



SAFE FROM THE START SEMINAR

SPEECH GIVEN BY

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ATTORNEY GENERAL

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P R O C E E D I N G S

MS. RENO: Thank you, Dr. Kanter. Thank you and the Alliance for the dedication and commitment that you've put into these programs all throughout the country. None of it would be possible without your leadership. And I salute you and thank you.

To the Children's Services Council, Conner Foundation, Health Care of the Trauma Foundation and the School District of Palm Beach County, thank you all for making this day possible. And thank you for what you do for children.

We're here to ask the question, how do we keep our children safe? How do we keep them from being violent? How do we give them a future, a strong and positive future? I would like to discuss six principals. First of all, if we're going to do this, it must be done community by community. Washington doesn't know what the situation is in a community fifteen hundred miles away. That community understands its needs and resources and it knows its people. It can plan far better than anybody else what it needs to address the problem of children. And Palm Beach County has taken the lead from the day it formed the Children Services Council and made a commitment of ad

valorem tax dollars.

Children are our most precious possession. Palm Beach County understands what's needed in terms of developing a plan and putting building blocks together. And as I saw here today, Palm Beach County knows that one key to community planning is trust the people, listen to the people. When you plan and listen to young people as part of it, they have wisdom, strength and courage, and they have so much to say.

The second principal is one that I can talk about with more assurance than I could when I first went to Washington because our ability to gather data to inform and be informative is far better than ever before. We have seen, all of us, efforts in which public policy has been designed without really looking at the data. Looking at the areas of the county where there is a high incident of child abuse, looking at our patterns, determining whether this is drug gang operated. Solving -- using that data to solve crimes. But we have got to, if we're going to address the issue of children in a comprehensive way, recognize that we are in a new age, that we can gather great amounts of information concerning children at risk. And as we plan we must make sure we do it based on solid information.

The next principal is the prosecutor can't do it by herself; the police officer can't do it by himself; the teacher can't do it by himself. No one professional will address the issue of our children's issue by itself. It will take all disciplines. It will take the public and private sector. It will take the criminal justice professional and the public health professional working together to reweave the fabric of community and children throughout America. It will take universities and schools. It will take the old lady who has lived behind bars because she's afraid of what's going on outside; who is befriended by the community police officer who gives her the feeling that their community is safe so she comes down to the community center to give the community police officer a piece of her mind and in the process anybody else that cares to listen. But she's lived there all that time and she knows it like the back of her hand and she must be

listened to.

The fourth principal is an early investment of dollars, time, love and care. We try to do it on the cheap. We try to make the investment a little bit at a time and find us making tremendous investments in remedial investments as late as the community college. We need to do our affirmative action up front. The first three years of life are the most informative. That's when the concept of reward and punishment is developed. That's when the concept of conscience is developed. We have got to be prepared in that time to address those issues. If we're going to be prepared that means we've got to make investments then; investments in parenting; investments in education; investments in medical care. And it will save us a lot of dollars down the road.

The fifth principal is don't let anybody tell you you can't make a difference for children just because you don't have any money. If we take the resources of this state and organize those more effectively, eliminate duplication and leverage our resources together, we can do so much more than we are doing. There are doctors willing to volunteer the kind of match the doctor with the clinic or the patient with the doctor who's three bus transfers across town or down to another county is sometimes more difficult. Where there is a will there is a way. And Palm Beach County, frankly, probably takes the lead in this effort because of its Children's Service Council.

The final principal, final sixth principal is make sure that what you deliver is comprehensive, coherent and continuous. The single biggest failing I have found in delivering services for children is that everybody has their own little project and they don't see the whole picture. They develop great early intervention programs but they have no programs for children K through sixth grade. Or they have wonderful programs from 0 to 12, but nothing for teenagers. And then they turn around and say all those programs failed because these teenagers are committing a high incidents of violence. Whereas, if we had the continuity in programming we would have so much more.

I would like to spend time with you because I think you're going to be perhaps talking about specific projects, best practices, looking at the whole, and urging you to make sure that you enhance the already good job you're doing in Palm Beach County in terms of making sure that continuum is whole.

Now, if you can't feel something else, don't worry, children are some of the toughest little critters I ever saw in my life. Half a fighting chance they can make a world of difference. But try to get most of the pieces in. What are the building blocks? They're simple. Strong, healthy, good and willing parents is the first building block. That type of parent is the best caregiver, the best educator, the best policeman for their child of anybody around. The first years really do last forever. And that parent can make the difference for that child forever.

In terms of developing parenting skills, we've got to teach parents how to do it. I think being a parent is the single most difficult thing I've ever known to do. That includes being Attorney General of the United States in the last eight years. But in 1984 a friend died leaving me legal guardian of her 15-year-old twins. The girl was in love. I learned an awful lot about raising children. It takes hard work, love, intelligence and an awful lot of luck. But it is one of the most rewarding experiences in the world. To put that young lady on the plane for college and then go see her graduate cum laude three years later and on both occasions have her throw her arms around my neck, say thank you, I couldn't have done it without you, there is no comparison in terms of what you have achieved.

But it's difficult. And we must support home visitation programs that bring skilled professionals into homes and offer new families the assistance they need. Programs that teach parenting skills in a comprehensive way. You can't teach parenting skills in two hours, but to do it in a comprehensive way yields results. Incidents of child abuse decrease and studies report up to 60 percent increase in constructive behavior on children served.

I'm proud to tell you we will begin a new parent initiative

in Washington DC early next year. Every parent of every baby born in the District soon will receive a package at the hospital including coupons for free home nurse visitation; videos on child care and early literacy; a parent resource guide; children's passport; blood report of inoculations and stored current photos to help recover abducted children; a guide to the Department's new parenting web site and books to promote early literacy. I hope this initiative will be replicated across the country.

But we have got to, and it is clear after listening to young people in the session just past, talk about how to prevent suicide. Adults have got to learn how to talk to children and how to talk to young people as if they were adults, only a little bit younger. As if they had good ideas. As if they had some wisdom, which they have in abundance.

They have got to learn how to supervise them and to set limits. This is a mysterious world for a child growing up. It's very difficult to grow up in this country. And children want limits and they want guidance, though they sometimes rebel.

The second thing we need after know-how in terms of parenting is the time to parent, to love, the time to be patient, the time to instruct, the time to read to your child. I can still hear it now, winking, blinking and nod, one night they are lost in a wooden shoe over a river and over a sea of doom. And I can hear my mother's voice. That time taken has lasted down almost 62 years of time. We need the time to talk to our children and tell them stories and tell them what their grandmothers and grandfathers were like.

Ladies and gentlemen, if we can send a person to the moon, if we can develop the internet, we ought to be able to develop work places with cybertechnology and common sense that give both parents quality time with their children on a regular basis. A work place that puts family first, that gives parents time to go to their children's schools. If there are any educators here, if they are like the

educators in Dade County when I asked them they said my greatest problem is I can't get parents to the school. And I thought back to the days of PTA when parents were all over the school. I wish some of them would have gone home then.

You can't do it just by waving a magic wand. It takes teamwork in a workplace where everyone works together to address each need and develops a plan for which they are all responsible for the output and the plan is developed as a consensus.

The third thing for parents is we have got to eliminate violence from the home. The child who watches his father beat his mother comes to accept violence as a way of life. The child who is abused by the live-in boyfriend comes to accept it and is further beaten down and scarred for life by it unless we take action. We have come long ways in Florida in terms of domestic violence from when I first started as a prosecutor. We have seen great reforms. We have seen domestic violence start to come down in this country in a perceptible fashion. But it is still far too high. We have got to change the culture of this nation, the culture that has been developed over probably hundreds of years to let people know that we won't tolerate it and we can't wait until it happens to do that.

Every doctor, every pediatrician, ObGyn, family doctor, general -- GP should have material in his or her office that talks about domestic violence and where do you go and what you do and where is the nearest shelter, and who do you call, just as they have for what you do about this and that and the other traditional medical problem. It is a public health problem as much as it is a criminal justice problem. The faith community should start speaking from the pulpit about it. I have been to a bunch of churches and a bunch of temples and I've never heard anybody say you shouldn't beat your wife. It might help.

We must intervene in terms of victims. The child who observes should have counseling immediately with follow through. Not just a dab here and a dab there, but a comprehensive effort to make a difference.

The next thing we should have is healthy parents. Up until 1988 no medical school in this country had coursework in addiction knowledge. I would like to make sure this state takes the lead in assuring that we have done the latest research on how best to treat, not just drug abuse, but alcohol abuse as well. Not just for the person living in an intercity strung out on crack, but the affluent mother living in the suburbs strung out on alcohol or something else. We have got to address it across the board because too many lives are being destroyed prematurely because of a parent's addiction to substance.

And we must make sure -- we must make sure that we have mental health services available for all Floridians and all Americans. I worked at the psychiatric institute at Jackson Memorial Hospital when I was about 19 years old as a swing person for social worker's who were on vacation. I interviewed indigent patients. We were coming out from the dark ages then, but in these 50 years we have come so far but we are not utilizing it as we should. We're not using the great lessons learned, because we can't get a child across town to a psychiatrist who can provide such wonderful support and treatment. We have got to make sure that parent and child both have the mental health insurances they need to cope with the rigors of this world.

The next key, and this is an important key because we're saying we've already thought of mental health in Palm Beach County, we've thought of this, we thought of that. I mean people are thinking, thinking about child support, but are you giving it the priority it needs? Because I can tell you I got calls from a lady at 7 o'clock on a Sunday night saying you haven't gotten me my child support yet and I'm about to be kicked out of my apartment and I've got two children and it's all your fault. Then she'd start crying and then get mad at me again. The next morning she'd call at ten o'clock and said she had gotten her mail, the check just came, thank you very much. That check meant all the world to her ability to cope. And we can laugh about it but it is extraordinarily important as witnessed the lady who broke through the rope lines. The president and I were dedicating a church in South Carolina, one that replaced a

church burnt by arson. She said, Janet, I haven't seen you since Miami. You got me child support. And these are the two you got me child support for. Both grown men doing well. It is rewarding, but it is frustrating and it is a part of the building block that is absolutely critical.

There are beautiful lines from the book of Malachias from the last verse of the Old Testament. The whole (inaudible) before the coming of great and dreadful day, and he shall return the heart of the fathers to the children and the children's hearts to the fathers, lest I come and strike the earth with a curse. Let us, as we build for the future for American children, return the parents' hearts to the children and the children's heart to their fathers and mothers.

The next thing, we spend an awful lot of money on expenditure, cursory medical care for children, for teenagers or for adults who didn't get primary care early on. Clearly with CHIP, with other programs we ought to make sure that every child in America has appropriate preventative medical care and that no child should be missed in this effort. If you look at this great huge county geographically in size, very large population wise grown, we must make sure that there is no nook or cranny that is missed in insuring health care. But what can we do in terms of prevention?

Relatively new construction, new housing stock, but what have we done about lead? And what have we done about lead with housing for small children? Have we looked at that? Because we can now see the direct connection between lead poisoning and behavioral problems down the road. And mental health services will become as important as a school counselor who knows how to speak to kids, how to talk with them all make a difference. But then you know what happens? You get kicked out of your house because they're building a road through the house and you don't know where to go, and you're out of a job, and you can't get into public housing. And what do you do? And in this nation people should not be found sleeping in cars. We ought to be able to provide at least clean, decent, simple housing for everyone. And we can do it. Most Habitat for Humanity efforts are buildings

here or complexes here or something here. What about taking a whole neighborhood, as I saw Jackson, Mississippi do, and compliment Habitat's construction with municipal services and police services that began to rebuild a comprehensive neighborhood. Look at it in comprehensive terms. You say what does this have to do with violence? The child that is supervised, that is cared for, that is housed, that has basic health care is going to be the strong child who can withstand violence.

But then comes education. First of all, we should get rid of the world child care because we should be substituting something else in terms of the substance; educare. If 50 percent of all learned from responses are learned from the first year of life, then we should have some of our best teachers if they can't be parents in those first years. We should make sure that in our whole public school system something is done about salaries. Something is wrong with the nation that pays its football players in the six digits and it's paying its school teacher what we pay them. We've got to tell teachers just how much we appreciate them, instead of putting another bureaucratic form on top of another bureaucratic form that they have to fill out. Let us free their time to teach. And let us train our children to resolve conflicts, to problem solve, to communicate, to listen, so that we do not have the discipline problems that so take up teacher's time.

But what about after school programs? We can make a time of magic what is now a time of fear for community children. The Carnegie Foundation in its marvelous report on teen years says that your children are more alone and unsupervised than at any time in our history. If we can relatively inexpensively make sure that every child in America is properly supervised after school rather than leave them on the streets at risk to the world.

Let us make sure that we focus on preparing our young people for the future. They drop out of school. They drop out of school because they sometimes don't see any relevance to their life. But you show them that if they stay in school they will graduate in the 12th grade with the skill that will enable them to earn a living. And give

them basic elementary skills that can go on to other skills that they need to develop and they're going to stay in far more than they do today. And you say but I don't have to teach the person who wants to be a college professor a basic skill. How many people do you know that were English majors that couldn't find a job so they sat on the sidelines for three or four years. Let's give them a skill that they can use while they figure out what they're going to do when they grow up. I need to figure that out too.

We've got to make sure that we use mentors in these after school programs. That we remember that the truant is the perspective burglar, the truant is the perspective dropout. And behind the door at home may be the mother who is about to slide into an addiction that we can pull her back from if we have a team of police officers, counselors and others willing to intervene and make a difference.

But then we've got to address the issue of safety. Safety through community police, trust in police builds confidence in government. The police officer is the human face of government that more people see probably than anybody else. How that person talks to the people he or she serves, the body language, the manner, the address, is going to form a person's opinion of government. That person has tremendous power in his or her hands and we must make sure that it is exercised clearly, fairly because children rebel and become violent when they feel like they have not been fairly treated.

But what does that officer do when he sees two children, same situation, one having a strong family structure at home, one having no family structure at home. He takes one home and works it out with the parent, if it's a minor crime. He takes the other to central intake because there is no one to go to. That's not that child's fault. How do we level the playing field for that child? How do we level the playing field when it comes to determine who shall be detained and secured in detention at the detention center and who shall be detained at home detention? Again, we've got to level the playing field for that child so that he will feel that he is being treated fairly.

And the same is true with the transfer to adult courts. I think one step that we can take to make a profound difference is making sure every police officer in this county is trained on how to talk to young minority males who feel like there is racial profiling, even if there is not racial profiling, who feel like they're being singled out. Most police officers want so to do a good job and do an excellent job for all the people they serve, not just some. We've got to make sure we understand what it's like to walk in the shoes of other people. And I think we can train and teach people to talk to each other with better understanding and greater respect. And what you will find is what I have seen, the police officer comes from the auditor figure to become the child's mentor in person that he or she can go to to talk out their problem. In short, police should become problem solvers as well as peacemakers.

Guns. We have got to make sure that there are child safety locks required on every gun around every child in America. And I think we've got to make sure nobody possesses a gun unless they know how to safely and lawfully use it, and that means the ability and willingness to do so. And then if they are apprehended with guns, they should be treated accordingly. We've got to make sure that every child in America, when a police officer finds them and that the problem is a drug problem, that they get treatment. Not just a slap on the wrist, but real treatment, comprehensive follow up. That's treatment. You can't treat a drug problem with a slap dab two week training program or something like that, you're going to treat it by comprehensive counseling with follow up on a regular basis and rebuilding of that child's life. And you can do it through drug corps and other programs that use the care and (inaudible) approach.

Unless you think it's not probable to build model juvenile courts. For example, let me begin by telling you that in 1978 -- '87 we couldn't figure out what to do about first offenders charged with possession of a small amount of crack. The system was totally overloaded. Five or six of us got together and developed the drug corps. People got interested in it. We had it evaluated. It seemed to be working. There are now over 400 in this country and more are being asked for because they work. Each one of you can

make a difference if you continue to pursue what you believe to be right. And I have the dream of model delinquency corps that have case loads small enough for the judge to know who he is working with. With resources sufficient to match the needs of that child that have to be addressed before we get that child back on the right foot. And with time for judges to address the needs over a year's period, not just 90 days. Those programs can work and courts can become a powerful force.

But what about the child getting out of a state training school and going back to the apartment over the open-air drug market where they got into trouble in the first place? We've got to develop reentry programs that send that child back to alternative housing with proper supervision and a good chance at education, free and away from the drug dealers who try to lure him back in.

People have asked me, why do you pursue public service and all you do is get cussed at and beaten around the ears? These last eight years have been the most extraordinary opportunity that any lawyer could have to try to use the law the right way to make America safer and freer and healthier and have a stronger, better future. I have watched the children in action. They want to serve. I suspect most people in this room are engaged in some form or expect to be in some form of public service. I thank you because of your education, because of the dedication of young people, and countless people I have met around this country who care, who are reaching out to help others, who make a difference through service in this historic time for our nation.

I can stand here today and tell you I have never been so proud of a nation and never had such confidence in the future as I have after being able to watch communities and the people of America in those communities in action in these last eight years. I salute you and I thank you from the bottom of my heart.