

TESTIMONY
OF
OSCAR DIAZ DE OROPEZA
TO THE
MONTGOMERY COUNTY BOARD OF EDUCATION
COMMUNITY FORUM
AT
KENNEDY HIGH SCHOOL
OCTOBER 15, 2009

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Good evening,

My name is Oscar Diaz de Oropeza. I work with Identity as the Program Coordinator at the Montgomery County Correctional Facility. I am responsible for all orientation and pre-placement activities of new Latino inmates, which essentially provides a roadmap for the rules and available resources inside the facility. I also facilitate several behavioral modification programs, including an HIV prevention program and Responsible Fatherhood program. I conduct counseling and testing for HIV in the medical center, and I make referrals for inmate services, including educational classes such as ESOL and GED, as well as addiction and medical services. In sum, I am an active advocate for Latino inmates here in Montgomery County.

Facilitating these programs to incarcerated Latinos has helped me greatly in creating a sense of trust between them and myself, and has also made me realize that incarceration may be the only time where many of these people have had the opportunity to access education.

I have seen how immigrant Latino youth come to this country with a sincere desire to progress and overcome difficult circumstances, not just financially, but also emotionally. Most of them come here hoping to find the family and the community belonging that in many cases they lost back home. I have an example from an immigrant from Central America. He is one of my clients at the Correctional Facility who came to this country at

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the age of sixteen after losing his parents in the civil war. He came to live with his relatives and lived with them for several years with no access to school or any other pro-social activities, working his entire salary to repay his trip. He suffered through physical and sexual abuse. Tired of this situation and without a place or person where to turn for help he met a friend from his home country while he was walking in a local mall, and he confided his desperation. The friend told him about a group that could become a family to him where he could find love, protection and be accepted. He became a member of a gang and got involved so deeply that when he realized where he was heading it was too late, and there was no way out. He is now awaiting a life sentence for a crime for which he is deeply ashamed.

Youth are not born criminals. Nobody grows up desiring to become a burden on society. It is for that reason that I come today to please ask you to continue funding youth development programs for at-risk youth. Research has shown that prevention programs work, and more cost-effective than incarceration. Everyone has the potential to become the best that they can, its just that many young people need extra guidance and support to counteract the temptations that come with challenging life circumstances.

I definitely love the mission of my work at the Correctional Facility, but I ask that you work to support youth before they get to me. Thanks so much for your attention, and for your continued dedication to our youth.

Oscar Diaz de Oropeza