



TALKING THE MASS INCARCERATION EPIDEMIC

“The mass incarceration epidemic is a stain on our society,” said Rep. Hakeem Jeffries (D-NY) during the Congressional Black Caucus Foundation’s 2019 Annual Legislative Conference. These words underscored the theme of the “Mass Incarceration In America: Where Do We Go from Here?” session.

As the discussion kicked off on Sept. 13, attendees jockeyed for seats to hear thought leaders address issues related to criminal justice reform, including the drivers of sentencing policies and legislation, and the role of community in ending the epidemic.

By Arnesa A. Howell

Continued on page 2

MAKING STRIDES: JOBS COALITION ACCOMPLISHMENTS



While raising awareness of workforce challenges and potential barriers to employment, the JOBS Coalition and its members have combined their resources and industry expertise to achieve the following results:

- Built the Bellevue Resource Center, a program facility serving the hard-to-reach, hard-to-employ, and returning ex-offender populations. The Center was completed on September 30, 2003.
- Guided the creation of the Construction & Design Academy at Cardozo, providing District students access, training, and preparation for careers in the construction industry and trades after graduation. The Academy officially opened in September 2005. □



DECONSTRUCTING CRIMINAL JUSTICE Social justice advocates lead a panel on prison reform and reentry for African Americans.

LIVES REINVENTED: Congressman Danny K. Davis CBC Session Examines Stories of Reentry

While there’s been progress in recognizing the need for outreach to returning citizens reentering their communities following incarceration, more needs to be done to break the revolving door cycle before it starts, according to Illinois Rep. Danny K. Davis.

By Arnesa A. Howell

“The whole business of reentry has come a long way and people are beginning to look more comprehensively at reentry than in the past,” said Davis (D-Ill.). But in a political climate where African-American men continue to be disproportionately affected within the criminal justice system and black women are the fastest growing segment of this population, Davis pointed out: “We have not done the preventive work that needs to be done.”

“For African Americans, there will never be quality of life and equity of opportunity as long as the number of people who are black in this country are suffering from incarceration,” he said.

Davis tackled the issues surrounding mass incarceration and criminal justice reform during the 49th Annual Legislative Conference of the Congressional Black Caucus Foundation, where he hosted the “Returning Citizens, Renewing Humanity, Reinventing Lives, Reinvigorating Our Economy” session on reentry. The Sept. 14 event drew a spectrum of attendees, including those working at the forefront of these issues — from grassroots advocates to legislative leaders. This year’s panelists included celebrity chef Jeff

Henderson, motivational speaker and criminal justice advocate Kemba Smith, and CNN political commentator Van Jones.

The Big [Reentry] Picture

Any discussion of life after prison is incomplete without examining the meaning of reentry. “Full reentry is comprehensive,” said Alfreda Robinson, president of the National Bar Association, while explaining that those reintegrating back into society should have rights such as the ability to “vote fully.”

“It means you come back home to us... We need daddies and mommies being back with their children, [and] we need you in our communities,” she told the crowd, gathered inside a conference room of the Walter E. Washington Convention Center in Washington, D.C.

While not the “sexiest” topic, mass incarceration is a necessary one for discussion as it has far-reaching implications for African Americans, noted Davis. And unlike when the congressman started taking on the issue, said panelist Van Jones, it’s trendy now.

Continued on page 2

Mass Incarceration Continued from page 1

Here, *JOBS Coalition Pathways* excerpts some of the top insights from the panel, moderated by Tiffany Cross of the political platform The Beat DC.

Michael Eric Dyson, sociologist professor at Georgetown University, author and writer, on the most pressing issues in criminal justice today:

We have to pay attention to the different laws and legislation put forth in the attempt to leverage this with our presidential candidates and others who are now putting this issue on the map. How can we have legitimate and quality forms of social reform, of criminal justice reform that talk about cash bail? That talk about the degree to which some of us would not be put in a perilous position if we were able to pay bond in a way that did not tax our families.

On the school-to-prison pipeline and the racial, ethnic and socioeconomic disparities within the criminal justice system:

When you talk about the people who are vulnerable racially and ethnically who have born the brunt, [it] is black, brown ... First Nations [and] indigenous people. Look at the school-to-prison pipeline. When you're kicking kids out of school at the ages of 3, 4, 5 and 6 ... and then you're setting them up to be stigmatized through detention, to be marked. The expulsion of black and brown kids earlier and earlier on under zero-tolerance policies is ... lethal to our communities. We must intervene on the local [school] levels.

Topeka K. Sam, founder and executive director of The Ladies of Hope Ministries, on incarceration disparities for women of color:

I feel that women and girls should not be in jail, period. There are alternatives to incarceration. Women being primary caregivers of young children, women being sole bread winners and a lot of times women are getting caught up in ongoing conspiracies for different things that impact once the man goes. So, the woman ends up being left with a big burden and then she ends up getting caught up in something that lands her in prison. Women are the fastest growing segment going in.

On conditions for incarcerated women:

I also understand that while they wait and while we have laws that we want to put in place to decarcerate, we have to make sure the conditions to confinement are more humane for people. That women are getting access to proper hygiene products, that we are not shackling women during child labor, that we're making sure that families are reunified and children are brought closer. We have all of these issues that we face. □

Note: Excerpts are edited for content and clarity.



'GROWN FOLK TALK'
Political commentator Van Jones says those returning home after prison 'should hit a springboard to success.'

Lives Reinvented Continued from page 1

Widely known for his strong voice on social justice, Jones said that from the decades of "building up the pockets of the incarceration industry, we now have the biggest peace time prison population in the United States in the history of the world, times two." It's a scenario that helped to fuel the creation of #cut50, a national bipartisan initiative aimed at reducing the prison population while increasing community safety, which Jones co-founded.

In remarks, Jones credited bipartisanship for the passage of a 2018 criminal justice reform bill that "wasn't as great as the bill Obama would've gotten done, but it was a good bill." Still, he noted, there is more to be done: "The question now is what we're going to do with this space. Passing one bill doesn't mean anything, you've got to implement it."

He explained that #cut50, in turn, has produced the report "First Step to Second Chances" to decipher how to navigate life after release and "put the power in our hands" to get things done the right way since passing the First Step Act. Jones also highlighted the efforts of the celeb-backed REFORM Alliance, where he serves as the startup CEO. The prison reform organization includes founding partners like Meek Mill and Jay-Z.

"We're saying when people come home, they should hit a springboard to success and not a trap door to failure," Jones said, noting the alliance's work in Pennsylvania to pass a bill to clean up the probation system there and get prison reentry on track.

"Our community comes first," he continued, "people behind bars come first."



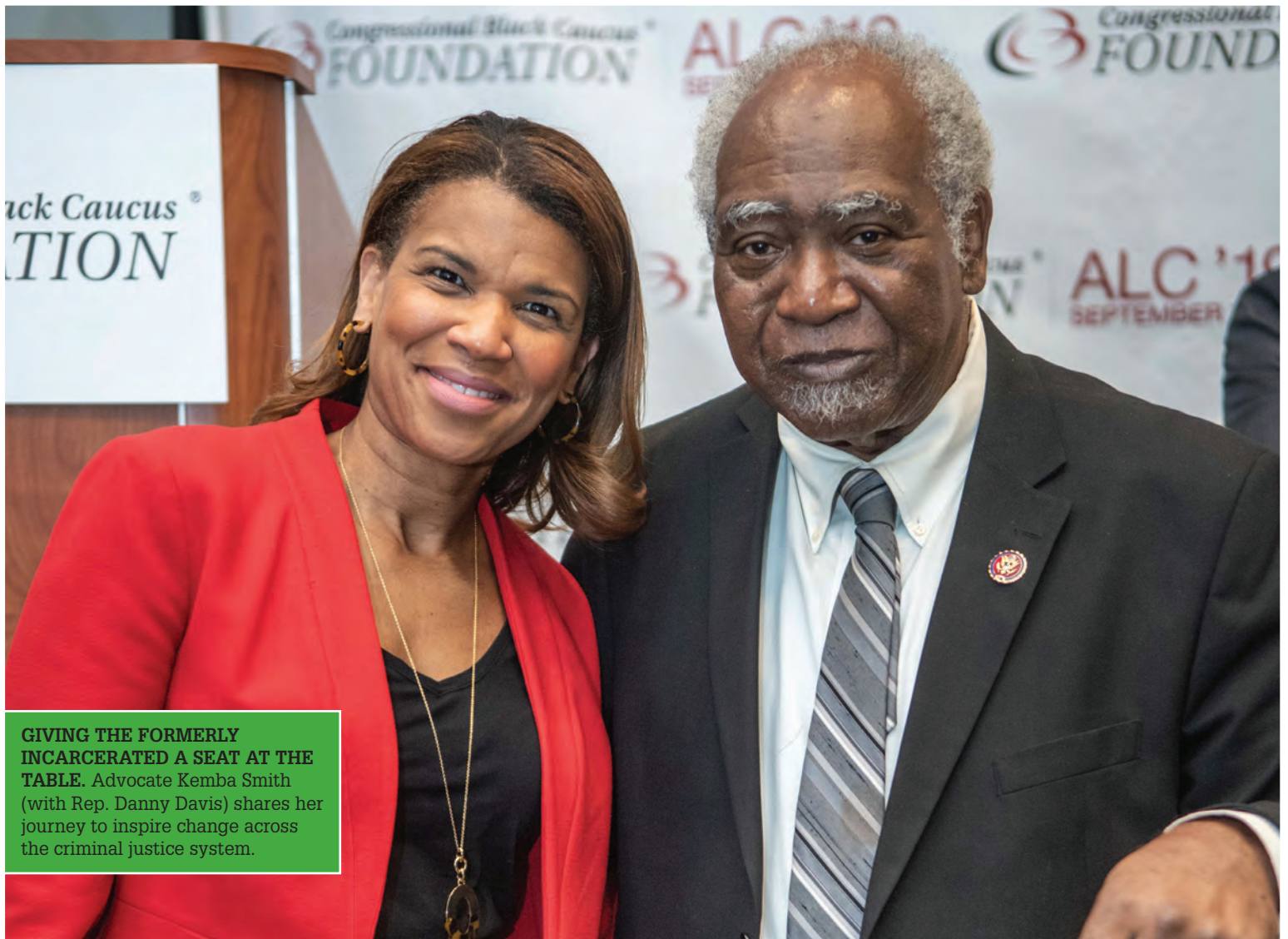
ON THE [GOURMET] GRIND Chef Jeff talks a life transformed from street hustler to top chef.

Pulled 'Out of the Muck'

Before becoming Chef Jeff, Jeff Henderson went to prison for committing infractions against society, said Davis in his introduction. However, Henderson would go on to pull himself "up and out of the muck and miry clay," the congressman said, something that he would inspire others on similar life paths to do.

Henderson shared that a single mother raised him and his sister on government assistance. She was uneducated and didn't tell him why he had to go to school every day. But he remembers clearly being that little boy with the Coke-bottle thick glasses who sat behind the bus driver each day because it had the largest window for him to look out on suburbia — a different picture from his daily environment. "I knew something was

Continued on page 3



GIVING THE FORMERLY INCARCERATED A SEAT AT THE TABLE. Advocate Kemba Smith (with Rep. Danny Davis) shares her journey to inspire change across the criminal justice system.

Lives Reinvented *Continued from page 2*
 wrong, but it sparked my dream,” he said.

In reflection, Henderson, now 55, characterized himself among the intelligent “profound streetpreneurs” and “brilliant thinkers” who were unconscious participants in what’s now called modern day mass incarceration. “I used to cook crack,” he said, drawing a “wow” from the crowd. “I used to take kilos of pure 99.9 percent Peruvian and Columbian cocaine” with the tools of the trade — including baking soda and pots — and check into the motels in Southeast San Diego to cook.

Then came a life-saving moment. “I was blessed with a federal indictment in 1987,” Henderson said. It was during this time that he discovered two things: books that taught him about black intellectuals, and a passion for cooking.

“I began to see the world different,” he recalled.

Henderson started a side hustle in prison, a catering company fueled by his work as head inmate cook. With stolen items from the kitchen — from red onions to extra chicken — he created top ramen concoctions back on the cellblock. He also honed his public speaking skills in

Toastmasters. Henderson ultimately transferred these business traits to a new endeavor after being released. “I had a dream to become a chef,” he said. And he did just that, becoming the first African-American executive chef of a multi-million dollar restaurant at Caesars Palace and the Bellagio in Las Vegas.

“I mastered getting employed as a convicted felon,” Henderson said.

While building upon his own culinary success, he strategically hired other formerly incarcerated individuals. “I clean them up and give them the do-over because I speak the language and I’ve walked in their shoes. I have a prison GED but never been to college,” he explained. “Second chance employment is important.”

An Empowered Voice

Meanwhile, the name Kemba Smith is to many synonymous with the harsh mandatory minimums accompanying first-time, nonviolent drug offenders. As a college student at Hampton University, Smith fell in love with a drug dealer who was later murdered. And although she didn’t “handle, use or sell the

Continued on page 4

JOBS Coalition Pathways

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Lives Reinvented *Continued from page 3*
drugs that were involved,” her relationship with him led to a 24 ½-year sentence in federal prison. “I turned myself in while seven months pregnant and gave birth to my son while incarcerated,” she said.

Throughout the more than six years in prison before her sentence was commuted by President Clinton in 2000, her parents were a source of steadfast support that included caring for her son. “A lot of people in the system are not that fortunate to have family members who can take their children,” she said.

After returning home, Smith’s first priority was being a mother. But she also focused on sharing her story to keep what happened to her from happening to another young woman. “Most grown people wouldn’t want to talk about the poor choices they made, the abusive relationship,

their prison experience ... but I came out running with that, although I was on probation,” she said.

At the time, Smith noted that criminal justice wasn’t a topic people discussed. Still, it didn’t stop her from advocating for change on drug laws and sentencing guidelines, among other issues, as she continues to work with reentry and criminal justice organizations.

“Reentry to me was to prevent the prison-to-school pipeline and to share my story,” she told the audience. “It’s so hard for a person coming out of prison to let go of those shackles.”

But she emphasized that regaining a sense of community and belonging is important to moving forward, and reclaiming one’s voice in the process. “Formerly incarcerated people are now starting to get a seat at the table,” Smith said, “and influencing change.” □

JOBS COALITION PROMISES

- Provide opportunities for District residents to secure gainful employment.
- Remove barriers that prevent meaningful employment.
- Provide educational and training opportunities for all District residents interested in pursuing careers in various industries and trades.
- Work toward the creation of a comprehensive, fair, and more open system of training and hiring the underserved, unemployed and returning ex-offenders.
- Ensure that the training and educational skills being taught are relevant to the job market of today and tomorrow.
- Engage elected and appointed officials to support legislation and maintain appropriate oversight to ensure gainful employment for District residents, including the underserved, unemployed and returning ex-offenders.

JOBS COALITION MISSION STATEMENT

We will work together to develop a long-term strategy that creates an environment where aspiring District residents will have unprecedented opportunity to succeed. We strive to create a fair and open system, supported by government, industry, employers and the education and faith-based communities, which seeks to properly train today’s apprentices while making an unparalleled commitment to educating students and others not yet in the workforce.



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