



Khalilah M. Harris, deputy director for the White House Initiative on Educational Excellence for African Americans

## SPOTLIGHT ON CBC: The 45th Annual Legislative Conference

### CTE On the Brain

*The Cause for Excellence: Advancing Equity and Engagement in Career and Technical Education, Sept. 17*

A stigma is attached to career and technical education (CTE), particularly when it comes to African-American students who historically have been “tracked” into hands-on, skilled trades. But a powerhouse panel during CBC said such stigmas must be shed, so young people can embrace the career opportunities CTE offers.

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## MAKING STRIDES: JOBS COALITION ACCOMPLISHMENTS



While raising awareness of workforce challenges and potential barriers to employment, the JOBS Coalition and its members have combined their resources and industry expertise to achieve the following results:

- Built the Bellevue Resource Center, a program facility serving the hard-to-reach, hard-to-employ, and returning ex-offender populations. The Center was completed on September 30, 2003.
- Guided the creation of the Construction & Design Academy at Cardozo, providing District students access, training, and preparation for careers in the construction industry and trades after graduation. The Academy officially opened in September 2005. □



(Clockwise) Congressman Danny Davis; panelists Avon Hart-Johnson and Dennis Deer.

## REENTRY FORUM 2015: Families, Support Services Key to Ex-Offender Success

For Avon Hart-Johnson, the issue of mass incarceration for black men hits close to the heart. She remembers her son being taken away when he was 15 years old and returning at the age of 27. He spent 12 years of his life incarcerated, and during that time, Hart-Johnson did what she had to do: mother him through prison.

*By Arnesa A. Howell*

“I mothered him through letters to his jail cell; I mothered him through collect phone calls,” recalled Hart-Johnson, who would launch D.C. Project Connect, a nonprofit dedicated to helping other families maintain the bond with their loved ones during – and after – release from prison. “Families are the best and one of the most effective [reentry] strategies because they are the 24/7 safety net when the social services and human services offices close. Family is the front-line intervention.”

By the time he came home, Hart-Johnson said her son had earned a degree in information technology and moved on to work as a federal contractor.

This mother is not alone in her experience. Federal and local agencies estimate that more than 600,000 ex-offenders are released back into their communities each year. And for those returning home, steadfast family support and access to wraparound services that include

counseling, training and transitional programs are keys to staying out of prison.

Understanding the need to examine reentry strategies that work for returning citizens, Rep. Danny Davis (D-Ill.) hosted a reentry forum, “What’s Really Working for Returning Citizens?” as part of the of the Congressional Black Caucus Foundation’s 45th Annual Legislative Conference. For the Sept. 19 panel, Davis brought together representatives of the government and private sectors to discuss programs that are helping returning citizens transition back to their communities and families.

“I am convinced that as long as I can walk down the streets of the community where I live, [if] I run into three African-American males, one of the three has been incarcerated,” Davis told the audience at the start of the forum. “That does not speak well for equal justice.”

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## CBC Spotlight *Continued from page 1*

**K**halilah M. Harris, deputy director for the White House Initiative on Educational Excellence for African Americans, said that it's still honorable for students to pursue a trade based on technical skill. "There is no child that should get out of high school [or] middle school where they haven't had intentional exposure to careers they may not have thought of," Harris said.

Panelists explained that today's CTE is broader – going beyond traditional vocational classes like shop and heating, ventilation and air conditioning to include creative careers in hospitality management and biotechnology. Harris added that the humanities shouldn't be carved out, and STEM (science, technology, engineering and mathematics) is part of the conversation as well. "Being exposed to career pathways is not just about trades," she stated.

Students may have been exposed to CTE without even realizing it, according to Donna Harris-Aikens, director of the Education Policy and Practice Department at the National Education Association. One reason: some programs don't brand themselves that way. She agreed career and technical education today is not just about the trades, saying, "It is literally about careers."

"If we can't start wrapping our minds around that," Harris-Aikens said, "it's going to be very difficult to make the changes systemically within public education and higher education and everything in between."

Part of eradicating the stigma is rewriting the history of CTE. Karen King, program director for the Division of Research on Learning at the National Science Foundation, concluded: It's more that just a "stepping stone" to college.

### Black Women & Incarceration

*Black Women & the Criminal Justice System: We, Too, Sing America*  
A Sojourner Truth Forum, Sept. 18

Black women are incarcerated, serving time on death row, and facing police violence. Female leaders from law enforcement, grassroots organizations and civil rights advocacy came together to examine these issues and develop action plans for change.

The panel opened with questions, asking who are law enforcement officers and what influence do they have in the relationship between communities and police?

"They are humans who have vices, prejudices; they have bad days," said Charlene L. Hinton, chief of staff for the Petersburg, Virginia Bureau of Police. "Unfortunately, they are not always representative of that community." That translates into them not always

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**DO-GOODER** Panelist Dennis Deer (at lectern), president of Deer Rehabilitation Services in Chicago, serves disadvantaged communities to do "good in the hood."



## CBC Davis 2015 *Continued from page 1*

### Changing Mindsets

Besides family, panelists agreed that providing ex-offenders with much-needed substance abuse treatment programs and employment training services are important to successful reentry. But there is one element that is often overlooked – mental health services.

"Individuals who are coming home from incarceration need to change their mindset," said Dennis Deer, a forensic psychologist who is the president and founder of Deer Rehabilitation Services in Chicago, which provides mental health evaluations, individual counseling, couples counseling and other treatment services for underserved and disadvantaged communities.

"Because if you don't change what's up here," he continued, motioning to his head, "you can give all the workforce development training you want ... my clients have said to me, 'Look doc, when they didn't help me change my thinking and put me out in a house in the suburbs, all I saw was those kids left their bikes out.'"

Many of the services offered are also Medicaid-certified, reflecting the financial situation of most individuals after incarceration: little to no money.

"For many years, we did services on a sliding fee scale, and many of them [services] had to be pro bono," Deer explained.

Acknowledging that it's never too early to start intervention, the Deer staff connects with incarcerated individuals to provide behavioral health, domestic violence and reentry services before release. After release, ex-offenders have continued access through service sites. Training also extends to law enforcement officers to help them address reentry and behavioral health. "They have to know how to interact with individuals who have



**IN THE NUMBERS** The Bureau of Prisons' Linda T. McGrew says BOP houses over 208,000 federal offenders nationally.

mental illnesses as well as individuals who are out there on the streets," Deer said.

### At the Federal Level

Meanwhile, Linda T. McGrew, assistant director for the Reentry Services Division of the Federal Bureau of Prisons (BOP), stressed that the bureau can't control who is arrested or convicted, but can control the programs provided to offenders while in custody and the collaborations/partnerships developed to assist them from incarceration to release.

"Reentry begins on the first day of incarceration," said McGrew, adding that inmates have access to literacy, vocational training and other programs to assist throughout their transition. She noted that the bureau is currently working with the Attorney General's Reentry Council to talk about "banning the box," the movement to remove the box on job applications where employers ask about an applicant's criminal history. Other issues on the discussion table include federal Pell grants and what can be done in education for returning citizens. The Department of Education in July unveiled a "second chance" pilot program that would allow incarcerated individuals greater educational opportunities, a move proponents say could reduce recidivism rates. Currently, the grants are unavailable to this population.

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(From left) Forum panelists Brenda V. Smith, Charlene L. Hinton and Natalie A. Jackson, with moderator and Girlfriends Pray founder Dee Marshall.

**CBC Spotlight** *Continued from page 2*  
 understanding the culture, she added, or having the ability to communicate in a manner that's understood by the people in the communities they serve.

"That's what generates a lot of our problems that we are seeing across the country today," Hinton said, referencing the wave of police killings and violence against African-Americans across the country from Ferguson to New York.

Meanwhile, Natalie A. Jackson, who worked on the Trayvon Martin case, reminded the audience that the police is a government entity that has the right to take one's life. "They can be regulated and we should regulate them," said Jackson, a managing partner of the Women's Trial Group.

When black women are victims of crimes, it's important to have females who look like them as officers, lawyers and in other positions within the criminal justice system to break down emotional barriers, the panelists said. They outlined obstacles including: low numbers of women applying to become police officers and passing the physical agility requirements; struggles of black lawyers to become prosecutors because of perceptions they are biased towards black defendants; and, harassment in a male-dominant cop culture. "You need a strong cohort of women to go in with you

so you feel that you're not alone," said Brenda V. Smith, project director of The Project on Addressing Prison Rape.

**Systemic Abuses**

Smith also outlined pathways to incarceration for black women. She said that many women experience victimization as children, adults and when in custody. And while most women are incarcerated for nonviolent offenses, those who are convicted of violent offenses or serve significant jail time do so because of a man. "They are often co-defendants and are often scared to say a word because they fear for their safety and they fear for their family's safety," Smith said.

The panelists also tackled the issue of sentencing discrimination, a conversation sparking discussion on mandatory minimum laws, which Jackson deemed "unfair" for disproportionately affecting women and not allowing judges to take an individualized approach to sentencing.

As a "call to action" on these laws, Smith urged people to encourage their congressional representatives to push against mandatory minimums that disproportionately impact communities of color. "If we could do something about mandatory minimums for drug offenses," said Smith, "that would make such a huge difference in the imprisonment of women." —AAH □

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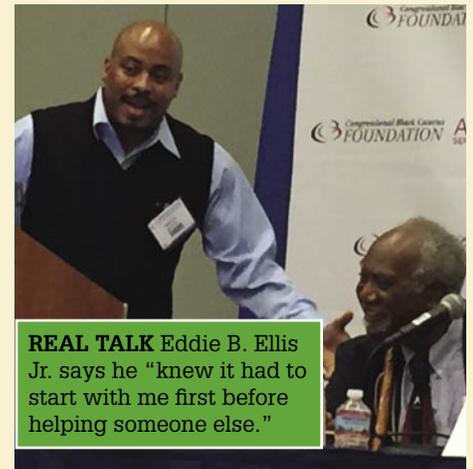
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**REAL TALK** Eddie B. Ellis Jr. says he "knew it had to start with me first before helping someone else."

**EDDIE B. ELLIS JR.:**  
**One Man's Journey**

16. 15. 31. Eddie B. Ellis Jr. went to jail at 16 for manslaughter and served 15 years behind bars before coming out at the age of 31. During that time, Ellis spent most of his years in solitary confinement, with six years in the ADX Supermax in Florence, Colorado. As one of the formerly incarcerated panelists during Rep. Danny Davis' Reentry Forum, the native Washingtonian made sure to "keep it 100."

"They say most of us who come home will never be successful, never make it, never be right again in life. But I'm here to prove them wrong," Ellis said.

While many reentry programs advocate job-training opportunities during incarceration, little discussion is given to an individual's skill set. So when Ellis was introduced to banking, it didn't stick: "I didn't have any money, so I had no use for banking skills."

What he did have is a dedication to stay out of prison, and for Ellis, that proved the best reentry strategy. By putting himself first, he said that he knew what he had to do: "There was nothing my mother could do, a program could do, nobody could do if my mind wasn't made up."

After being released, Ellis in 2009 started the nonprofit One by 1 to equip ex-offenders with the tools they need to be successful in light of the challenges they will face after incarceration. The organization also conducts youth outreach in an effort to prevent incarceration. Programs include healthy kids, anti-bullying and violence alternatives workshops. One by 1 provides reentry support resources as well.

Ellis started building relationships to help him successfully reconnect to his community – and himself. He reached out to his probation officer and got a doctor to address the emotional impact of incarceration – because

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### **CBC Davis 2015** *Continued from page 2*

According to McGrew, the bureau houses over 208,000 federal offenders. And BOP offers a variety of evidence-based programs aimed at helping inmates. She said those participating in the Federal Prison Industries Program are 24 percent less likely to relapse into crime than similar non-participating inmates. Meanwhile, offenders participating in vocational and occupational training programs are 33 percent less likely to recidivate, while 16 percent of offenders participating in the residential drug abuse treatment programs are less likely to recidivate.

Despite the benefits of these programs, McGrew said the power of family can't be overlooked: "Research shows positive family connections support reentry." □

### **One Man's Journey** *Continued from page 3* where "a lot of people are failing is mental health."

It was his probation officer who one day took his lunch break to show Ellis how to use the Metrorail system, a foreign concept after being locked up so long. "I caught cabs everywhere because I didn't know how to get [around] in my own city," he recalled. To this day, Ellis said he remains in touch with his therapist, counselor and others who helped and believed in him when no one else did.

"We can't do it alone," said Ellis, admitting that shadows of his former life remain (he still eats breakfast, dinner and lunch in his room). "If we make people who are coming out of the system more involved, they will feel more empowered."—AAH □

## **JOBS COALITION PROMISES**

- Provide opportunities for District residents to secure gainful employment.
- Remove barriers that prevent meaningful employment.
- Provide educational and training opportunities for all District residents interested in pursuing careers in various industries and trades.
- Work toward the creation of a comprehensive, fair, and more open system of training and hiring the underserved, unemployed and returning ex-offenders.
- Ensure that the training and educational skills being taught are relevant to the job market of today and tomorrow.
- Engage elected and appointed officials to support legislation and maintain appropriate oversight to ensure gainful employment for District residents, including the underserved, unemployed, and returning ex-offenders.

## **JOBS COALITION MISSION STATEMENT**

**W**e will work together to develop a long-term strategy that creates an environment where aspiring District residents will have unprecedented opportunity to succeed. We strive to create a fair and open system, supported by government, industry, employers and the education and faith-based communities, which seeks to properly train today's apprentices while making an unparalleled commitment to educating students and others not yet in the workforce.



**JOBS COALITION**  
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