REMARKS

OF

THE HONORABLE GRIFFIN B. BELL
ATTORNEY GENERAL OF THE UNITED STATES

AT THE
DEDICATION CEREMONY OF

THE KANSAS CITY NEIGHBORHOOD JUSTICE CENTER

2:00 P.M.

TUESDAY, MARCH 7, 1978

KANSAS CITY, MISSOURI

I am happy to be in Kansas City today to open this Neighborhood Justice Center. I have been proposing such Centers for two years -- since I served as Chairman of the Pound Conference Follow-up Task Force, which recommended the establishment of such Centers. When I became Attorney General, I determined that I had an opportunity to create several experimental Justice Centers. The one here in Kansas City is the first to open. Others will follow soon in Los Angeles and Atlanta.

The Neighborhood Justice Centers are one of the steps being taken by the present Administration to improve the delivery of justice in the United States. They are designed to fill a gap in our justice system. Many people have nowhere to go when they have the sort of dispute that typically arises during the course of people's daily lives - perhaps with a landlord over a security deposit, with the parents of a youngster whose baseball broke the picture window, between neighbors over a car blocking a driveway, or between separated parents who cannot agree on child visitation rights.

It costs too much and takes too long to go to court over such problems. I hope Neighborhood Justice Centers will prove to be a speedy and inexpensive way of providing satisfactory resolutions to the kinds of problems that I have just mentioned.

At one time, when we were a more rural nation, justices
of the peace provided a legal forum that was close to the
people and readily available. When populations shifted to
urban and suburban areas, the people did not bring their rural
courts with them. The Justice Centers may fill this longstanding
need.

In a broader sense, the Centers reflect the obligation of
our government to be more responsive to the needs of the people
and to operate as economically as possible. The Justice
Centers will be located in urban areas where they are most
needed. They will utilize members of the community as dispute
resolvers, and community leaders will sit on the boards that
establish the policies of the Centers. The Justice Centers
are thus designed to solve--at the community level--problems
arising within a community.

The Centers are also intended to be economical. It is
not necessary to have the full trappings of a courtroom to
resolve many disputes. Indeed, the Centers may provide
better dispute resolutions than the courts and, at the same
time, leave the courts with more time to devote to the larger
cases that courts are better suited to deal with. The limited
size of the offices of the Kansas City Center illustrate
the savings they can effect for the taxpayers.

Nevertheless, the Centers are expected to provide first-class justice. As I have already noted, courts are not suitable for many problems. Many disputes are better resolved by persuading the parties to reach an agreement than by having a court impose a decision in which one party is found wrong and the other party right. And there are genuine disputes over which courts technically do not have jurisdiction but which the Justice Centers can handle.

In short, the Centers are an institution of modest dimensions that should be effective in dealing with problems of modest dimensions.

I have been greatly heartened to learn of the interest and enthusiasm with which this project has been received in Kansas City. The active involvement of civic, community, and legal groups --- working with the city government --- has produced a Center with tremedous prospects for success.

By participating in this experiment you will be riding the crest of a wave of the future. Government must develop institutions that are responsive to contemporary problems. I think that the Neighborhood Justice Center is such an institution.

Alexander Hamilton said, "I think the first duty of society is justice." This Center constitutes an important step in our efforts to fulfill that duty.

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