

# Birmingham Mayor Randall Woodfin's State of the Community address

This evening, I come before you in a state of mourning.

We're a city with a broken heart.

We grieve for the family of Mayor Larry Langford, whom we memorialized just this morning.

We grieve for the family, friends and the entire Birmingham Police Department as we recall the sacrifice of Sgt. Wytasha Carter, who paid the ultimate price for his service to our city.

And our hearts are with the second officer who was shot along with Sgt. Carter yesterday.

We grieve with them and we stand with them as they work to protect and serve. (I'd like to have Police Chief Patrick Smith and officers to please stand.)

These are trying times for our city, times that test our resolve. However, I believe in the power of prayer, our greatest spiritual weapon in times of crisis.

It was prayer that fortified civil-rights foot soldiers before they hit these very streets to march in the name of justice. It was prayer that served as comfort when our forefathers and foremothers were faced with the brutal horrors of hatred and division.

And I believe it's prayer that will be the foundation as our city faces these current hurdles.

At this time, I'd like to ask Pastor Terry Drake to join me on stage and uplift these and other issues in prayer.

**[Prayer]**

Thank you, pastor.

Our days have indeed been challenging. In recent months, our communities have faced a crisis in leadership on several fronts, from the Birmingham Water Works board to the Birmingham Jefferson County Transit Authority to most recently, one of our most treasured institutions, the Birmingham Civil Rights Institute.

But let me assure you right now, our commitment is to demand strong, dependable and transparent leadership through these institutions. And as your mayor, know that I will fight for our assets because they are ours.

Birmingham, we will overcome these current obstacles.

Because it's in our DNA. Our resolve is as strong as the iron ore on which this city was built. Our passion burns as the blast furnaces that shape those metals.

This is Birmingham, the city that taught the world tolerance.

The city that showed the world the power of prayer.

The city that defined leadership on unprecedented levels.

We are the blueprint of change.

And we are currently writing another chapter in our grand legacy.

Over the past year, my commitment to our communities remains as steadfast as it did when I first gave that solemn oath to serve our city.

Neighborhoods have always been the hallmark of this administration. My campaign was solidified by the residents of this city – the scores I met walking the campaign trail, knocking on doors, shaking thousands of hands and simply listening.

Putting people first is what we do at City Hall.

And we're currently riding off the momentum of a successful 2018.

We've prioritized the removal of blight – more than 300 structures have been demolished since January 2018, work that has been supplemented by our new Neighborhood Revitalization Fund. Initial deposits to the fund include \$1.4 million through Shipt and DC BLOX investments in the city, plus \$4 million from budget savings we discovered through our focus on efficiency and effectiveness.

Last year, we launched regular town hall meetings in our council districts, providing residents a chance to personally interact with Birmingham leadership and offer a voice in shaping their neighborhoods.

And we're not done yet – more meetings are scheduled throughout 2019. And we will continue to listen to you.

While our focus is always outside the four walls of City Hall, we've made several adjustments internally to better serve the people.

We have invested in our current employees by reinstating Cost of Living Adjustments and Longevity Pay. And we are working hard to ensure that future generations of city employees are taken care of.

That's why we are working so hard to protect our people by protecting our pension. Right now, I am working closely with the members of the pension board to come up with strategies to fully fund the pension and remove any doubt about our employees' future.

We've peeled back the layers of city government to identify what works, what doesn't and how we can better serve the people of Birmingham.

Those actions have included feedback from thousands of employees and residents like you.

We have turned our search for department heads into a quest to find the best talent available to serve our city.

That has included the new leadership roles in more than a dozen city departments and divisions and new leadership at the Birmingham Police Department in Chief Smith.

Tonight, representatives from our city departments are here. If they would stand so that you could see these leaders, I'd appreciate it. They lead teams that help get done what needs to be done in our city.

If you were like me yesterday, your soul was shaken to its very core when you heard the news that Sgt. Carter had been killed and another officer was in the hospital as part of a senseless act. We will not tolerate criminals taking control of our streets.

Now, let's pause to reflect on where we are and where we want to be when it comes to public safety.

Violent crime is a public health care crisis in our city that will require all of us working together to make a difference.

Our strategy is a three-pronged approach to violent crime: prevention, enforcement, and re-entry.

Chief Smith arrived in Birmingham last June with a major shortage of officers. Since then, the Birmingham Police Department has hired nearly 40 officers and transitioned to an updated work schedule in all precincts to provide more officers on the streets at peak hours.

But there's more to public safety than simply flooding our blocks with badges. We are looking to create robust neighborhood watch programs with block captains because no one knows neighborhoods better than those who walk its streets daily.

It's the concerned, loving mentors, big mamas, aunties and respected elders who will help us take our streets back.

And with the formation of our re-entry task force, we're looking to support families and communities after a loved one has been incarcerated and returns home. We want to reduce their chances of falling back into the system.

You will hear more about our peace strategy in the coming weeks. Instead of focusing on reducing violence from the few bad actors in our city, we're focusing on bolstering peace within the majority of the population.

In the last year, we've launched the Office of Social Justice and Racial Equity.

This office has been helping to facilitate a conversation around social justice issues in our community. Next Monday, in observance of Martin Luther King Jr. Day, that team will host “Let’s Talk, From Conflict to Connection,” a free event at Boutwell Auditorium from 10:30 am – 12 p.m. This event will help the community have a constructive dialogue about leadership for civil and human rights.

Birmingham is the bedrock of social activism in this country – this office will help the beacon of equality and justice shine more brightly.

We’ve transitioned the Office of Economic Development into the Department of Innovation and Economic Opportunity. Their marching orders are clear – provide more opportunity for women and minority-owned business owners in Birmingham.

Under IEO, we saw the creation of more than 2,100 new jobs in 2018. We haven’t had that many jobs come on line since 2011. We can only expect that number to rise this year.

We are focused on putting people first by supporting our small businesses. This includes the upcoming establishment of a 21-person Small Business Council made up of small business owners, start-up founders, ecosystem builders and small business supporters. And as a reminder, the deadline to apply for this council is Jan. 23. Please visit our website at [www.birminghamal.gov](http://www.birminghamal.gov) for a link to an application.

And for my sports fans out there, you’re going to love what we have in store in the coming year. The Birmingham Iron football team and The Birmingham Legion soccer team will be starting their seasons in the coming weeks. Birmingham Iron will play its first football game at Legion Field on Feb. 10 at 1 p.m.

The New Orleans Pelicans will operate an NBA G League team that will play in our own Legacy Arena.

And, we can’t forget that in 2021, the world will descend upon our doorstep for the World Games.

Tonight, we have copies of our strategic plan available for you. It includes 92 initiatives. Expect a more robust update on the execution of the plan in March.

It's an exciting time to be in Birmingham. However, we cannot be bound by the spirit of complacency.

Not when so many residents are unable to rest soundly at night due to the fear of violence outside their windows.

Not when so many of our neighbors reside in food deserts, unable to access healthy foods for their families.

Not when there are still gaps in workforce opportunities for our youngest generation.

Not when our community is split apart by divisive conversations.

This is not a time to retreat to our corners and close our ears to conflicting ideas.

Because this is not the Birmingham whose radical thinking, willingness to build bridges and openness to engage in conversation changed the hearts of a nation.

It's time to have the difficult conversations.

And addressing these problems means understanding our history. We have to examine, unravel and address the generational problems that have hindered our progress – those deep-rooted, systemic issues that slow our march from promise to potential.

But I am hopeful. I'm surrounded by a dedicated team that has vowed to make change.

Because this is their city too. And we want better for our home.

Regarding access to healthy foods, I vow to do what it takes to talk to CEOs and grocery stores around the country to alleviate the issue of food deserts. I'm willing to wade through a countless number of "no's" to get to that one "yes" – that yes that will help our children and elders be healthier and happier.

We are also working with the Division of Youth Services and Parks and Rec to establish a more robust summer jobs program.

We will still continue our push for improved infrastructure, paving streets and repairing sidewalks.

But please understand that that's just a portion of what community revitalization is.

Revitalization means helping residents feel safer in their homes.

Revitalization means giving our young people a chance to enter the workforce and improve the health and wellness of our community.

Revitalization is the spirit of creativity that remains the lasting legacy of Mayor Langford. He taught us to be bold. He taught us to be creative. And in 2019, we will do just that.

And as Mayor Langford once said: "I can't do nothing, but, we, as a people, can do everything in this city."

Revitalization lies in the spirit of organizations like the Men of Powderly, a group of former Powderly Elementary School students who have reunited as an outreach group to empower their neighborhood.

That's the spirit that thrives in North Titusville, where residents like Latonya Bowers and Rodney Banks aren't waiting for change – they're hitting the streets themselves, leading cleanup efforts on their own streets with their own hands.

Revitalization is the creativity of North Birmingham's Studio 2500, where Willie Williams Jr. has carved out a space for creative artists to express their talents.

These are what we call our 99 Voices, the sons and daughters of Birmingham who are taking up the mantle and uplifting their neighborhoods. We launched this initiative last year in an effort to show what you, our citizens, are doing to spark change in the Magic City. Some of these very people are here tonight and I'd like to thank them for their commitment to excellence. Please stand.

This is revitalization.

Because simply put, revitalization means restoring the intangible of hope.

President Obama once said that “hope is that stubborn thing inside us that insists, despite all the evidence to the contrary, that something better awaits us so long as we have the courage to keep reaching, to keep working, to keep fighting.”

We’re still reaching, we’re still working, we’re still fighting to fulfill the promise of Birmingham. The “magic” that has been this city’s calling card for generations.

As long as there is progress, there is hope.

We won’t let you down.

So, in the spirit of Larry Langford, ...

Let’s do something!

Thank you.