

REMARKS

OF

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AT THE

RIGHT TO COUNSEL NATIONAL CONSORTIUM
3RD ANNUAL MEETING

ON

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WASHINGTON, DC

Thank you, Priya [Sarathy-Jones]. It's a pleasure to welcome everyone to the Office of Justice Programs. I want to thank Priya and our Bureau of Justice Assistance, as well as Maha [Jweied] and the Justice Department's Office for Access to Justice. They've worked hard to make this gathering possible, and we have a great program to show for it.

I want to extend a special thanks to our keynote speaker, whom I'll have the pleasure of introducing in a moment. Deputy Attorney General Rosenstein, we appreciate your taking time out of your busy schedule to join us this morning.

I also want to recognize our partners and participants. In particular, I want to thank the Justice Programs Office at American University's School of Public Affairs for its leadership and cooperation. And, of course, thanks to all the members of the Right to Counsel Consortium who have worked so hard to make sure our justice system lives up to the principles of fairness and equal access on which it is based.

We're fortunate to have leaders in the Department of Justice who are firmly committed to these principles. We have an Attorney General and a Deputy Attorney General who, while fighting to uphold the rule of law and protect America's citizens, work just as hard to achieve a justice system that is both equitable and accessible.

The right to counsel for criminal defendants is the bedrock on which the foundation of true justice is laid. It is enshrined in our Constitution and remains a cornerstone of our criminal justice system. It is an unassailable civic right.

Yet here we are, more than half-a-century after *Gideon*, and there are defendants across the land – many of them poor – who do not have the benefit of this most fundamental of rights, the right to competent legal representation.

This can only be described as a stain. "Equal justice under law" is more than just an inscription on the frieze of the Supreme Court building, it is the basis of our system of laws. When this principle is undermined by under-resourced and over-burdened defenders, or by judges who fail to appoint qualified attorneys to handle cases, the integrity of the system is compromised, and we all pay a price.

Justice Felix Frankfurter once wrote that "the history of liberty is largely the history of the observance of procedural safeguards." Our freedom depends on the durability of the mechanisms designed to protect it. Effective counsel is a defense against the erosion of justice, peace, and security and is a right that must be protected at all costs.

That is why this Department of Justice is committed to upholding and expanding access to counsel. We have an Attorney General and a Deputy Attorney General who understand very well that our system of justice demands balance – qualified prosecutors and qualified defense attorneys, both sides committed, not just to winning cases, but to seeking justice.

I'm proud that the Office of Justice Programs, primarily through our Bureau of Justice Assistance, is playing an important role in ensuring that the sixth amendment is honored both in spirit and in practice. The Right to Counsel National Campaign is the engine that has been powering this work.

We've drawn attention to the challenges facing our nation in securing the right to counsel. We've conducted surveys and published findings on Americans' views of public defense. We've helped stakeholders from across the spectrum define their roles in supporting equal access. And we've provided training, shared information, and helped jurisdictions map out strategies for a healthy public defense system.

By all accounts, the Right to Counsel Campaign has been a success, and we're making progress as a nation toward our goal of equal justice grounded in fair representation. But I think we'd all agree that there is still much more to do. The challenges are long-standing, and overcoming them will take years of effort.

But we're on the right path, and I believe that, in time, we will see the promise of equal access realized throughout our systems of justice and in every corner of America.

It's now my privilege to introduce our keynote speaker.

Deputy Attorney General Rod Rosenstein has built a distinguished career at the Department of Justice, going back to his days in the Attorney General's Honors Program and as a trial attorney with the Public Integrity Section in the early 90s.

He has since served the Department in a number of capacities, from Associate Independent Counsel to Assistant United States Attorney to head of the Department's Tax Division. In 2005, he began 12 years of service as United States Attorney for the District of Maryland, and early this year, he was nominated by the President to take the post of Deputy Attorney General. He was confirmed by the Senate on April 25th.

Over the course of his career, he has earned a well-deserved reputation for integrity and the fair pursuit of justice, and he continues to speak out on behalf of equal justice for all citizens of this country.

It's an honor to have him with us today. I hope you'll join me in giving a warm welcome to Deputy Attorney General Rod Rosenstein.

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