

OPINION

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Giving Ex-Offenders, Families a Life Line

Senate should pass Second Chance Act

BY MARC H. MORIAL

At a young age, Taneka Davis knew just how hard life could be. At just 15, she was thrown into a county jail in Pittsburgh amongst hardened adult criminals after being arrested for aggravated assault and reckless endangerment of a bully who had terrorized her for years.

Davis, now 19, spent much of her childhood living in uncertainty, with her drug-addict parents revolving in and out of prison on a regular basis. It rendered her unable to cope with life. So, she sought out the help of the Pittsburgh Urban League to overcome a tumultuous past and forge a new future.

Sharonda Pitteard, a 21-year-old single mother of two children from Louisville, already had a felony theft conviction under her belt when she arrived on the doorstep of her local Urban League affiliate. Fellow Louisville resident and single mother Ashley Burnley, 18, faced a misde-

meanor charge for shoplifting when she passed through the affiliate's doors. Both wanted to get their lives together to serve as better role models for their children.

All three at one point in time represented a class of black youth described by author Harry J. Holzer as disconnected in the National Urban League's *The State of Black America 2007*.

"They may be incarcerated or on parole or probation; they might be aging out of foster care or still attached to their nuclear families. But, overwhelmingly, they come from low-income families and often grow up in poor and relatively segregated neighborhoods," Holzer wrote.

Now, they're all recent graduates of the National Urban League's Urban Youth Empowerment Program that seeks to give at-risk youth and ex-offenders a second chance.

While women are less likely than men to become entangled in the criminal justice system, they're more

likely to have left a child or more behind upon incarceration. Sixty-four percent of female inmates shared the same house with their children before entering the justice system, compared to 44 percent of male inmates.

talence, skills training and on-the-job experience. But, with more than 650,000 ex-offenders - nearly 50 percent of them black -- re-entering society every year, the program barely makes a dent in the problem. Fortunately, the U.S. House of

efforts to help current and former offenders to get a new lease on life.

The bill also establishes a federal re-entry task force and creates a national clearinghouse of information on re-entry programs as well as expands access to drug-treatment facilities and improves educational services offered. In the words of a New York Times editorial, the legislation would "provide crucial help to people who have paid their debts to society."

As for Taneka Davis, Sharonda Pitteard and Ashley Burnley, so far so good.

Davis enrolled in a criminal justice program at a local university in Pittsburgh and landed a part-time job at a medical center, where she ended up working with the bully she had assaulted years before in a fit of fear. Pitteard is out of the drug treatment program, in her own apartment and is in a post-secondary

education program at a local technical college. Her classmate Burnley obtained her GED a month after she entered the empowerment program and is now pursuing her certification in cosmetology with hopes of starting her own business one day.

All are examples of the disconnected population who, under the watchful eye of Urban League affiliates, put themselves and often their children, back on the right track. That is why it is important that our leaders pass the Second Chance Act soon and keep up their commitment to giving at-risk youth and ex-offenders a second chance, if not for the sake of current generations but of future ones.

I urge the U.S. Senate to follow the House's lead and pass the legislation swiftly.

Marc H. Morial is president and chief executive officer of the National Urban League.



The legislation would "provide crucial help to people who have paid their debts to society."

To date, the empowerment program, one of the league's most successful, has helped thousands of disconnected and re-entering individuals get second chances at a better life with educational assis-

Representatives seems to be seeing the logic of greater federal investment in such programs. In early November, the chamber passed the so-called Second Chance Act, which authorizes more money for

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American Dream Too Far Out of Reach

Risking hope and faith in ourselves

BY JUDGE GREG MATHIS

Recent reports indicate African Americans are, despite the gains made in the 1960s, falling behind economically.

Sure, there are some of us who have "made it;" it's these individuals, with their nice homes and cars that many of our young people look up to. But, for a majority of our people, the American dream is too far out of reach.

And for those of us who do make it to the middle class, there is no guarantee that our success will benefit our children. These trends are disturbing and don't seem as if they'll reverse any time soon. Unless we discuss the root causes of this degeneration, we risk losing hope and faith in ourselves.

Gone are the days when unskilled labor and industrial jobs could move a black family into the middle class.

Standard educational systems, to which many of us were and are subjected to, have not been able to provide students with the skills and knowledge they need to compete in modern-day society. Decent paying jobs for unskilled workers are hard to come by and our community is feeling the effects.

Black men, in particular, are struggling with the country's new economy. Incomes among black men have actually decreased over

the last past three decades. Black women greatly outnumber men on college campuses and increasingly in the workforce. As our women succeed, they are poised to become tomorrow's leaders and decision makers. The black male voice will become more and more obsolete.

Our families, too, will suffer. Education and income disparities will make it difficult for black men and women to relate to each other, causing rifts and breaking up families. Perhaps this one of the reasons nearly 70 percent of black children are cur-

offered in black neighborhoods are partially responsible for the reason our children don't dare to dream big.

Poor education systems, disintegration of the black family, disparities in services, economic degradation, discrimination in the workplace, these are just a few of the root causes of the economic decline that threatens the health and stability of the black community. Many, if not all, of these are rooted in slavery and years of oppression.

But we can't let this stop us from reaching our full potential as a people. Collectively, we should understand that these barriers are

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Judge Greg Mathis is national vice president of Rainbow PUSH and a national board member of the Southern Christian Leadership Conference.

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