



ACS Forum Highlights New Ideas for Criminal Justice System

Video Now Available of Gathering Addressed by Sen. Webb, Rep. Scott and President Obama's Special Assistant for Justice and Regulatory Policy

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WASHINGTON, D.C. – Legislative and executive branch responses to a more integrative approach to criminal justice policy were the focus of a forum sponsored by the American Constitution Society for Law and Policy (ACS), which included a keynote address by Sen. Jim Webb, remarks from President Obama's Special Assistant for Justice and Regulatory Policy Mariano-Florentino (Tino) Cuéllar, and a panel discussion of legal experts and policy makers, including Rep. Bobby Scott.

“Every so often a moment of hope glimmers with the very real possibility of change, and we are in one of those moments now,” said Nkechi Taifa, senior policy analyst for the Open Society Institute (OSI) and moderator of the panel discussion. Taifa noted the timeliness of policy changes to reorient federal criminal justice policy from punishment to prevention, saying, “We have a new administration that is listening and some courageous congressional leaders with bills poised for change. The political will for reform is there.”

“Reorienting Criminal Justice Policy: An Opportunity for a More Integrative Approach,” included discussion of prosecutors' approach to criminal justice reform, lawmakers' responses to a rising incarceration rate and advocates' calls for a multi-disciplinary approach to criminal justice policy. The panelists explored many of the ideas that were raised in an [article](#) by Taifa and Catherine Beane in the current issue of the *Harvard Law & Policy Review*, the official journal of ACS. The panel included Beane, director of Behind the Cycle, Walter E. Beglau, the elected district attorney in Salem County, Ore., and Gina E. Wood, director of policy and planning at the Joint Center for Political and Economic Studies.

In his keynote address, Sen. Webb echoed the theme that now is the time to strengthen the nation's criminal justice system.

“America’s criminal justice system is broken and its inequities cut against the notion that we are a society founded on fundamental fairness,” Webb said. “I believe that it is time to bring together the best minds in America to confer, report, and make concrete recommendations about how we can reform the process.

“To advance reform,” he continued, “I introduced The National Criminal Justice Commission Act of 2009 to create a blue-ribbon commission to look at every aspect of our criminal justice system with an eye toward reshaping the process from top to bottom. With the bipartisan support of my Senate colleagues, I am hopeful that we can pass this legislation and begin work on the pressing issue of criminal justice reform in the coming year.”

Rep. Scott, who sponsored the Youth PROMISE Act, intended to advance new methods to deal with juvenile crime, echoed these themes.

“Legislators have a choice in crime policy. We can reduce crime or we can play politics, and we’re good at both. Once you’ve decided what you’re going to do, it’s not hard. We know how to reduce crime and save money while we’re doing it. Research clearly demonstrates that a comprehensive approach – a strategy of prevention, early intervention and rehabilitation will significantly reduce crime and usually save more money than you spend in the process.

“We also know what scores well in political polls,” Scott continued. “The slogans and sound bites that we hear have been shown to waste money, discriminate against minorities, and do nothing to reduce crime. In fact many have been shown to increase the crime rate.”

Professor Cuéllar, who is on leave from the Stanford Law School faculty, said that the administration had been especially supportive of state and local initiatives to help to bring down high incarceration rates and to curb violent crime.

Video of the entire Dec. 9 event is available [here](#).

The American Constitution Society for Law and Policy is one of the nation’s leading progressive legal organizations, comprised of lawyers, judges, students and policy makers committed to promoting the vitality of the Constitution and the fundamental values it expresses. The views of the speakers are their own and should not be attributed to ACS. For more information about ACS, visit www.acslaw.org.

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