

## **On Katrina Anniversary, Nagin Expresses Hope, Challenges Nation to Stand Up to the D.C. Bureaucracy**

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NEW ORLEANS (NNPA) Despite the wreckage that still remains from Hurricane Katrina's assault on New Orleans two years ago, the city's Mayor Ray Nagin says he is encouraged despite the U. S. Congress' ignoring serious mental health problems among residents.

"We as a city are open, the population continues to grow at levels above what the experts projected. We now have a viable economy to support jobs and to support this growth. The economy is really showing good signs," Nagin says. "I'm also really starting to feel as though we're starting to turn a corner with the police force. We've stabilized it, the attrition rate is down and the recruitment rate is tremendously up. We had the largest recruit class in the history of the NOPD."

The mayor continues, "Overall, in the criminal justice system we finally got it to the point where it's starting to work better together. I had a one-on-one with the D.A. and told him that I wouldn't be able to support him going forward if he continued to release potential murderers without talking to folks. He's been talking and we've been communicating very well."

Nagin says his efforts to get Congress to address the city's mental health crisis have been pushed aside as more focus has been given the projected Road Home shortfall. He said because he has read about the ongoing mental health problems children in New Orleans face as a result of the storms of 2005, he is committed to continuing to fight for funds to address those needs.

Also, despite efforts to undermine the recovery, the city continues to slowly gain ground in the process, he says.

"The money is bottled up right now, but at some point it's going to flow," an upbeat Nagin says.

"We have defied the odds by working through all the strangulation points that have been put in front of us...with the Road Home, insurance, Entergy rates, etc. Folks are still coming back to this city at a pretty high level.

He adds, "Now, we got major work to do...Our streets are falling apart, we still have a rental housing crisis and the mental health of the community concerns me the most right now...I recognized this problem a couple of months ago, started talking about it with the governor, wrote her a letter and they just kind of blew us off."

The mayor has encouraged residents to use the second-year observance of Hurricane Katrina to exert pressure on the Bush Administration and members of Congress to give New Orleans and other areas along the Gulf Coast affected by Hurricane Katrina what they need to fully recover.

Organizers of the "Day of Presence" gathering that commemorated the second anniversary of Hurricane Katrina this week also called on everyone who is committed to social and economic justice to call their congressional and state representatives and the White House to demand the

restoration and betterment of New Orleans, Gulf Port, Biloxi and the entire Gulf Coast region.

The telephone number for the White House switchboard is (202) 456-1414; the U.S. Congressional switchboard operators at (202) 224-3121 connect callers directly to their Senators' and Representatives' offices, after asking for a state of residence and zip code.

Regional co-conveners for the Day of Presence include Mayor Nagin; Councilwoman Cynthia Willard-Lewis, who represents the Ninth Ward; committed activist/lawyers Tracie Washington, president and CEO of The Louisiana Justice Institute, and Judith Browne, co-director of the Advancement Project; and the Rev. Norwood Thompson, Jr., president of the New Orleans chapter of SCLC.

The Louisiana Justice Institute is the lead organization and is forming a broad coalition of regional and community-based groups to plan the day's program and work on the regional turnout.

"This anniversary is an opportunity for us to change the dialogue a little bit," Nagin said last week. "And if we can, I would like for us to not come across as whining. We want to state our problems and the fact that we still have needs, but I would like to present more examples of how New Orleanians are overcoming in spite of the odds...It still important to point out that America still hasn't done right by us, but look at the resiliency of the people of New Orleans and what we are doing.

Among those expected to be in New Orleans to mark the two years that have passed since Hurricane Katrina and the Great Flood of 2005 are the Rev. Al Sharpton, the Rev. Jesse Jackson, Essence executive Susan Taylor and actresses Lynn Whitfield and Victoria Rowell.

A groundbreaking ceremony for the Katrina Memorial was set for August 29, followed by a Bell-Ringing Ceremony for Katrina's Victims. Elected officials and celebrities are expected to flood the city as it prepares to mark the second anniversary of Hurricane Katrina and its aftermath. The city has reached out to all of the presidential candidates and invited them to attend various events commemorating the tragedy, according to planners.

Says Nagin, "There [has been] a growing movement for people to come to New Orleans from around the country that day. Some people want to come and help and stand with us."

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