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Friday, May 18th at Sojourner-Douglass College in Baltimore, the Institute of the Black World 21st Century (IBW) convened a Town Hall Meeting on the "War on Drugs" and its devastating impact on Black communities. Nationally syndicated talk show host Warren Ballentine, Keynote Presenter for the event, told an attentive audience that "it's time to consider legalization to take the profit out of the drug traffic and stop the violence and killing in our communities." Ballentine's comments came after listening to a panel of local and national drug policy analysts and policy reform advocates detail the damaging effects of the War on Drugs and racially biased criminal justice policies on Black neighborhoods. The panel was moderated by Attorney Nkechi Taifa, Senior Policy Analyst, Open Society Foundations.

Catalina Byrd of the Hip Hop Caucus, and Neill Franklin, Executive Director, Law Enforcement Against Prohibition (LEAP) made a Power Point presentation documenting the disparities in arrests, sentencing and convictions between Blacks and whites in Baltimore City and the State of Maryland. They emphasized that most of the arrests and convictions are for non-violent drug offenses. Despite the fact that drug use in Black and white communities is about the same, Black people are disproportionately arrested and sent to jail/prison. Byrd urged the audience to increase voter participation in order to change policies which are adversely affecting Black communities. Deborah Small, Executive Director of Break the Chains, People of Color and the War on Drugs followed with a Power Point presentation that illustrated the long history of discriminatory criminal justice policies directed at Black people. She suggested that "Black people have always been criminalized as a way of controlling and preventing us from achieving full freedom in this country."

Maryland Delegate Jill Carter said that most people in the audience were already aware of the negative effects of the criminal justice system on Black people. "We're preaching to the choir," she said. "Nothing will change as long as we stay at home, don't vote and allow politicians, including the leadership of the Democratic Party, to get away with adopting or tolerating these policies. You've got to work with those of us who are trying to fight the good fight and hold leaders accountable." Noted activist and Radio Talk Show Host Dr. Tyrone Powers voiced support for legalization of drugs but cautioned that "We just can't legalize drugs without having

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the alternatives in place first. If we legalize drugs without having the right system in place, Black kids will be sitting in the classroom like zombies spaced out on drugs." Neill Franklin, who often debates Powers on his radio show, countered by stating: "There are already a number of programs available. They may be inadequate, but we can't allow prohibition to continue until we have all the alternatives enacted. We're losing lives to the War on Drugs every day." John Morris, Dean of the School of Urban Planning and Community Development, Sojourner-Douglass College, touted building economically sustainable communities where people are genuinely connected as an alternative to the War on Drugs and the illicit drug trafficking in Black neighborhoods. "We have to focus on reconnecting with each other as a people, building relationships and using our collective resources to create safe and economically viable communities." During his remarks, Warren Ballentine clearly agreed with this approach: "We have got to use our economic power to check those forces that are oppressing us and invest in our own businesses as a way of building strong communities."

During a lively question and answer period, the frustration with years of neglect and misguided policies was evident as speaker after speaker complained about the absence of economic opportunities in Black communities, the construction of more prisons and displacement of Black people from their neighborhoods by "development." There was also sharp criticism of Black leaders and organizations who some suggested talk about the problem but are not on the frontlines working in the community on a daily basis.

In his closing Charge and Call to Action Dr. Ron Daniels, President of IBW, thanked Kareem Aziz of Sojourner Douglass College for being the principal Liaison for the Town Hall Meeting and commended grassroots activists for their lifesaving work on the frontlines. He indicated that there is a role for everyone to play in the struggle to end the War on Drugs and racially biased criminal justice policies. "We need to recognize and respect the efforts of everyone who is engaged in the fight to rescue and rebuild our communities and broaden the base of organizations and individuals who are committed to stopping the criminalization and incarceration of our young people. The various criminal justice and drug policy reform organizations also need to come together to form a Justice Collaborative like the ones recently formed in Washington, D.C. and Pittsburgh." He challenged organizations to attend the follow-up Debriefing and Strategy Meeting to begin the process. "The town hall meeting was not only to create greater awareness about the disastrous consequences of the War on Drugs, but to build greater unity in the community to work for just and humane alternatives. A Baltimore Justice Collaborative can take-on this task. The real work begins tomorrow."

At the conclusion of Dr. Daniels' presentation, Doc Cheatham, President of the Baltimore Chapter of the National Action Network, personally pledged his support for the effort. He said, "I'm willing to sit down with other organizations once every three months to work on this problem". Based on outreach by Jamye Wooten, Kinetics Faith and Justice Network, Richard Rowe, Sojourner-Douglass College and Minister Al Watson, Empowerment Temple AME Church, more than thirty (30) organizations have tentatively agreed to be part of the Baltimore Justice Collaborative. Follow-up meetings to solidify the Collaboratives in Washington, D.C., Pittsburgh and Baltimore are planned for the second week in June.

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