

Remarks by the Honorable Eugene Hamilton

November 4, 2009

Juvenile Justice Roundtable

Thank you all for coming today to New Beginnings!

As Liz mentioned, I served as the Chair of the Mayor's Blue Ribbon Commission on Youth Safety and Juvenile Justice Reform, which issued its report in 2001.

I had the privilege of leading an effort to study juvenile justice reform for the District of Columbia.

In 2000, then Mayor Anthony Williams asked me to chair the Blue Ribbon Commission, which consisted of 20 talented people and outstanding staff, and the Commission members represented—in various ways and from divergent perspectives—the broad concerns and mixed interests of this community. We worked together for about a year and a half.

The Mayor asked the Commission to offer policy recommendations.

More specifically, we were to: assess delinquency prevention strategies and explore model programs, identify strengths and weaknesses in rehabilitative and supportive services and programs, explore the research on youth violence and substance abuse, examine how our current

institutions were working, and develop strategies for serving children and youth in their neighborhoods and communities.

The Mayor issued an explicit call for the Commission to formulate a vision and seamless network of youth service ideals that “treat children as children.” This is an approach with which I fully agreed, and I was happy to devote time to these critical issues.

The Commission did a comprehensive study of the delinquency system in the District of Columbia, examined the research, and looked at promising and effective approaches from around the country.

Let me say, parenthetically, that the Commission, with its broad expertise and diversity of viewpoints, worked hard and worked successfully to find common ground, to find compromises and nuanced approaches that balanced the concerns expressed from every conceivable side of these issues.

I would like to recognize the work of the Late Chuck Ruff who worked so hard and with great dedication as a member of the Commission.

The Commission issued a lengthy report in November, 2001 with many detailed recommendations, which I believe constituted a solid “blueprint” for effective reform of the juvenile justice system in the District of Columbia. This “blueprint” was based on research and study, as well as a broad, balanced, and representative inquiry.

I should note that many of the Commission's recommendations were incorporated into a legislative proposal—the “Blue Ribbon Juvenile Justice and Youth Rehabilitation Act of 2004”—sections of which were passed into law by the D.C. Council, including the requirement to close Oak Hill and replace it with a smaller, rehabilitative facility modeled after the approach implemented in the State of Missouri, which was entirely consistent with the findings and recommendations of the Commission.

It is also noted that in the past 4 years there has been dramatic and significant progress towards implementing many of the recommendations the Blue Ribbon Commission.

Thank you to those of you here today who participated in the effort to inform the commission!

As we all know, the District of Columbia closed Oak Hill this year and replaced it with a state of the art facility, this facility where we are today – New Beginnings -- with a program that is based on the rehabilitative approach developed in Missouri.

As a result, New Beginnings no longer holds low risk offenders.

In the past 4 years the District has gradually moved towards expanding its range of community based programs, including implementing evidence based programs and best practices developed by organizations like the Annie E. Casey Foundation.

This progress has begun to garner very positive attention, with DYRS being recognized by Harvard's Kennedy School as one of the top 50 most innovative government programs in the country, and Plaintiffs' Counsel in the Jerry M. lawsuit indicating that they are seeing significant progress.

This is a far cry from 5 years ago, when the Youth Services Administration was on the verge of being placed into Court receivership.

I am so pleased to be here today – almost 10 years after the BRC first formed – to discuss with community members and policymakers ideas for the next 10 years.

And I would like to thank all you for your participation on today's roundtable and to especially thank the youth and parents who are directly affected by the justice system for participating in these discussions.

I look forward to hearing your recommendations for reform over the next 10 years. Thank you!