verbal kick when I need it.

We've got to teach those children how to talk to us. We've got to teach those children how to control their anger, how to solve their problems, how to resolve their conflicts without knives and guns and fists.

Why can't we institutionalize this training and make sure that every child in America is taught by teachers who know how to teach conflict resolution and

know how to teach problem-solving. I remember problem-solving as rate problems in math. I've discovered that the world is much more complicated than rate problems in math, but nobody taught me how to solve the problems of the heart and the mind and the soul, because that was done at home. But too often it's not done.

Why not have every graduating teacher be required to have course work in problem-solving and conflict resolution instruction? Why not require that every police officer who graduates from basic law enforcement academy have the same tools? Why not require that they learn together so that teachers and police officers become the two instruments of the development of trust that children need so desperately?

I'll probably be old and grey in Miami and sitting on my front porch rocking with my peacocks and enjoying the Florida sun six years from now. But if you invite me back, I bet I will be able to account for these six years by telling you once again: You've done it, and for that this nation is eternally grateful to you.

(Applause.)

MS. LANDRETH: Attorney General Reno said that she would be willing to stay a little bit longer and take a couple of questions before she has to get on.

GENERAL RENO: Yes. How do you do, sir? I went to that meeting after I was at the meeting you were at this morning, and I had the best -- we had about 15 chiefs who brought community activities from their community. They could only come if they brought an activist, and they talked about how they build trust, what was necessary. The community representatives were speaking first and they had some wonderfully good and very candid ideas.

QUESTION: Thank you. That fine lady, we just have a wonderful time whenever we meet. She's a dynamic person, and for somebody like myself she is my hero along with others, and she's my role model, and every time we meet we just have fun.

(Applause.)

GENERAL RENO: Now, what I did was I asked the question of everybody, and I'll ask it of you: If you were the -- if you don't want to ask me a question, answer this question: If you were Attorney General of the United States, what would you do to improve the lot of children in America?

QUESTION: Well, I've got one for you this time.

GENERAL RENO: All right.

(Laughter.)

QUESTION: In one of the sessions this morning we got the 1999 Youth Forum Report, and we had four -- we had five young people. Of course, you know Michael was the moderator, so he was included. But the four that were talking to us came from very diverse backgrounds. One of them was Vietnamese, which made him a minority. He was or he is a gay, which made him two, as he put it, two minorities, two times minority.

He wrote something in this thing that I want to read and then I want to ask you. It is just a very short, it is just a very short poem that he wrote. It says:

"First they came for blacks. But I'm not black, so I didn't speak up.

"Then next they oppressed women, denied them equal rights and pay. But I'm not a woman and so I didn't speak up.

"Then they came for Tinky-Winky, and Ellen. But I'm not gay, so I didn't speak up.

"Then I realized that when they come for one of us, they come for all of us."

The question I have to ask is, when we look at young folks today, the way they dress, baggy pants hanging beneath their buttocks -- and of course I'm sure we all in here are dealing with juveniles or for the most part, most people in here are dealing with juveniles, so we all I presume know where that culture derived. And if there is anyone in here who doesn't know where that dress and culture came from, it literally came out of prison. It came out of prison, with no belts and the pants are large, and so they just let it slip down their butt and so they just walked.

When we look at a young person coming down the street or a bunch of young people coming down the street, hip-hopping and their pants dragging, what do we automatically assume -- remember the question, it is "assume" -- of those young people that are approaching us when we are not within the same environment which they are at the time we are approaching them?

GENERAL RENO: I will tell you what I think when I'm approached by young men

and women like that in Washington. They usually have a skateboard with them and they're usually looking for someplace to use the skateboard and they've just been chased out of another place by police officers, and they look at me to help them and we try to figure out where they can go, which is usually to the Pentagon parking lot.

(Laughter.)

GENERAL RENO: But that goes back to what I was saying. We have got to develop -- and you can train people to learn how to talk to each other. You can. You should have heard these police officers in the program that I observed in Winston-Salem. They had learned so much from talking to these young people, who they might have generalized about if they hadn't otherwise had the opportunity to get to know them.

We can make a difference. We all do pretty outrageous things every now and then. Children are no exception. We've got to see beyond the baggy pants, because in almost every single one of those children is a human being who wants so to participate, to make a difference, to be kind, and who only lashes out because they know no better.

(Applause.)

QUESTION: Once again -- my name is Sarah Anderson. I'm a member of the Minnesota State Advisory Group and a member of the National Youth Network.

Again, like Michael did this morning, I'd like to commend you on always supporting youth in this country and their ability to speak out.

I would just like to ask for a couple, a short minute or two, for you to comment on the benefits -- you talked about learning to speak with youth and for youth learning to speak with the adults. But I'd like to have you comment on how it's beneficial for both groups to learn to listen to each other and what the active participation of young people can take in reforming the juvenile justice system and how you feel that's important.

GENERAL RENO: I think what is key to the reform of the juvenile justice system -- more kids tell me that have been in trouble, say they feel put down, they feel -- young black kids can tell me that they feel like they're picked on because they're black. White kids can tell me they feel like somebody did them wrong.

Everybody can have a complaint, sometimes a very valid complaint. Other times

they're not listening and it just steamrollers into a misunderstanding.

Frankly, I think we could all learn -- Congress could learn, the world could learn -- to listen and to listen with a listening ear and to hear. And if we did that -- you can't do it in a vacuum. You've got to look at those children's and young people's eyes, because they light up. They look at you dully for a moment and then you start getting them into something that's interesting and they begin to start to smile around the face. I start talking to them about turning over in my kayak and how am I ever going to learn to make my kayak roll, and they begin to say: Hmm, this isn't so bad.

It is so important, but I think it's important for us all. we have a vital responsibility to our elders. The Native American community has such a much better understanding and prizes its elders in such a wonderful way. But most of us have had the experience with an elderly parent who gets impatient, who is not the person we knew. How do we talk with them? It's possible. We've just got to learn to do it a lot better, all of us at all ages.

QUESTION: I'd like to first thank you for the leadership that you've given to me as a professional in juvenile justice. I started out about 30 years ago with Jack Calhoun as the director of our pretrial intervention program, and the Labor Department was interested in testing the effect of employment services in recidivism. Since that time and over that 30-year period, I again thank you for your direction as a professional.

But more importantly, this morning in sending my child to school I want to thank you again for what you have helped me with in teaching my child to make the right decision and do what is right in school today, so that when I get home this evening I'll see how his behavior was affected.

I want to address the issue of delinquency prevention as it relates to parenting and environment. These two factors I have found over the years, environment, regardless of how much we want a child to go back home, the physical environment the children have to go back to once they're in secure care or in our programs, in our custody, I believe to be very, very instrumental in maintaining their at-risk factors for further delinquent behavior and family deterioration.

So as we talk about delinquency prevention, we typically talk about programs and the client and the child as the primary client, and the dollars that we set aside somehow are not directed towards the parents or the environment. So what I'm suggesting is that all of our delinquency prevention strategies include our departments of housing and community development, zoning, so that the zoning

violation that exists in places where children and families are forced to live are changed as well.

So that's my suggestion for your comment on what would I do were I in your position.

GENERAL RENO: Let me give you two stories in response, which I think are the best way I can do it. I went to a school one day for a Fourth of July celebration. It was a summer school. The kids were at risk. I came. They had done models and written essays and drawn eagles and flags for the Fourth of July.

But one class had prepared a block, and I realized, looking out the window of the school, that it was probably the block outside the school. I looked at the block outside the school and there were mattresses and junk and filth on the parkway, lots were overgrown, houses were falling in, they were unpainted. The place was a mess.

The block that the kids had made with model houses, and they had put great care into it, was wonderful. There were trees planted and lawns and the parkway was clear. It was wonderful. Each child had put a three by five index card with their desire for their community: I want a place that's neat and clean --

QUESTION: Exactly.

GENERAL RENO: -- where nobody yells at me and there's no yelling and there's no gunfire. I want a place where I can walk in the grass in my bare feet and not have bottles and glass cut me.

It was so eloquent. It was just remarkable.

Then I got interested in the housing developments in Dade County, in the public housing developments. One had terrible problems. The toilet was falling in from the ceiling above. So I went there, and when I first went there people looked at me silently, no expression, no bitterness, no anger, just simply no expression. They knew who I was. The thought that I was the lady that collected child support made a lot of people happy, but I was totally unsuccessful at getting child support for them.

We worked hard on that housing project. We sued the county, which was the housing authority. We kept after them. We showed what could be done.

I took my mother through there and drove her through one afternoon. We were

in the car, and suddenly people started screeching and waving and hollering and running after me and coming up and giving me hugs. And I said to my mother: If you could have seen this place before and if you could see the comparison now, you would never believe it.

That's the best way I can answer your question.

QUESTION: Thank you.

(Applause.)

MS. LANDRETH: Thank you, Ms. Reno. I'm not pleased to introduce the Chair of the Coalition for Juvenile Justice, Linda Hayes.

MS. HAYES: Thank you. Thank you, Attorney General Janet Reno, for being here and speaking to us today. We are delighted that you are here.

It is the good fortune of all human beings to have fine moments in life and to really relish them. This afternoon, Attorney General, you have brought us one of those fine moments in life. We know that your time with us today is short and is coming quickly to a close. Yet, we would like to help you remember this time and the inspiration that you have brought to us today for our conference and for our future work.

We would like to relish this moment with you. So to honor you and show our deepest appreciation, it is indeed my privilege to give you the very first Meritorious Service Award from the Coalition for Juvenile Justice. Our Coalition for Juvenile Justice is proud to honor a law enforcement leader with such determination for preserving possibilities in our children.

By defending the core principle that supports the juvenile court, that children are fundamentally different from adults and thus more open to rehabilitation, you have demonstrated that youth who are in trouble today have the great potential to be the leaders of tomorrow.

At this time I'd like for you to stand with me. Our award to you reads: "Through the years you have always forged a path to protect our nation's children, families, and communities. Your vision and dedication serve as examples for all Americans."

God bless you, and our heartfelt thanks to you and thanks for being with us today.

(Applause and end of remarks at 1:58 p.m.)