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THE WHITE HOUSE

STATEMENT BY THE PRESIDENT

Three years ago, America committed itself to cutting the rate of mental retardation in half by the end of the century. That is a notable goal, worthy of a great nation, and today in meeting with the President's Committee on Mental Retardation, I have renewed our commitment to that goal.

The problem of mental retardation deserves our attention not only for the sake of the more than six million afflicted Americans and their families, but for all of us. The majority of retarded citizens can become productive members of society.

There are three important points about mental retardation that must be understood:

One, with appropriate training, retarded people are capable of continuing development in normal community settings. Primarily through its housing agencies, the Federal Government will help retarded adults obtain suitable homes. But the real help must come from the local level.

Two, corrective measures in early childhood can reduce the severity of a handicap. Young children should be screened for handicaps and, when found, they should be corrected.

Three, since we know some of the causes of mental retardation, we know some ways to prevent it. Biomedical research may be helpful in extending this knowledge.

At present rates, some four million of our children expected to be born by the year 2000 will be retarded or become retarded. The members of the committee have advised me that it is realistic to believe that the number can be reduced by half, and I urge all segments of our society to do their part in achieving this objective.

To attain this goal, every prospective mother should have available to her good prenatal care, including the most current techniques of fetal diagnosis and genetic counseling where necessary. She should know the kind of diet which will promote proper growth of the fetus. Good care for mother and child should continue postnatally, with special attention for premature infants. Infants and young children should be screened at appropriate intervals for hearing, visual and other defects which could impede their learning ability, so that the defects may be corrected before the child falls far behind.

A healthy environment and an adequate, balanced diet are especially important throughout the younger years, as is vaccination against rubella and other diseases.

Our school systems must be strengthened, so that they can provide the appropriate education which both the law and our conscience say may not be denied to retarded or otherwise handicapped children. By appropriate education, I mean training in academic, vocational and social skills which will enable these children to live up to their highest potential. And let us never underestimate how high that potential is.

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In the last few years, great progress has been made in winning legal recognition for the rights of retarded citizens -- not only the right to education, but the right not to be confined in an institution without habilitative treatment, the right to be paid for work done, and other rights that belong to all citizens.

I urge employers to consider the very real job capabilities of retarded persons and to use the U.S. Employment Service to the fullest possible extent in hiring retarded persons. If we forget stereotypes and look at retarded people as people, we will recognize what so many of them have already proved -- that they can do hundreds of different jobs reliably and well.

There is urgent need to chart a concerted effort to minimize the occurrence of retardation, and to assure humane services and full citizenship for those who are retarded. I encourage this Committee to pursue to completion its report on the directions that effort should take over the next quarter century.

Finally, I call upon all Americans to become more familiar with the problems of retardation, and the potentials of retarded people. With our understanding, they will thrive. With our love, they will flower.

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