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Eileen Olds

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President's Column

Eileen Olds

During this year as your AJA president, my appreciation and respect for the role that we play in our courtrooms has amplified. I have been afforded numerous opportunities to speak with other judges and various community and civic groups to gauge their concerns about our judicial system. Members of the judiciary and the community alike share a common concern for what is viewed as increasingly eroding societal values, as evidenced in courtrooms everywhere. Most conversations eventually evolve to discussions about prevention strategies. How did this happen? What needs to be done? I am convinced that, as judges, we must actively seek to answer these questions and embrace an obligation to offer solutions. Many of our nation's societal challenges are disguised as legal issues on court dockets; far too many severely impact our children.

As a juvenile and domestic relations court judge for more than 13 years, it should be no surprise that this is a subject near and dear to my heart; and one that must be closely examined. It is abundantly clear that there is a proliferation of social problems affecting today's children and their families. Of all the advances the judiciary has made in courtroom technology, docket management, courtroom construction, specialized and problem-solving courts, etc., there is one area that remains constant—overrepresentation of minorities and disadvantaged youth in our criminal justice system. As judges, I believe that we have a responsibility to lend ourselves as participants in the solution. We are the gatekeepers. We are uniquely poised and equipped not only to tackle and to improve the administration of justice, but also to be more mindful of the social ills that cripple our nation today.

I recently sat in an audience with a group of judges as we heard a presentation on the laudable efforts of the Children's Defense Fund ("CDF"). CDF is a nonprofit organization determined to ensure a successful passage from childhood to adulthood. Its goal is to offer preventive support to poor and minority children *before* they encounter family dissonance or educational failure. A core belief maintained by the CDF is that without practical early intervention, incarceration is inevitable for many of America's children.

CDF's *Cradle to Prison Pipeline*® research identified a grave

crisis affecting many minority children. They are abused, abandoned, and impoverished at greater rates than the general population. They are born to teen parents, born underweight, and medically uninsured. They languish in poverty, foster care, and drug houses. Disadvantaged at birth, these neglected children will most likely become America's future prisoners. According to statistics provided by the CDF, African-American boys born in 2001 have a one in three likelihood of becoming incarcerated. Latino boys have a one in six chance of imprisonment.

Underprivileged children are enmeshed in family unreadiness. The majority, rather than being raised by responsible parents or positive role models, are negatively influenced by television images, peers, and gang members. As a result, it becomes increasingly difficult to break free from their hampered environment. Economic disparities, the lack of quality living standards, health care, and education create a divide. Success for these bruised youths is obstructed and replaced with learning impediments. The numbers of those impacted are staggering, and unless this national crisis is remedied, America's *Cradle to Prison Pipeline*® will continue. (You can read the full CDF report online at <http://www.childrensdefense.org/site/PageServer?pagename=c2pp>.)

The judges' acknowledgement is therefore a necessary component to bring awareness and attention to contributing factors that bring juveniles before the court. While we must speak with clarity and authority to those before the court, we also have the responsibility to promote innovative approaches to address the underlying inequities.

Radical actions produce extreme changes. I am confident that the cradle-to-prison pipeline can be derailed and that some of these sociological ills can be healed. I urge your support in actively participating and working together with policy makers, parents, community leaders, and others to identify viable solutions. We are in an undeniable position of relevance to these issues. Through effective partnerships we can unite offering hope, new chances, and a better life for our children. Together we can create opportunities for new beginnings—untainted beginnings that outshine past negative experiences and destructive influences.

