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 described by auknew 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 State of Black had terrorized her for years.

Davis, now 19, spent much of her 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 Louisville, already had a felony theft conviction under her belt when she Urban League affiliate. Fellow Louisville resident and single mother men to become entangled in the Ashley Burnley, 18, faced a misde-criminal justice system, they're more

she passed through the affiliate's lives together to serve as better role models for their children.

All three at one point in time represented a class of black youth

thor Harry J. Holzer as disconnected in the National Urban League's The America 2007.

"They may be childhood living in uncertainty, 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 gradusingle mother of two children from ates of the National Urban League's Urban Youth Empowerment Program that seeks to give at-risk youth arrived on the doorstep of her local and ex-offenders a second chance.

While women are less likely than

male inmates.

meanorcharge for shoplifting when likely to have left a child or more tance, skills training and on-the-efforts to help current and former education program at a local techbehind upon incarceration. Sixty- job experience. But, with more than doors. Both wanted to get their four percent of female inmates 650,000 ex-offenders - nearly 50 shared the same house with their percent of them black -- re-entering children before entering the justice society every year, the program system, compared to 44 percent of barely makes a dent in the problem. Fortunately, the U.S. House of

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

better life with educational assis- which authorizes more money for ment and is in a post-secondary

To date, the empowerment pro- Representatives seems to be seegram, one of the league's most suc- ing the logic of greater federal incessful, has helped thousands of vestment in such programs. In early disconnected and re-entering indi- November, the chamber passed the viduals get second chances at a so-called Second Chance Act, treatment program, inher own apart-

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

nical 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.



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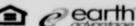


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American Dream Too Far Out of Reach

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 less we discuss the root causes of this degeneration, we risk losing hope and faith in ourselves.

labor and industrial jobs could move a black family into the middle

tems, to which many of us were and 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 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- understand that these barriers are

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

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

Black men, in particular, are struggling with the country's they'll reverse any time soon. Unnew economy. Incomes among black men have actually Gone are the days when unskilled decreased over the last past three decades.

Substandard educational sys- rently born to unmarried parents.

Atwo-income, middle-class famare subjected to, have not been ily doesn't guarantee the same fuable to provide students with the ture for black children. A study skills and knowledge they need to revealed that only one in three black children from middle-income families grow up to have higher incomes than their parents.

Ours is the only ethnic group not guaranteed to do better than the previous generation. Two thirds of white children grow up to have higher income than their parents. men have actually decreased over Inequalities in schools and services Conference.

And we should work together to figure out ways around them. They should not become excuses.

We are a people used to struggle. This is just another test of our strength. If we go into the battle armed with knowledge, we will be successful.

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

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