DEPARTMENT OF JUSTICE

Remarks of U.S. Attorney General Janet Reno

NATIONAL ASSEMBLY

Drugs, Alcohol Abuse, and the Criminal Offender

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(4:05 p.m.)

P R O C E E D I N G S

MS. ROBINSON: Good afternoon. And it's great to be back with all of you again today.

It's my great privilege to introduce our next panel.

And I think we're very honored to have here with us three members of the President's cabinet to speak, and then to answer major questions about the important issues we've been discussing over these several days.

And I think they're being here together today is very significant and, in fact, historic.

It really demonstrates the personal and the departmental commitment each of them has made, bringing their perspectives to the same table, to rolling up their sleeves and to working together to address the problem of substance

abuse and crime.

I think it is a very tangible reflection of bringing public health and public safety together for good public policy.

Our first speaker is my boss, Attorney General Janet Reno.

For many years, she has advocated a more comprehensive treatment-based approach to drug involved criminal offenders.

Now it would be very easy for the Nation's chief law enforcement officer to focus only on enforcement and incarceration.

But from her own experience in Miami, helping establish the first drug court in the Nation, she knows that treatment, combined with the coercive power of the criminal justice system in fact can reduce recidivism.

And she has made this carrot and stick approach a central them of her leadership at the Justice Department.

So please join me in welcoming the Attorney General of the United States.

(Standing ovation.)

GENERAL RENO: Thank you, Laurie. And, General and Madam Secretary, it's an honor to be with you today.

But I think you will forgive me if I say it's a special honor to be with you all in this room, who work so hard, who care so much, who, I suspect, have suffered many disappointments and have come back to try again and make the program work better.

You're the people that give me the hope, the confidence and the faith to keep going, and I salute you.

It's easy to come to Washington and think about concepts and how it works. It's much harder to work in a prison, in

a neighborhood, in a treatment program, and have success and failures and frustrations and anger conflict, to interrupt, to sometimes confuse totally wonderful efforts.

But it is helpful to come to Washington and think about it, about what we can do to really make a difference.

I just want to run through some ideas.

First of all, no one person can do it by themselves.

The police chief isn't going to do it by himself, the judge, the treatment specialist.

We've all got to be in this together.

Secondly, we in Washington are going to be a big help with some dollars perhaps.

But the problems are going to be solved in communities across America by all of communities coming together -- the teacher, the physician, the treatment specialist, the parks and recreation person, and the patrol officer.

There's also going to be the loud-mouthed activist amongst you, who really makes a difference.

(Laughter.)

GENERAL RENO: Thirdly, we cannot forget alcohol.

(Applause.)

GENERAL RENO: I look at the statistics with respect to violence, particularly violence amongst youth, and we have got to focus on alcohol. To the extent it is necessary, we have got to make treatment alternatives specific to alcohol.

And we cannot forget it.

Fourth, we cannot forget mental health.

We have learned so much over these last 30 years.

(Applause.)

GENERAL RENO: And you see the frustration sometimes when you're confronted with a person that has mental and emotional problems that go with the alcoholism or the drug abuse problem.

We have got to learn better how to bring disciplines together to focus our best, best knowledge on this problem.

And then, with those thoughts in mind, let's begin with prevention, but prevention that approaches it from a comprehensive point of view, that recognizes you've got to start early, when that child is born, that you've got to be comprehensive in terms of continuums.

It does no good to have a wonderful prevention program for a six- to nine-year-old if you haven't given that child the foundation upon which to grow in a strong, constructive way.

Then let's focus on intervention. How do we do that? The child is truant.

The police officer picks him up, takes him back to the school.

The school calls home, asks mother to come get him.

She doesn't arrive, and they send him home on the bus.

Great futility.

But if we had had a community team of a community police officer, a counselor and a nurse or a public health specialist call on that family to find out why that child was truant when they took that child home, they may find a mother about to slip off into addiction.

And with proper intervention, with helpful care, we could make a difference.

It is outreach. It is looking at people as if they are people, and that they are worth fighting for and worth making a difference for.

It's letting that lady know that if she works with us, she's not going to lose her kids.

Her kids are going to be stronger and the better for it.

And then enforcement, smart enforcement.

Not just taking everybody up one street while the next street continues its operation, but working together, the Feds, the State and the local, analyzing who is the problem.

Putting all the arrest reports, the incident reports, the OD reports into one database.

Training expert analysts to understand the patterns and identify the drug organizations.

Identify the major organizations first and take them out, in a cooperative effort, between State, Federal and local police.

But understand as you take them out, you've got to have something else to put in, whether it be a Weed and Seed, a local comprehensive community program, but something to come in to fill the vacuum.

And we've got to make sure that we're prepared to deal with the little wannabes, with positive alternatives, positive support, community policing and community probation officers, who can make a difference and give that child something to say yes to for the future.

Laurie spoke of the carrot and stick approach.

It's got to be a firm approach.

And one of the things that has happened in our society is that as other institutions have failed, our courts have become totally overwhelmed -- family, school, the neighborhood -- and the court ends up with the problem after it's protracted and way down the line.

The court has so many cases that it can't begin to deal with each one.

And if it can, by superhuman effort, it doesn't begin to have the resources too often to match the caseload.

Courts can work in this country. Courts can make a tremendous difference if we give them caseloads that they can manage, so that they know these people by name and can treat them like human beings rather than a number, and if they know that there are adequate treatment resources for the judges to manage them and to use them correctly.

We have a chance in this Nation to make our courts a beacon of hope rather than a

sometime dropping off place for where everyone else has failed.

We can make that difference if we organize our communities right and say, You are not sending me any more cases because I don't have the resources that can manage it, and holding firm on saying no.

We can really make a difference if we use our resources rightly.

And then somebody says, Well, where are they going?

I say, Give me time to deal with these, with the carrot and stick approach, with resources or punishment as the situation arises, but give me time and I will save you money in terms of a revolving door.

But one of the things that we've got to come to grips with is that 400,000 to 500,000 people are coming back from State and Federal prisons each year for the next five years.

This is a golden opportunity for us to stem the tide of drugs and to end the influence of drugs and alcohol on so much of what we see, to end the culture of violence in this country.

And our abilities as a civilized nation are going to be put to the test.

I've got this idea, and I think Jeremy Travis is the one that really instituted it.

What happens when you have somebody sentenced to five years?

Immediately he's transferred to the reentry court.

He is assigned to a community advocate who will follow his progress in prison.

There will be aptitude tests taken.

Plans will be made in prison for job training and placement and life skills efforts.

There will be connection with the community, connection with children if there are children, and a child support provision if there are prison industries.

But that person will come back to the community early if he complies with the terms of the reentry program, but under the supervision of a judge, before whom he will have to report regularly until he has established the pattern of compliance.

And then he will have follow-up and after-care and advocates who will advocate for his cause and not put him down, but let him know that if he commits further crime,

that if he begins to test positive again, he's going back to prison.

Ladies and gentlemen, sometimes the problem seems overwhelming.

But I watched what this Nation has done in these last several years.

You, in your communities, you can make such a difference.

Take back what you learn from this conference.

Know that you're on the right track.

Come together in your communities.

And I think we can end this epidemic of drugs, end what alcohol has done to too many, and make this Nation a stronger, safer place.

And, most of all, give our children a future.

Thank you for all you do.

You are but little lower than the angels.

(Whereupon, at 4:15 p.m., the Attorney

General concluded her remarks.)