

Remarks in Camden, New Jersey

May 18, 2015

Thank you, everybody. Everybody, please have a seat. Have a seat. Well, thank you so much. It is good to be in Camden.

I want to thank your Lieutenant Governor, Kim Guadagno, your Congressman, Donald Norcross, and your mayor, Dana Redd, for being here. Give them all a big round of applause. I want to thank the outstanding facility, our hosts. The Salvation Army is doing great work, and the Ray Kroc Center here seems like just a wonderful, wonderful facility. So we're very proud of them. I want to thank Camden County Police Chief Scott Thomson for his outstanding work. Where's the Chief? There he is.

So I've come here to Camden to do something that might have been unthinkable just a few years ago, and that's to hold you up as a symbol of promise for the Nation. Now, I don't want to overstate it. Obviously, Camden has gone through tough times, and there are still tough times for a lot of folks here in Camden. But just a few years ago, this city was written off as dangerous beyond redemption, a city trapped in a downward spiral. Parents were afraid to let their children play outside. Drug dealers operated in broad daylight. There weren't enough cops to patrol the streets.

So 2 years ago, the police department was overhauled to implement a new model of community policing. They doubled the size of the force, while keeping it unionized. They cut desk jobs in favor of getting more officers out into the streets, not just to walk the beat, but to actually get to know the residents: to set up basketball games, to volunteer in schools, to participate in reading programs, to get to know small businesses in the area.

Now, to be a police officer takes a special kind of courage. And I talked about this on Friday at a memorial for 131 officers who gave their lives to protect communities like this one. It takes a special kind of courage to run towards danger, to be a person that residents turn to when they're most desperate. And when you match courage with compassion, with care and understanding of the community—like we've seen here in Camden—some really outstanding things can begin to happen.

Violent crime in Camden is down 24 percent. Murder is down 47 percent. Open-air drug markets have been cut by 65 percent. The response time for 911 calls is down from 1 hour to just 5 minutes. And when I was in the center, it was 1.3 minutes, right when I was there. And perhaps most significant is that the police and residents are building trust. Building trust.

Now, nobody is suggesting that the job is done. This is still a work in progress. The police chief would be the first one to say it. So would the mayor. Camden and its people still face some very big challenges. But this city is on to something. You've made real progress in just 2 years. And that's why I'm here today, because I want to focus on the fact that other cities across America can make similar progress.

Everything we've done over the past 6 years, whether it's rescuing the economy or reforming our schools or retooling our job training programs, has been in pursuit of one goal, and that's creating opportunity for all of us, all our kids. But we know that some communities have the odds stacked against them and have had the odds stacked against them for a very long time, in some cases for decades. You've got rural communities that have chronic poverty. You

have manufacturing communities that got hit hard when plants closed and people lost jobs. There are not only cities, but also suburbs, where jobs can be tough to find and tougher to get to because of development patterns and lack of transportation options. And folks who do work, they're working harder than ever, but sometimes, don't feel like they can get ahead.

And in some communities, that sense of unfairness and powerlessness has contributed to dysfunction in those communities. Communities are like bodies, and if the immunity system is down, they can get sick. And when communities aren't vibrant, where people don't feel a sense of hope and opportunity, then a lot of times that can fuel crime, and that can fuel unrest.

We've seen it in places like Baltimore and Ferguson and New York. And it has many causes, from a basic lack of opportunity to some groups feeling unfairly targeted by their police forces. And that means there's no single solution. There have to be a lot of different solutions and different approaches that we try.

So one of the things that we did to address these issues was to create a Task Force on the future of community policing. And this Task Force was outstanding because it was made up of all the different stakeholders. We had law enforcement. We had community activists. We had young people. They held public meetings across the country. They developed concrete proposals that every community in America can implement to rebuild trust and help law enforcement.

The recommendations were released in March; they were finalized today. They include everything from enhanced officer training to improving the use of body cameras and other technologies to make sure that police departments are being smart about crime and that there's enough data for them to be accountable as well.

And we're trying to support the great work that's happening at the local level where cities are already responding to these recommendations. And before I go further, I just want the members of our Task Force to stand, because they've done some outstanding work, and they deserve to be acknowledged. Thank you.

Now, we've launched a Police Data Initiative that's helping Camden and other innovative cities use data to strengthen their work and hold themselves accountable by sharing it with the public. Departments might track things like incidents of force so that they can identify and handle problems that could otherwise escalate.

Here in Camden, officers deal with some 41 different data systems, which means they have to enter the same information multiple times. So today we've brought a volunteer, elite tech team to help: a group of data scientists and software engineers and tech leaders. They're going to work with the police department here to troubleshoot some of the technical challenges so it's even easier for police departments to do the things they already want to do in helping to track what's going on in communities, and then also helping to make sure that that data is used effectively to identify where there are trouble spots, where there are problems, are there particular officers that may need additional help, additional training. All that can be obtained in a really effective, efficient way.

Today we're also releasing new policies on the military-style equipment that the Federal Government has in the past provided to State and local law enforcement agencies. We've seen how militarized gear can sometimes give people a feeling like there's an occupying force, as opposed to a force that's part of the community that's protecting them and serving them. It can alienate and intimidate local residents and send the wrong message. So we're going to prohibit some equipment made for the battlefield that is not appropriate for local police departments.

There is other equipment that may be needed in certain cases, but only with proper training. So we're going to ensure that departments have what they need, but also that they have the training to use it.

And we're doing these things because we're listening to what law enforcement is telling us. The overwhelming majority of police officers are good and honest and fair. They care deeply about their communities. They put their lives on the line every day to keep them safe. Their loved ones wait and worry until they come through the door at the end of their shift. So we should do everything in our power to make sure that they are safe and help them do the job the best they can.

And what's interesting about what Chief Thomson has done and what's happening here in Camden is these new officers—who I have to confess made me feel old—[laughter]—because they all look like they could still be in school. [Laughter] The approach that the Chief has taken—in getting them out of their squad cars, into the communities, getting them familiar with the people that they're serving—they're enjoying their jobs more because they feel as if, over time, they can have more of an impact, and they're getting more help from the community because the community has seen them and knows them before there's a crisis, before there's an incident.

So it's not just crisis response. It's not after the fact: There's a crime, there's a dead body, there's a shooting, and now we're going to show up. It's, we're here all the time, and hopefully, we can prevent those shootings from happening in the first place.

But one of the things I also want to focus on is the fact that a lot of the issues that have been raised here, and in places like Baltimore and Ferguson and New York, goes beyond policing. We can't ask the police to contain and control problems that the rest of us aren't willing to face or do anything about.

If we as a society don't do more to expand opportunity to everybody who's willing to work for it, then we'll end up seeing conflicts between law enforcement and residents. If we as a society aren't willing to deal honestly with issue of race, then we can't just expect police departments to solve these problems. If communities are being isolated and segregated, without opportunity and without investment and without jobs, if we politicians are simply ramping up long sentences for nonviolent drug crimes that end up devastating communities, we can't then ask the police to be the ones to solve the problem when there are no able-bodied men in a community or kids are growing up without intact households.

We can't just focus on the problems when there's a disturbance and then cable TV runs it for 2 or 3 or 4 days and then suddenly we forget it—about it again, until the next time. Communities like some poor communities in Camden or my hometown in Chicago, they're part of America too. The kids who grow up here, they're America's children. Just like children everywhere else, they've got hopes, and they've got dreams, and they've got potential. And if we're not investing in them, no matter how good Chief Thomson and the police are doing, these kids are still going to be challenged. So we've all got to step up. We've all got to care about what happens.

Chief Thomson will tell you that his officers read to young children in the communities not just to build positive relationships, but because it's in the interests of the community to make sure these kids can read so they can stay in school and graduate ready for college and careers and become productive members of society. That's in his interest not just as a police

chief, but also as a citizen of this country and somebody who grew up in this area and, knows this area.

And that's why we've partnered with cities and States to get tens of thousands more kids access to quality early childhood education. No matter who they are or where they're born, they should get a good start in life.

That's why we've partnered with cities, including Camden, to create what we call Promise Zones, where all-hands-on-deck efforts to change the odds for communities start happening because we're providing job training and helping to reduce violence and expanding affordable housing.

It's why we're ready to work with folks from both sides of the aisle to reform our criminal justice system. We all want safety, and we all know how pernicious the drug culture can be in undermining communities. But this massive trend toward incarceration even of nonviolent drug offenders and the costs of that trend are crowding out other critical investments that we can make in public safety. If we're spending a whole lot of money on prisons and we don't have computers or books or enough teachers or sports or music programs in our schools, we are being counterproductive. It's not a good strategy.

And so in addition to the work we're doing directly on the criminal justice front, we're also launching something that we call "My Brother's Keeper," an initiative to ensure that all young people, but with a particular focus on young men of color, have a chance to go as far as their dreams will take them. Over the coming weeks, members of my Cabinet will be traveling around the country to highlight communities that are doing great work to improve the lives of their residents.

We know these problems are solvable. We know that we're not lacking for answers, we're just lacking political will. We have to see these problems for what they are: not something that's happening to—in some other city to some other people, but something that's happening in our community, the community of America.

And we know that change is possible because we've seen it in places like this. We've seen it, thanks to people like Officer Virginia Matias. Where is Virginia? There she is right there. So earlier this year, Vice President Biden and I got to sit with Officer Matias and rank-and-file law enforcement officers from around the country. And Virginia was talking about how when she was growing up in East Camden, crime was so bad she wasn't allowed to go to the store alone. Her mom was once robbed at gunpoint. When she was 17, her uncle was shot and killed in his own store. Instead of turning away from Camden, she decided she wanted to become a cop where she grew up to help the community that she loved. And today, she is a proud member of the Camden County Police Department.

And she's a constant presence in the community, getting to know everybody she passes on her beat, even volunteering in a kindergarten. Officer Matias isn't just helping to keep her community safe, she's also a role model for young people of Camden. And anybody who thinks that things aren't getting better, she says, "I see kids playing outside, riding bikes in the neighborhood, on their porches having a conversation. That's how I measure change."

And that's how we should all measure change. I had a chance to meet with some of the young people here who participated in a little roundtable with the officers, and they're extraordinary young people. And they've got hopes and dreams just like Malia and Sasha, and they're overcoming some bigger barriers than my children ever had to go through or I had to go through. And they're strong, and they're focused.

But in talking to them, some of them—the reason they've been able to make it and do well is because their parents don't let them out outside. Well, you know what, children shouldn't have to be locked indoors in order to be safe. That's not right. Some of them still have concerns about friends of theirs that have taken a wrong path and got involved in the streets and drugs. That's not the environment we need our kids to be growing up in.

I challenge everybody to get to know some of these young people. They're outstanding, and they're going to do great things in their lives. But the point is, is that they shouldn't have to go through superhuman efforts just to be able to stay in school and go to college and achieve their promise. That should be the norm. That should be standard. And if it isn't, we're not doing something right. We as a society are not doing something right if it isn't.

So, ultimately, that's how we're going to measure change: rising prospects for our kids, rising prospects for the neighborhood. Do our children feel safe on the streets? Do they feel cared for by their community? Do they feel like the police departments care about them? Do they feel as if they—when they work hard they can succeed? Do they feel like the country is making an investment in them? Do they see role models for success? Are there pathways to jobs that they can identify? Do they know that if they put in effort, they can make it? Are they going to be treated fairly regardless of the color of their skin or what their last name is?

It's pretty basic. I travel around the country. The one thing that makes me always so optimistic is our children. And what you realize is everywhere, kids are kids. *[Laughter]* Sometimes, they'll drive you crazy. *[Laughter]* They'll make mistakes. But there's an inherent goodness in them. They want to do the right thing. They just need to be given a chance.

And some of them aren't going to be lucky enough to have the structures at home that they need, in which case, then, we all have to pick up the slack. And if we do, they'll respond. They will. But we've got to feel like that they're our kids. We've got to see our children in them, in their eyes. And we haven't done enough of that. But we can.

This is a moment of great promise; this is a moment of great hope. And if we're seeing such extraordinary improvement in Camden because of the good efforts of a lot of elected officials and an outstanding police chief and some wonderful police officers and a community that's supportive and nonprofit organizations like Salvation Army and others that are doing some great work—if it's working here, it can work anywhere. *[Applause]* It can work anywhere.

On the City Hall of Camden, you got an inscription by Walt Whitman: "In a dream, I saw a city invincible." In a dream, I see a country invincible, if we care enough to make the effort on behalf of every child in this country. Camden is showing that it can be done. I want America to show everybody around the world that it can be done.

Thank you very much, everybody. God bless you.

NOTE: The President spoke at 2:42 p.m. at the Salvation Army Ray and Joan Kroc Corps Community Center.

Categories: Addresses and Remarks : Camden, NJ.

Locations: Camden, NJ.

Names: Biden, Joseph R., Jr.; Guadagno, Kimberly A.; Matias, Virginia; Norcross, Donald W.; Obama, Malia; Obama, Natasha "Sasha"; Redd, Dana L.; Thomson, J. Scott.

Subjects: Civil rights : Minorities :: Relations with police; Civil rights : Racial equality; Economy, national : Poverty :: Efforts to combat; Economy, national : Strengthening efforts; Education : Early childhood education programs; Education : Standards and school accountability; Employment and unemployment : Job training and assistance programs; Law enforcement and crime : 2015 crime rate, decline; Law enforcement and crime : 21st-Century Policing, President's Task Force on; Law enforcement and crime : Community-oriented policing, strengthening efforts; Law enforcement and crime : Criminal justice system, reform efforts; Law enforcement and crime : Law enforcement officers, service and dedication; Law enforcement and crime : Sentencing requirements, reform; Law enforcement and crime : State and community law enforcement agencies, Federal support; New Jersey : President's visit; White House Office : "My Brother's Keeper" initiative; White House Office : Vice President.

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