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The White House

Office of the Press Secretary

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Remarks by the President on Criminal Justice Reform

4:15 P.M. EST

THE PRESIDENT: Well, good afternoon, everybody. It is good to be in Newark. (Applause.) Let me, first of all, thank your chancellor, Nancy Cantor, for hosting us here today. Where's Nancy? (Applause.) There she is. Your Mayor, Ras Baraka, is here. (Applause.) Your Senator, Cory Booker, is in the house. (Applause.) Where did Cory go? There he is, right here. Your Congressman, Donald Payne, Jr. (Applause.)

Over the course of this year, I've been talking to people all across the country about reforming our criminal justice system to be fairer, to be smarter, to be more effective. I've met with police chiefs and beat cops. I've met with prisoners, corrections officers. I've met with families of fallen police officers and families of children who were killed by gun violence. I've met with men and women battling drug abuse, and rehab coaches, and folks working on new solutions for treatment.

And I have to tell you that from all these conversations, I have, at times, despaired about the magnitude of the problem. I've asked myself, how do we break the cycle that has young children somehow on that pipeline where they end up incarcerated? And yet, what's interesting is I've been really hopeful, as well, during the course of this year because what I've seen is that there are people across the board -- folks who work inside the criminal justice system, folks who are affected by the criminal justice system -- who are saying, there's got to be a better way to do this, and are not just asking questions about how we make the system smarter and more effective but are also showing us how it's done and are actually implementing it.

This afternoon, I spent I've spent with the Mayor and Senator Booker, getting a firsthand look at how Newark is helping to lead the way. And as a partner in our My Brother's Keeper Initiative, the Mayor and the Senator and Congressman and others are working in a public-private partnership to focus on disrupting the pipeline from underfunded schools to overcrowded jails. Here in Newark, when it comes to rehabilitating prisoners and reintegrating former inmates into society, you've got organizations that are doing extraordinary work. And that's why I wanted to focus here today, because places like Integrity House, the work that's being done in our federal ReNew program through the District Court and our U.S. Attorneys Office -- they are accomplishing extraordinary things. And when you meet folks who are taking that step to break addiction and overcome great odds, and you see what they've already accomplished and what more they're going to accomplish in the future, you cannot help but feel hopeful about the future.

Now, right now, there are 2.2 million Americans behind bars -- 2.2 million. We incarcerate people at a rate that is unequalled around the world. We account for 5 percent of the world's population, 25

percent of its inmates. They are disproportionately black and Latino. As one of Cory's Republican colleagues, John Cornyn from Texas -- no bleeding-heart liberal here -- likes to point out, almost all these individuals will eventually be released. More than 600,000 inmates are released each year. Around 70 million Americans have some sort of criminal record -- 70 million. That's almost one in five of us. Almost one in three Americans of working age.

Now, a lot of time, that record disqualifies you from being a full participant in our society -- even if you've already paid your debt to society. It means millions of Americans have difficulty even getting their foot in the door to try to get a job much less actually hang on to that job. That's bad for not only those individuals, it's bad for our economy. It's bad for the communities that desperately need more role models who are gainfully employed. So we've got to make sure Americans who've paid their debt to society can earn their second chance.

And as I said before, we spent the day seeing people who are doing just that -- counselors; parole officers; small business owners who are giving folks a second chance; federal judges who are not only being smart about sentencing but are also helping, to the extent that they're going into their own pockets, just to help somebody who is transitioning out get the right clothes for a job interview.

I've spoken to men and women who are part of programs like NJ-STEP here at Rutgers-Newark. You're giving prisoners a chance to start taking college courses before their release so that they can re-enter society with marketable skills.

And I've had a chance, as I said, to speak with folks who are working hard to get back on track. And I just want to highlight a couple of them -- I hope you guys aren't embarrassed, if you're here, because I'm really proud of what you're doing.

Daryl Rose was arrested for a drug-related abuse charge in 2013, served six months in prison. Today he's a member of Integrity House -- that's a treatment center that I visited earlier this afternoon -- determined to become a productive citizen. And he's getting the counseling and support that he needs to achieve his goals. And Daryl's family is with him every step of the way. So we're very proud of Daryl. (Applause.) I don't know if Daryl is here. Are you here, Daryl?

Ashley Sinclair. Ashley is here today -- I know that. Where's Ashley? Come on -- there you are. Stand up, Ashley. (Applause.) Ashley spent most of her 21 years on the streets, and involved in crime. Eventually, she decided she wanted something better for herself, joined a program called Project HOPE, impressed everybody with her work ethic. She earned a place in the Newark Department of Sanitation. And today, instead of getting into trouble on the streets, she's earning a paycheck cleaning up those streets. So we are proud of Ashley. (Applause.)

We want more success stories like these. It's good for everybody. It means less crime. It means less

recidivism. It means less money spent on incarceration. It means less wasted taxpayer money. It means police aren't having to arrest the same folks over and over. It means young people are seeing in their community people who are working. That, in turn, creates economies in those communities that are legal and not just illegal, which creates redevelopment for everybody. And now, suddenly businesses have more customers, which means they're hiring more, and you get a virtuous cycle.

That's why today, we're taking two new actions to create more success stories like this. These are actions that I can take as President through my executive authorities.

Number one, my administration is announcing new grants to help returning citizens seize that second chance through education and job training and housing and legal help and children's services. (Applause.) Five cities are announcing commitments of their own to help folks re-entering society to train for high-tech jobs. And we're going to be partnering with them and others to try to make sure that the good work that we saw here today we can start expanding. All right, so that's point number one, putting some more money in the system.

Let me say it's nowhere near what we need, but it gives us more ability to create more programs that serve as an example of best practices so it can be duplicated around the country. That's point number one.

Point number two, I'm taking action to "ban the box" -- (applause) -- for the most competitive jobs at federal agencies.

Now, the federal government is a big employer, as you know, and like a lot of big employers, on many job applications there's a box that asks if you have a criminal record. If you answer yes, then a lot of times you're not getting a call back. We're going to do our part in changing this. The federal government, I believe, should not use criminal history to screen out applicants before we even look at their qualifications. We can't dismiss people out of hand simply because of a mistake that they made in the past.

And I have to say that, although this is something that I can do on an executive basis, this is an area where Cory Booker, working with one of his Republican colleagues, Ron Johnson, are working to try to pass federal legislation -- a ban-the-box bill that's working its way through the Senate. I believe Congress should pass legislation that builds on today's announcement. And keep in mind some really good, really successful companies are already doing this. Walmart, Target, Koch Industries, Home Depot -- they've already taken action to ban the box on their own. And 19 states have done the same.

So my hope is, is that with the federal government also taking action, us getting legislation passed -- this becomes a basic principle across our society. It is relevant to find out whether somebody has a

criminal record. We're not suggesting ignore it. What we are suggesting is, when it comes to the application, give folks a chance to get through the door. (Applause.) Give them a chance to get in there so that they can make their case.

Now, this is not just the only step that we can take. Just two weeks ago, Cory, other Democrats and Republicans moved through the Senate a bipartisan criminal justice reform bill. This is a bill that would reduce mandatory minimums for non-violent offenders. It would invest in law enforcement. It would reward prisoners with time off if they complete programs that make it less likely that they will commit crimes in the future. And there's a similar bill working its way through the House.

I urgently encourage both the Senate and the House to pass these bills. It will not completely change the system overnight, but it will lock in some basic principles that we understand are going to make us a fairer and safer society over the long term. And I am very proud of the work that those legislators are doing. I'm especially proud because it's not typical that Democrats and Republicans get together -- (laughter) -- on useful legislation -- let's face it. But this is an area where we've seen some really strong bipartisan work, and I'm very encouraged by that.

There are so many Americans who desperately want to earn a second chance. I already mentioned Daryl and Ashley. I'm going to call out one other person -- Dquan Rosario. Where's Dquan? He's looking very sharp in his suit today. (Applause.) Now, Dquan was arrested for his first drug charge when he was 17. At 27 he received a 10-year federal sentence for drug distribution. In his own words, when he got out he was homeless, had no real legitimate employment history. And it would be easy to write Dquan off. More importantly, it would have been easy for Dquan to write himself off -- or at least to say, there's nothing else I know, this is the path I have to follow -- going back to the drug trade that, unfortunately, he had been raised in.

But something happened inside of Dquan, so he had a motivation to say, I'm going to change -- which is really hard to do at 37. It's even harder to do if you've been through a decade or more of prison. So he got involved with a Justice Department program called ReNew. The federal District Court judge who presides over this program -- Madeleine, stand up. I just want to give her credit. (Applause.) The probation officer who worked with him, Kevin, who helps run this program. (Applause.) This isn't in my formal remarks, but I just talked to them. I just think everybody needs to understand what happened here.

So with the help of our U.S. Attorney, Paul Fishman -- right here. Paul, stand up -- (applause) -- the Justice Department, the federal District Court judge, the probation officer -- they all set up a system in which Dquan has a community encouraging him to move forward. If he doesn't have the right suit for a job application, they're helping him do that. If he doesn't have enough money to eat that week, they're seeing if they can scrape something together. If he's interested in going back to school, what

happened was, is that these folks helped to scrape together school fees for him, including through the Second Chance dollars that we generate through the Justice Department.

And as Dquan just told me, he said, look, I'm not saying that everything is easy; you've got to want it yourself. But because of the investment of these people who are calling him and bringing him in every couple weeks, and Kevin, his probation officer, is problem-solving with him on an ongoing basis -- Dquan found a job in medical transportation. Then he pursued his EMT certification. Today, he is an EMT in Essex County. (Applause.) And instead of peddling drugs that are destroying lives, he's saving lives. He's making the community better.

And I just want to highlight this story because here you've got a situation where officers of the court, judges, probation officers, U.S. attorneys, pastors, community leaders, business leaders are all coming together saying, what's the problem we're trying to solve here? The problem we're trying to solve is not just to keep on catching people and putting them back in jail. The problem we're trying to solve here is giving people a foundation through which they can then become productive citizens. And the judge was mentioning how when she saw Dquan or some of the other folks who have gone through this program graduate, that's the best thing that happens to her as a judge -- because she understands that's the goal.

The goal is to prevent crime. The goal is to make sure that folks are fairly punished when they break the law. But the ultimate goal is to make sure that folks are law-abiding, self-sufficient, good citizens. And everything we do should be designed towards that goal. (Applause.) And if we're doing a good job there, then crime will go down and it will stay down.

That's our goal -- where everybody has a chance to contribute. And that's what these outstanding folks that I met with here today are committed to. That's what Mayor Baraka and Cory Booker and Don Payne, Jr. and others are committed to. That's what I'm committed to. This is not easy. And as I've said before, we can't have the criminal justice system carrying the entire load of solving all of society's ills.


We're a lot better off if we catch Dquan when he's 5, or 12, or 18, than when he's 37. We're a lot better off if we're investing in economic development and housing and jobs and adequate funding for schools, and making college more affordable on the front end. But Dquan's story, like the stories that so many people in this auditorium can tell, is that it's not too late. There are people who have gone through tough times, they've made mistakes. But with a little bit of help, they can get on the right path. (Applause.)


And that's what we have to invest in. That's what we have to believe. That's what we have to promote. That's why I'm so proud of what Newark is doing, and that's what I hope everybody learns.


Thank you very much, everybody. God bless you. God bless the United States of America. Thank you.

END
4:37 P.M. EST

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