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“Behind the Cycle” Summit

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The Behind the Cycle Summit, held December 4-6 and hosted by the Open Society Institute, brought together a diverse mix of people to address interrelated risk factors that contribute to the disproportionate entry of people of color and the poor into the juvenile and criminal justice systems. The term “Behind the Cycle” refers to the need to look behind the cycle of incarceration to address the linkages between unaddressed social conditions and initial entry into the juvenile and criminal justice systems. Described as a national summit “to advance an integrative approach to justice reform,” the conferees addressed the need for increased interdisciplinary collaboration in research, advocacy, and policymaking, with the goal of stopping the cycle of incarceration even before it begins.

An eye-opening Pre-Summit field tour of Washington DC’s Oak Hill Youth Detention facility set the stage for what was to become a jam-packed weekend filled with the importance of addressing human service interventions that address risk factors for negative behavior, over policies that emphasize confinement.

The Summit commenced with an Opening Reception with moving presentations by featured guests Susan Taylor - former Editor-in-Chief Essence Magazine, now Founder of the

National CARES Mentoring Movement; Patrice Gaines- former Washington Post reporter who overcame abuse and jail as a young woman; and John Jackson, President and CEO of the Schott Foundation for Public Education.

Harvard Law School’s Professor Charles Ogletree established the Summit’s tone with his masterful moderation of an insightful Roundtable Discussion which included experts such as Veronica Coleman-Davis, President and CEO of the National Institute for Law and Equity; former police chief Clarence Edwards, Past President, National Organization of Black Law Executives; The Honorable Salima Siler Marriott, Deputy Mayor, City of Baltimore, MD; Ronald Mincy, author of *Black Males Left Behind*; Elsie Scott, Executive Director, Congressional Black Caucus Foundation; Terrie Williams, author, *Black Pain*, and others. Using a “big picture” case scenario centered around the fictional Jamal and his family, the conversation deepened understanding of the complex linkages of social issues that lie behind the cycle of incarceration and which are often the root causes of delinquent and criminal behavior.

Three plenary workshops constituted the “nuts and bolts” of the Summit, moderated by the Ford Foundation’s Kirsten Levingston;

Cait Clarke from Equal Justice Works; and Nicole Austin-Hillary from the Brennan Center for Justice. The workshop panelists profiled successful interdisciplinary collaborations which strengthen communities and support “at-risk” youth; highlighted policy campaigns and initiatives that utilize integrative programmatic approaches to achieve their objectives; and discussed research and communication strategies to build support for “pre-entry” programs, services, and policies.

Both keynote speakers, Marilyn Gambrell and Reverend Alfonso Wyatt, mesmerized the Summit participants. Gambrell, the subject of a Lifetime Original Movie, “Fighting the Odds: the Marilyn Gambrell Story,” literally brought tears to everyone’s eyes as she described the pain youth experience from the trauma of parental incarceration. Rev. Wyatt’s riveting closing oratory, “From Moment to Movement,” inspired, motivated, and galvanized everyone to action.

The Summit took on even more significance as it was convened at the threshold of a new administration. The challenges and opportunities posed by the evolving political landscape were analyzed by Michael Ettlinger, Vice President for Economic Policy at the Center for American Progress. Critical legislative updates from Capitol Hill were delivered by NAACP Washington Bureau Chief Hilary Shelton.

The Behind the Cycle Summit was the culmination of an OSI project that created space for advocates to collaborate across disciplines to address interrelated risk factors that contribute to the disproportionate entry of people of color

and the poor into the juvenile and criminal justice systems. Over the past two years the Project hosted three interdisciplinary working group sessions; conducted intensive research that included interviews, focus groups, and a literature review; and disseminated a policy report authored by the project consultant, Catherine Beane, which contains key recommendations for moving toward a more integrative approach to justice reform. These recommendations, which included the convening of a national summit, were endorsed by over twenty-five research, advocacy, academic and direct service organizations from the fields of education, family and child welfare, public health, criminal justice, poverty, law, juvenile justice, housing, faith communities, human rights, youth development, and racial justice. There is not only consensus but also hunger for interdisciplinary collaboration to address “pre-entry” issues that contribute to the cycle of incarceration.

In closing, there are countless children and young adults living in communities plagued by concentrated poverty, inadequate education and health care systems, and limited economic opportunity. The Behind the Cycle Summit served as a reminder and wake-up call for us to consciously connect the dots between these unaddressed social stressors and entry into the juvenile and criminal justice systems, and redirect the lives of those impacted. They deserve the opportunity to avoid falling into the cycle of incarceration and it is our responsibility to use all strategies at our disposal to plug the pipeline through which they enter. ■