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OPINION

My Brother's Keeper: Thank You, Mr. President

Changing lives for the better

BY THE REV. BENTLEY DEBARDELABEN



Recently, President Obama announced a new White House initiative to benefit young men and boys of color named "My Brother's Keeper." This program is aimed to create and expand opportunities in the lives of these young men while minimizing harsh realities which often adversely affect them.

Based in part on a program created by former New York mayor, Michael Bloomberg, the Obama administration hopes to assist young men through a variety of benchmarks, including part-

nerships with local businesses that would train and hire these young men.

In a very candid conversation in front of the media, President Obama shared his motives for the creation of "My Brother's Keeper."

Perhaps some of the reasons were personal. Some may have been political. Nevertheless, the formation of such a program can and will be advantageous to the group of young men and boys for whom it was created. At least, that is my hope since, I, too was such a young black male growing up in a home without a father in the urban community.

As a teenage boy whose parents had recently divorced, I was angry, confused, and uninterested in the "new" life

that was thrust upon my siblings and me. Fortunately, there were people in that community, such as teachers, pastors and neighbors, who saw gifts and possibilities where I could not. Despite their constant push for me to not give up, the outcome looked bleak. I was ready to drop out of school, possibly even life.

As it had been foretold, an opportunity arose. I was offered a full academic scholarship through A Better Chance to attend a private high school in Wisconsin. The mission of Better Chance has been to "substantially increase the number of well-educated young people of color who are capable of assuming positions of responsibility and leadership in American society."

If it weren't for this fortuitous occasion provided me, as well as the many people who prayed for, encouraged, and financed me, I absolutely would not be a man "of leadership and responsibility" that I am today. Thus, it is from a deeply personal place that I commend this new initiative from the White House.

Growing up in Middle America during the 1960s and 70s had its challenges for a young man of color such as myself. Unfortunately, growing up in today's society, with all of our progress since the passage of the Civil Rights Bill of 1964, is still tough for young men and boys of color. Any program slated to help them achieve their hopes and dreams is an added bonus.

The Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. said it best, "Injustice anywhere is a threat to justice everywhere. We are caught in an inescapable network of mutuality, tied in a single garment of destiny. Whatever affects one directly, affects all indirectly."

President Obama understands this as do many others. I am grateful that he assembled a task force to help pay forward the many blessings afforded him. This program may radically change their lives (and this nation's) for the better. It is with a humble heart that I say, "Thank you, Mr. President."

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Conservatives Finally Wake Up to Prison Reform

Skyrocketing incarceration rates not sustainable

BY JUDGE GREG MATHIS

A recent column in Washington, D.C.-based paper The National Journal describes in detail how prison reform is becoming a key theme among conservatives.

The Heritage Foundation, an ultra conservative think tank funded heavily by the Koch brothers, is now aligned with a cause Democrats and minority grassroots organizations have long championed.

Sen. Rand Paul, R-Ky., is now a supporter of pending legislation in the U.S. Senate that amends mandatory minimum sentencing laws to give judges more flexibility and several Republican leaders have joined him to support similar reforms.

I have consistently said that reforming our nation's prison system is the right thing to do morally. In addition, research shows that investing in comprehensive prison reforms will save tax-payer dollars and improve outcomes for ex-offenders.

Traditionally, Democrats have made up the majority of policy-makers calling for legislation to reduce incarceration and re-arrest rates among inner-city and low-income youth. However, now -

faced with increasingly strained state and federal budgets -- Republicans are starting to realize that we must change the way our nation's prison systems are run.



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1980. First time non-violent drug offenders can often serve long-term prison sentences with no option for parole.

At the recent Conservative Political Action Conference, Sen. Paul acknowledged drug-related sentences "disproportionately affect African-Americans." Black and Latino-Americans make up over 58 percent of our prison population, despite being only 25 percent of the American population. However, the true rallying point for many conservatives is the reality that these long-term prison sentences and a growing prison population are not helping to reduce crime.

In 2008, President George W. Bush signed the Second Chance Act into law. This law written by Democratic Rep. Danny Davis and Republican Sen. Rob Portman offered federal grant funding to state and local government agencies and nonprofit organizations to support innovative efforts to reduce re-arrest rates and overall prison populations.

In my home state, the Michigan Prisoner Reentry Initiative expanded its parole programs and invested in transition

America has one of the highest incarceration rates of any industrialized nation in the world and leaders in both parties are beginning to realize that this trend is not sustainable. States across the country are running programs similar to Michigan's and they have witnessed comparable results.

Some politicians have been reluctant to support programs helping ex-offenders, because they want to be tough on crime. During election cycles being "soft on crime" is never a good thing. However, the facts show that our current policies on crime are not effective and far too expensive.

Our public officials need to be smart on crime and invest in programs that will allow our prison systems to offer true rehabilitation. This includes career development and mentoring to help ex-offenders readjust to society and avoid being arrested again. It also includes investment in youth violence prevention with similar programs focused on education, job training, and mentoring.

As Republicans are beginning to realize, these commitments will ultimately lead to less Americans behind bars and long-term cost savings.

Judge Greg Mathis is known for his advocacy for equal justice. His inspirational life story of a street youth who rose from jail to Judge has provided hope to millions who watch him on the award-winning TV court show Judge Mathis.

plans that included employment guidance, mentoring and counseling services for ex-offenders. Between 2005 and 2011 Michigan saw 5,000 fewer ex-offenders return to prison. In addition, between 2002 and 2008 Michigan's prison population fell by over 12 percent and the state closed more than 20 correctional facilities.

Compelling research that proves investment in prison reform and ex-offender reentry pays off is an attractive sell to budget conscious Republicans who were previously tone-deaf to widespread dysfunction in U.S. prisons.