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Remarks Following a Meeting on Strengthening Relations Between Law Enforcement and Local Communities

December 1, 2014

As I said last week in the wake of the grand jury decision, I think Ferguson laid bare a problem that is not unique to St. Louis or that area and is not unique to our time, and that is, a simmering distrust that exists between too many police departments and too many communities of color. The sense that in a country where one of our basic principles, perhaps the most important principle, is equality under the law, that too many individuals, particularly young people of color, do not feel as if they are being treated fairly.

And as I said last week, when any part of the American family does not feel like it is being treated fairly, that's a problem for all of us. It's not just a problem for some. It's not just a problem for a particular community or a particular demographic. It means that we are not as strong as a country as we can be. And when applied to the criminal justice system, it means we're not as effective in fighting crime as we could be.

And as a consequence, what I've been able to do today, thanks to excellent work by Eric Holder, our Attorney General, who had to fly down to Atlanta to start a conversation down there around these issues, as well as the outstanding leaders around this table, is to begin a process in which we're able to surface an honest conversation between law enforcement, community activists, academics, elected officials, the faith community, to try to determine what the problems are and, most importantly, try to come up with concrete solutions that can move the ball forward.

And one of the most powerful things that happened today was I had the opportunity to meet with some young people, including a couple of young outstanding leaders from the Ferguson community, Brittany Packnett and Rasheen Aldridge, who both served on the Ferguson committee, live in the area, and I think have been hearing from a lot of young people in that area.

And what made me concerned was the degree to which they feel as if they are not heard or that the reality of what they experienced has been denied. What made me greatly encouraged was how clear their voices were when they were heard and how constructive they are in wanting to solve these problems. And I think anybody who had the chance to listen to them here today felt the same way.

We also heard from law enforcement and were reminded of what a tough job it is to be in law enforcement. Whether you're in a big city or in a small community, as Eric Holder put it, police officers have the right to come home. And if they're in dangerous circumstances, we have to be able to put ourselves in their shoes and recognize that they do have a tough job. I don't think those realities are irreconcilable. In fact, I'm convinced that if we work hard, that we can make sure that police officers and the communities they serve are partners in battling crime, partners in making sure everybody feels safe; that we can build confidence and we can build trust, but it's not going to happen overnight, and it's not going to result just from a conversation around a table in Washington. It's got to result in concrete steps that we are able to lift up in communities all around the country and institutionalize.

In order to advance that goal, here are a couple of specific steps that we're taking. First of all, I want to thank Chuck Ramsey, the Commissioner of the Philadelphia Police Department, as well as Laurie Robinson, who is a professor of criminology, law, and society at George Mason University and a former Assistant U.S.—a former Assistant Attorney General.

They are going to cochair a Task Force that is not only going to reach out and listen to law enforcement and community activists and other stakeholders, but is going to report to me specifically in 90 days with concrete recommendations, including best practices for communities where law enforcement and neighborhoods are working well together: How do they create accountability, how do they create transparency, how do they create trust, and how can we at the Federal level work with the State and local communities to make sure that some of those best practices get institutionalized?

So this is not going to be an endless report that ends up collecting dust on a shelf. My expectation is concrete recommendations that we can begin to operationalize both at the Federal, State, and local levels. And the good news is, is that we've got two folks who are respected by activists and respected by law enforcement, and I'm confident they're going to do an outstanding job. I want them to help us make sure that crime continues to go down and while community trust in the police goes up.

Second, one of the issues that came up during the response to the—Ferguson back in August was the issue of military equipment being utilized in the face of protests that may be taking place in the community. It raised a broader issue as to whether we are militarizing domestic law enforcement unnecessarily, and is the Federal Government facilitating that?

I have now received a review that I had ordered from all the agencies involved in this program, the 1033 Program. I will be signing an Executive order that specifies how we are going to make sure that that program is accountable, how we're going to make sure that that program is transparent, and how are we going to make sure that we're not building a militarized culture inside our local law enforcement?

Third, I'm going to be proposing some new community policing initiatives that will significantly expand funding and training for local law enforcement, including up to 50,000 additional body-worn cameras for law enforcement agencies. And I look forward to working with Congress to make sure that in addition to what I can do administratively and with resources that we've already got, that we are in a conversation with law enforcement that wants to do the right thing to make sure that they're adequately resourced for the training and the technology that can enhance trust between communities and police.

And finally, as I mentioned, Eric Holder is going to be working in parallel with the Task Force to convene a series of these meetings all across the country, because this is not a problem simply of Ferguson, Missouri, this is a problem that is national. It is a solvable problem, but it is one that, unfortunately, spikes after one event and then fades into the background until something else happens. What we need is a sustained conversation in which, in each region of the country, people are talking about this honestly and then can move forward in a constructive fashion.

Let me just close by saying this: There was a cautionary note, I think, from everybody here that there have been commissions before, there have been task forces, there have been conversations, and nothing happens. What I try to describe to people is why this time will be different. And part of the reason this time will be different is because the President of the United States is deeply invested in making sure that this time is different. When I hear the

young people around this table talk about their experiences, it violates my belief in what America can be to hear young people feeling marginalized and distrustful, even after they've done everything right. That's not who we are. And I don't think that's who the overwhelming majority of Americans want us to be.

And I think there may be a convergence here where we've got outstanding law enforcement officials who recognize that times have changed and want to be responsive. I know that Richard Beary of the International Association of Chiefs of Police spoke about how eager they are to work with us. I think that we've got activists on the ground who don't always get attention because it's oftentimes the people who aren't being constructive that get attention, but there are folks there who are working really hard. I think there's a maturity to the conversation right now that can lead us to actually getting some concrete results.

And in the 2 years I have remaining as President, I'm going to make sure that we follow through, not to solve every problem, not to tear down every barrier of mistrust that may exist, but to make things better. And that's how progress is always made in this great country of ours. All right?

Thank you very much, everybody.

NOTE: The President spoke at 4:52 p.m. in the Dwight D. Eisenhower Executive Office Building. In his remarks, he referred to Brittany Packnett, executive director, Teach For America—St. Louis; Rasheen Aldridge, Jr., director, Young Activists United St. Louis; Charles H. Ramsey and Laurie Robinson, Cochairs, President's Task Force on 21st-Century Policing; and Richard Beary, president, International Association of Police Chiefs.

Categories: Addresses and Remarks : Law enforcement and local communities, strengthening efforts, meeting with President.

Locations: Washington, DC.

Names: Aldridge, Rasheen, Jr.; Beary, Richard; Holder, Eric H., Jr.; Packnett, Brittany; Ramsey, Charles H.; Robinson, Laurie.

Subjects: Civil rights : Minorities :: Relations with police; Civil rights : Racial profiling; Defense, Department : Defense Logistics Agency's 1033 Program, policy review; Justice, Department of : Attorney General; Law enforcement and crime : 21st-Century Policing, President's Task Force on; Law enforcement and crime : State and community law enforcement agencies, Federal support; Missouri : Civil unrest in Ferguson; Missouri : Civil unrest in Ferguson.

DCPD Number: DCPD201400894.