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DELLUMS COMMISSION CALLS FOR REDUCING THE NUMBER OF MINORITY YOUTHS TRIED AS ADULTS

Symposium Cites Negative Impact of Treating Juveniles as Adults in the Courts

LOS ANGELES - The Dellums Commission, headed by former Oakland Congressman Ronald V. Dellums, is calling on national and state criminal justice officials to reform practices and policies responsible for increasing the number of minority youths tried as adults in courtrooms across the country.

At a symposium held jointly with the National Bar Association on Saturday, Rep. Dellums led a discussion of the problems associated with treating juveniles as adults in the court system, and also addressed the broader impact on communities when a disproportionate percentage of minorities, particularly African-American youths, are sentenced to fill the nation's prison and jail cells.

"This trend of sending young men off to prison instead of using the juvenile justice system is limiting the life options for male youth of color," Mr. Dellums said. "Too frequently the adult justice system is the destination point for young men of color due to policy failures in health and education, and a lack of family and community support."

Rep. Dellums cited "alarming statistics" from the US Bureau of Justice Statistics showing that last year 2,267,787 people were incarcerated in the United States, and nearly two-thirds of the prison population were persons of color, mostly males. In fact, the data showed that 8.4 percent of African Americans ages 25 to 29 are in state or federal prisons. Further, Amnesty International found that there are currently 2,225 prisoners across the country serving life without parole sentences for crimes that were committed when they were a juvenile.

The Dellums Commission, established this year by the Joint Center Health Policy Institute, consists of national policy makers, government officials, educators, health professionals and business, legal and religious leaders, who are studying the problems plaguing male youth of color, and making recommendations to increase opportunities for these youths.

The symposium identified several public policy issues that need to be addressed, such as zero-tolerance policies in schools that are resulting in excessive expulsions among African American males; judicial policies that allow juveniles to face criminal infractions in adult courts with subsequent detention in adult facilities; dwindling economic and job opportunities for the minority youths, which is often a factor in turning them to crime; and the lack of adequate mental health and drug treatment programs.

Dr. Gail Christopher, VP for Health, Women and Family for the Joint Center and director of the Joint Center Health Policy Institute, said the rate of incarceration among young African American males is increasing because of misguided public policies and social ills that limit life options. For instance, Dr. Christopher noted that the Bureau of Justice Statistics has found that two-thirds of male youths in juvenile justice system have been diagnosed with emotional disturbances.

“There is growing evidence that a large number of youths with diagnosable serious emotional disturbances are being diverted to the criminal justice system,” said Dr. Christopher, whose Health Policy Institute sponsored the symposium. “It’s crucial that we address the root causes of the social problems, such as the lack of adequate mental and physical health treatment, that are contributing factors in a large number of youths who are taken into the criminal justice system.”

Participants in the symposium included California Assemblyman Mervyn Dymally; Washington State Rep. John McCoy; New York Assemblyman Felix Ortiz; Dr. Gloria Grantham, CEO of Chester Upland School District in Pennsylvania, George White, of UCLA’s Center for Communications and Community and the Honorable Arthur L. Burnett who sits on the Dellums Commission.

The panelists cited a variety of social problems that are contributing to the increase in incarcerations.

“The school system is becoming the pipeline for the prisons,” said Dr. Grantham. “Take for example my district, one of the schools we had 700 students to enter into high school and only 299 graduated. What are the remaining students doing? After they drop out, they have no skills; therefore, they may end up in the prison system... We’re suspending and expelling students’ everyday for fighting. That’s not the solution; we must keep them in school. If we kick them out, it just gives them idle time to get in trouble.”

Rep. McCoy also focused on the schools as a problem.

“A quarter of the kids are graduating from high school today,” the Native American said. “We’re portrayed as evil in the history books. The politicians are saying leave no child behind, but let’s test the system and not the child! We’re testing the children. We took out vocational and technical education, as well as music in the school system in Washington State, however only 24 percent of the jobs require a college degree. We’re setting our kids up to fail. Let’s put vocational and technical education, as well as music, back in the school system to provide options for our students.”

Meanwhile, Assemblyman Dymally added, “We’re spending too much money within the penal system and not enough in the educational system.

Mr. White echoed those saying that said the social issues, such as the education system and lack of healthcare, are the root causes of the juvenile problems.

“It is currently framed as a public safety issues and it should be framed as a public health issue. We have to come up with a solution,” Mr. White said. “We spend six times the rate on the penal system versus what we spend on higher education. We need to shift the money that we’re spending. There are more African Americans in prison than in higher education.”

