

Mayor's Address to the People of New Orleans

Gallier Hall, August 20, 2020, 4:00 PM

As prepared for delivery

Good afternoon. Thank you for giving me the opportunity to address you regarding the state of our City. I am speaking to you today from Gallier Hall for a reason. This building was the seat of our City's government for over a century, and I stand here filled with the spirit of the Mayors that have come before me.

Two and a half years ago, even eight months ago, I don't think any of us could have imagined the state of the nation and the state of the world we find ourselves in right now. I am so grateful for the support you have shown me and have shown our City --- the countless emails, cards, the flowers, and for your prayers --- thank you. It matters. As I committed to you when I became mayor, we are moving forward together.

Since my inauguration as your Mayor on May 7, 2018, we have faced many unprecedented challenges together. Flood events, the Hard Rock collapse, the cyber-attack, tragedies in the middle of our Mardi Gras celebrations, and now a global pandemic that has taken the lives of 569 members of our community.

We are no strangers in our City to trauma or to disruption. After all, next week will mark the fifteenth anniversary since Hurricane Katrina. We are in the peak of hurricane season right now; we are prepared. We are all well-versed in the unwavering focus, the

hope, and the strength it takes to rebuild from what can seem like disaster. I'm here to deliver a message of hope and point the way forward to our future beyond this pandemic.

The present moment can feel and seem like a unique and unimaginable challenge. But within the 300-year history of our City, it is not without precedent.

In 1853, New Orleans was in the throes of a Yellow Fever pandemic. That year alone, 8,000 New Orleanians died. Our City endured and fought through waves of death, against a disease that few understood and that many did not survive.

Men and women of every race were forced to expose themselves to risk infection to just make a living. For a long time, a myth persisted that Black people could not be infected, and thousands died. Marginalized workers were put at even greater risk, made expendable, to maintain the lifestyle and convenience of those who were less vulnerable to the disease. Today, many of our residents feel they are living that history.

The parallels are startling. But they can also be an inspiration. I am joined daily on the front lines of this fight by our public safety team: the NOPD, NOFD, NOEMS, NOHSEP, OPCD, by countless medical health professionals, and by the New Orleans Health Department. Dr. Jennifer Avegno, who leads the Health Department today, has been an invaluable partner and leader, as have all of my public safety chiefs. I am grateful for this team,

their expertise, their empathy, and their efforts to make sure that our people are safe.

Our Health Department, the only Parish-level health department in the state, was formed to combat Yellow Fever. The men and women of that department have made it among the most respected, most prepared public health agencies in the nation. Our entire public safety team has been responding to this challenge while being hit themselves. EMS alone had 58% of their manpower affected by COVID during this crisis. They never stopped the work.

All of the institutions we built to combat pandemics in our history: Ochsner, Touro, the New Orleans Health Department, the New Orleans Mosquito, Termite and Rodent Control Board, the New Orleans Sewerage and Water Board have worked to preserve our lives during the COVID crisis.

This crisis is the defining challenge of the moment. On top of the threat it represents to our health, this pandemic has a dramatic impact on our economy and even our civic culture. "Social distance" is contrary to who we are as a people, and the need to limit social gatherings has transformed our lives.

The way we love on one another and how we show our support is disrupted. Each life lost ripples through our community at a time when we can't even turn to our traditions and our rituals that we have depended on for generations. How we celebrate life and

death in this City is different than anywhere else in the nation. But families have been unable to be with their loved ones as they faced the end.

The impact the crisis is having on individual families is stark. With the expiration of Unemployment Insurance benefits and the resumption of foreclosures in the courts, people are struggling to make ends meet. We've seen our eviction rate triple since last year. We have seen an increase in 911 calls from residents overwhelmed by new levels of mental trauma. Our children are living in these homes and are not shielded from this trauma.

My administration has fought hard to help. We have implemented a rental assistance program, created an emergency housing program for our homeless, and provided legal assistance to residents facing eviction. This also includes my Mayor's Fund, which provides diapers and formula to families, and assists members of our immigrant community unable to receive aid from the government.

But the scale of our need far exceeds the resources available on the local level. I need you to understand that. While I am not legally empowered to halt evictions, I am doing everything I can to fight for immediate intervention on the federal level to get our people the support they desperately need. I recognize the challenges facing our renters. The time of a pandemic is not the time for our people to lay awake at night wondering how to make

next month's rent. It is also not the time for landlords to face missing mortgage payments or losing investments they spent a lifetime to build.

We must address this crisis with every tool at our disposal. That means, first and foremost, getting people fed. I think of the hard work that was done in the early weeks, led by New Orleans Public Schools, the New Orleans Recreation Department, and many of our nonprofit partners, to feed families almost 1.5 million meals. Obtaining food became one less worry. In June, the City initiated the largest federally funded mass-feeding program in the nation for residents facing food-insecurity. We have served over 10,000 residents three meals a day, and we are grateful for the support from the 70 local restaurants participating. Families are fed and local restaurants and hospitality businesses are paid to feed them.

In the midst of these challenges, I have hope. Our businesses are leading the way, innovating new ways to work and get things done, implementing contact tracing and no-contact services, spreading seating into the sidewalks, and turning to new technologies to keep moving forward. Our faith-based community has found new ways to connect with their members, bringing again that spirit of hope.

We've seen innovation from our artists and creators. I think about the "Sew Dat" mask program. Shamarr Allen's "Quarantine and Chill." And Dee 1's "Corona Clap." Only in New Orleans.

We face these challenges together. We've seen that the public health guidelines we put in place, work. We bent the curve and we stopped the spread, and we will keep it up. We have led the nation in COVID testing and have been deliberate about making mobile testing sites available to communities we know were hit the hardest.

The data shows that we saved lives. At the beginning of this pandemic, national models were predicting more than 1,500 fatalities by midsummer. Thousands of lives were saved because we shared the sacrifice; we wore our masks, we embraced social distancing, and our residents, churches and businesses took responsibility for one another and for the health of our community.

What we have done has not been without pain, especially for essential workers and for small businesses and their employees. They have suffered hardships, lost income, and business profits.

Shared sacrifice right now means that everyone must submit to some level of change, and New Orleans is stepping up to do what's needed. One of the most critical steps we can take to protect our economy from further disruption is to ensure our students attend school in person. I have worked closely with our health department leadership and with our school leaders to ensure a data-driven plan for reopening schools safely.

The City itself is facing a significant impact. Without immediate aid at the federal level, we face a budget shortfall of \$130 million for this year alone. That's an economic reality we must face, and it's one that's likely to have a direct impact on our City employees. New Orleans was disproportionately impacted by this pandemic on the front-end and suffered again when our CARES Act funding was diverted and diluted at the state level.

Throughout this crisis, my CAO and leadership team have worked to keep our people working and to keep government moving. We've streamlined our operations to avoid disruption, but the challenges ahead are sobering.

For the City employees who have been showing up every single day on the front lines: I see you, and I am so grateful for you. It's hard when you're in the middle of a struggle to look around and feel like everyone isn't pulling that same weight--- like you're alone. You're not. I'm with you, and I will continue to stand with you and fight for you at every step of the way. The work never stopped and neither have you, and I'm proud of you.

For our employees who have been less visible, those who have been forced to adapt to the challenges of quarantine and remote work, who innovate every day to find new ways to deliver for the residents who depend on us: I see you, too. Even though you haven't been at your desk, you haven't stopped. To those employees with children at home, I stand in awe of how you, like

so many of our residents, have navigated the challenge of suddenly becoming fulltime teachers, in addition to being full-time public servants.

To all of our city employees: Take pride in what you have done and what you do for our city every day. At no other time in our city's history can our city workers make a more positive impact than right now. You have the honor of serving. Be proud to work for this City. I am.

We will continue to make critical investments that shape our future. Our 2020 bond initiative will function as a local stimulus. I have worked closely with our City Council to ensure that we issue a large enough bond package to rebuild infrastructure and infuse funding into our economy all at the same time. Our 2020 bonds, totaling more than \$280 million, are part of the \$500 million you overwhelmingly approved with your vote last November. Thank you for that. Those bonds will allow us to use existing millage rates to repair our streets and drainage lines, build green infrastructure, and develop affordable housing.

These investments are on top of the more than \$1 billion in FEMA-funded infrastructure work that my administration has put to work since my inauguration. I thank FEMA for standing with us to get these long-delayed projects rolling.

The decisions my administration made in the years preceding COVID are paying off now. The cyber-attack last year prepared

our teams to transition to remote work, nearly seamlessly. Our procurement team rapidly transitioned to online bidding, and since the outbreak has issued more than \$300 million in infrastructure contracts alone. The City's improved credit rating, which my team achieved last year, put us into a stronger financial position before this pandemic hit.

Our financial team uncovered millions that sat unspent for decades. We called together the Board of Trusts, a body that had not met in three decades, and we released over \$1 million in funds, some of which hadn't been touched in almost a century.

We cannot lose sight of the challenges we faced before the pandemic. When the first COVID cases emerged in March, our City was already under two emergency declarations, and even now we continue the work of recovering from the tragedy at Hard Rock. Just this week, we finally achieved some degree of closure with the recovery of our people's remains. It was a terrible relief, and my administration will continue to hold the building's ownership accountable and stand with our families to seek justice. Because the work doesn't stop.

In the face of multiple unexpected challenges we've had in the last two years, it is easy to overlook the tremendous progress that has been made.

Our Office of Youth and Families is working to improve outcomes for our children. This year, we became the third city in the country

to create a "Fiscal Map," which provides an analysis of public investments in our youth. In 2020 alone, those investments total \$40 million, with a per capita investment of \$361 per youth, for ages 0 to 24. Way ahead of the curve compared to other cities our size.

By contrast, it costs our City about \$77,000 per person, per year, to incarcerate people at the Orleans Justice Center. That's why we are investing in our people, funding alternatives to incarceration, and offering critical social services that can prevent people from becoming involved with the system to begin with.

To that end, the City has doubled down on our investment in Early Childhood Education, from \$1.5 million to \$3 million. We've led a wholesale transformation of our juvenile justice system, with the reimagined Juvenile Justice Intervention Center. When I first took office and visited this site, I found 70% of the children there not going to class, sitting alone in dark cells. No more. We are investing in our young people, changing their outcomes and their lives.

We've engaged our youth voices through our Youth Advisory Council and the Junior Civic Leadership Academy program. Once again, we invested in our young people, and they invested in us, giving up their Saturday mornings for months to engage with City government. And just last week, we stood with the four winners of our mask-wearing poster contest: Dai'ja Alford, Izzy Harrel,

Raeann Koehler, and Mauro Nunez. These young people are using their voices and their creativity to promote public safety messages, and I could not be more proud.

We've expanded the way we communicate to residents, working to meet them where they are and bridge the digital gap. With support from key social media influencers, and the embrace of new applications like direct texting, we are using new ways to deliver important information, and engage directly on the platforms residents use.

Our Neighborhood Engagement Office continues to deliver on their mission to expand public participation in government. They've trained community leaders to become Neighborhood Navigators, connecting residents with resources and helping them access critical services during this pandemic.

They've also worked to drive up participation in the 2020 Census, and remember: that deadline was moved up by the federal government, so the time to be counted is right now. The census count will determine how \$1.5 trillion in federal spending is distributed. We will have to live with our census count for the next ten years, so let's get it right.

We continue to steer our City toward a more financially stable future. Because fighting for our Fair Share didn't stop when COVID hit. That meant securing an agreement for Champion's Square, bringing \$2.3 million to our city. It meant fighting for

franchise fees, bringing in another \$6 million. This money was left on the table for years. Our City Attorney, Ms. Sunni LeBeouf, led the way in that fight. We're working to get every dollar and put an end to a culture where our City and our people get anything less than what they deserve. YOU are worth more, and so is the future we are building together.

When I look ahead at that future: I am filled with hope. I am filled with hope when I see how our City responded to the wave of peaceful protests that swept the country this summer.

Racial injustice and inequality are a legitimate concern for the people of our City and they should be. We have a moral obligation to ensure that Black Lives Matter when it comes to equal opportunity and to economic and social mobility. We have an obligation to uplift our people, and to make Black Lives Matter in our neighborhoods, to embrace behaviors and policies that keep our families safe, and out of the system.

Years before activists were calling for "Eight Can't Wait" reforms, our police department led the way with a commitment to constitutional policing, and the results speak volumes. While many cities encountered turmoil and dysfunction during the protests this summer, our police department had no walk outs and came through with minimal conflict and maximum transparency. At a time when crime is rising across the country, we

are continuing to grow our department and build relationships that keep our people safe.

It fills me with hope that even as we confront the impacts from COVID, our Workforce Development office, JOB1, is leading the way by redefining how government connects people with jobs, delivering the best results of any similar program in the state. Through Clean Up NOLA, we are getting properties that have languished since Katrina back into commerce. We're demolishing blighted properties, clearing lots, and adding affordable housing. This allows our people a chance to keep and build generational wealth. Our Office of Community and Economic Development has secured over \$18.5M in new funding for this work this year.

I'm proud that our administration took action at the outset of this crisis to help our most vulnerable population, getting our people off the street and keeping them off the street. That is our commitment.

As we navigate this new reality, our people continue to bring me hope. During this crisis, people have seized the opportunity to reconnect with their families, using the time to address delayed maintenance on their homes or businesses, or focusing inward on their personal faith. Our people are finding ways to survive in this moment and thrive going forward.

The story of New Orleans is the story of reinvention and of opportunity, of uplifting and embracing the triumph and tragedy

that have shaped us into who we are today, seizing every opportunity to create and to inspire what we can become next. Because what happens next is going to be something both familiar, yet altogether new for our people and for our City. What happens next is rebirth, a time and an obligation to reshape for the better, every aspect of our lives: how we live, how we work, how we teach our children, and how we keep our community safe. It's what we do in this City: we recover, we rebuild, and we redefine what it means to be New Orleans.

You've heard me say over and over again throughout this crisis that what happens next depends on what we do right now. Right now: we're in the fight. Right now: we're called upon to work harder and to work smarter. Because what we do right now will define New Orleans for the next three hundred years. We're moving forward into that future, and we're moving forward together.

May God bless you, and may God bless the City of New Orleans.