



MAYOR RAS J. BARAKA'S 2023 STATE OF THE CITY ADDRESS

Before I begin, does anyone have any sister-city agreements for me to sign?

I want to address this issue with the sister city agreement scam with United States of Kailasa. We have to admit this was a huge mistake an embarrassment for many, even funny, something that some have tried to use to bury us. Many joined the chorus of folks who once again thought that this was an opportune time to push Newark backwards to highlight our flaws, in the hope that they would overshadow how beautiful and triumphant we have been even in our darkest moments. We live by the African proverb that to stumble is to move forward faster. And I am bringing this up specifically to address a state legislator that believes he can pile on us to hide his disdain for working people like those here in Newark of multiple nationalities. But we were made beautiful on purpose. In the likeness and image of greatness. And you should be careful in your attempts to come for us.

Douala, Cameroon; Freeport, Bahamas; Riviera, Spain; Di Crotone, Italy; Castlereaigh, Ireland; Desdunes, Haiti; Vila da Murtosa, Portugal; Kumasi, Ghana; Santiago, Dominican Republic; Zhangjiagang, China; Cabo Rojo, Puerto Rico; Cuenca, Ecuador; Taoyuan, Taiwan; Belize City, Belize; San Sebastian, Puerto Rico; Huaquechula, Mexico; La Cieba, Honduras; Periera, Colombia; and the list goes on. We are partners with cities all over the world that reflect our beautiful and diverse communities and I would like to thank those that organize our sister-city arrangements. You do and have done an enormous job. My shoulders are big enough to carry our burdens. I always have and I always will. And for Mr. Testa, I would say the mistake we have made can be and was easily rectified, but the mistake that we would make that can never be rectified is the moment we allow ourselves to think that you have the answers for us. On expanding the rights of temporary workers, he voted no. Prohibiting extraditing people that are taking advantage of NJ reproductive laws, he voted no. Asking gun owners to purchase identification, he voted no. He even voted no for electric school buses. Voted no to

authorize funding for affordable housing. For the constitutional right to freedom of choice, he voted no. Voted no on offshore wind projects. No on transformative and restorative justice programs for youth. Voted no on early voting. Voted no to expand healthcare and wages for airport workers. No on money for college athletes, no on stopping rent controlled units from becoming condos. No on registering formerly incarcerated the right to vote. I am sure that the errors in judgment you are making will be extremely expensive for generations to come. And every time we fall down, by God's grace, we get up, better than we were. I would advise you we don't take well to bullies here. Take my advice, go pick a fight somewhere else; you're not equipped for this one. Now with that said, let us begin.

Madame Council President, Municipal Council, my fellow Mayors that came out this evening and dignitaries throughout the state: every year all across the country, mayors of cities come before the American public as custom and deliver a State-of-the-City Address. It is with pleasure that I stand before you this evening and deliver this address in this majestic hall once again. I would like for my Directors to stand, because the work we do, we do collectively. There is nothing that we have accomplished of great significance that we have not toiled through together. It is this collaboration and the collaboration with the Municipal Council and our partners in the county, the state, and the private sector that has enabled us to travel so far. This is why Newark is leading the way and I am proud of it.

And I am convinced that our collective efforts can help us tackle some even bigger issues, like ensuring that the majority of the affordable housing that we are building goes to Newark residents. Or that we create a substantial fund to invest in communities that have been left behind purposefully for decades, disinvested in because of redlining and racism. I know we can work to ensure that more people can vote through same day registration, and lowering the age for school board elections. We can tackle the issues of environmental justice and ensure that we are not building more incinerators but more opportunity. We can stop saying that there are a shortage of workers and begin to invest more in those that have been locked out of labor for too long. Women, undocumented, formerly incarcerated and black, brown, and south Asian communities that have been looked over and left out. We give people access to training, certification, education, and the opportunity to work and this problem goes away overnight. We can pay people decent wages and our economy won't sink.

We can create more pathways to get unfettered and unregulated cash into people's households and they will not waste it and it has absolutely nothing to do with inflation. There is so much we can do that we turn away from because it appears too complicated or too heavy. And it may be for us as individuals, but collectively our problems become simpler and our burdens lighter. So I am asking you to help me invest more in neighborhoods that have absorbed the brunt of inequity far too long, to invest more in training and certification for women, undocumented, and those communities that have been locked out of employment. Help us find a way to do the work that many think is impossible and unreachable. President John F. Kennedy said, "The new frontier of which I speak is not a set of promises, but a set of challenges. It sums up not what I intend to offer the American People, but what I intend to ask of them." Frederick Douglass said, "Oppression, as organized as ours is, looks invincible all the way up to the moment it falls."

I remember running for Mayor in 2014. It was a tough election and everything we believed in was in question, worst in doubt. I said, "When I become Mayor, We become Mayor." But that never meant turning my responsibilities over to someone else. I never ran from our troubles and always stood in front of our circumstance. I never blamed anyone for our difficulties, or pointed fingers even when the issue didn't begin with me. I never closed my eyes to the problems we face daily nor was I arrogant enough to believe we could solve them alone. You may not have always agreed with or understood the course but we have always battened the hatches, looked right into the storm and held the line, and by God's grace, we are still here and still standing. The last time we got together, I told you how proud I was to be from Newark. Tonight, because of the work we are doing collectively, I'm not just proud of our shared history and perseverance, but because we are taking the lead in so many areas. We are getting things done! And this state and the entire country is beginning to take notice.

In 2014, we were being castigated for our new approach to Public Safety long before the murder of George Floyd, the calls to defund police, or the many law enforcement agencies that are now beginning to buy into the strategy of treating violence and crime as a public health issue and moving away from the "broken windows theory" that led to broken practices that eventually landed us in a consent decree. We were calling for reform in Newark at street rallies and public meetings. We were organizing alternative strategies to help reduce violence. And we stood on it. When I wrote the letter shown above, Newark's homicide rate had increased for the fourth straight year in a row to well over 100 murders per year. Listen, I

know that sometimes when we are in the middle of it, it's difficult to see how impactful the work we are doing is, but in Public Safety we have something to be proud of, because by God's grace, we are leading the way.

What does this say? It says, in Newark, while we have some issues of violence and crime, we have also discovered something. So much so that on the cover of the National League of Cities Mayoral Network on Community Safety and Violence Prevention Report, they showcase the faces of Director Keesha Euree of Newark's Office of Violence Prevention and Trauma Recovery and Kyleesha Wingfield Hill of the Brick City Peace Collective. And while we struggle with each other here in Newark, even get to a point where we allow gadflies, political operatives, and opportunists to get in our way around the state and the country, we are being celebrated. The State of New Jersey is now opening an Office of Violence Prevention. Not too long ago about 20 different municipalities came to Newark from as far west as Tacoma, Washington, and as far south as Montgomery, Alabama and Jackson, Mississippi, to discuss how they can also create the ecosystem that we are working on right here in Newark. The Newark Community Street Team, organized by Aqueela Sherrils, came to Newark at my request. They developed the first iteration of what we expanded on in our city.

Now they are working in multiple cities across the country and are the lead at the White House in providing technical assistance to organizations all over the country that are venturing down the path that we started right here in Newark. Where are the media stories about this work? About us here proudly leading the way. We never said "defund the police." What we did is understand that police should not do this work alone and that they key component to public safety was the word "Public." We empowered the public to take control of their own lives. We hired social workers. Included the Office of Violence Prevention in Comstat and created seamless opportunities for the police to work with them. We corralled all the local organizations that do this work concentrated their efforts and began to fund them. In fact, we just put out an \$18 million bid for this work over the next two years. Can some of these organizations stand up to be recognized?

We don't just believe social workers should arrive to scenes when people suffer mental illness or respond to alternative calls. We have hospital-based intervention that provide service to people at their most vulnerable moment. Therapy through art and music, high-risk intervention workers, safe passageway for students, case work to those at greatest risk, we have counselors in the youth house and every

police precinct, people that work on drug addiction, and workforce development and training for opportunity youth. And we are not finished yet. We are still building. We are going to create a reengagement center where we can focus our attention on getting our young people to reimagine their future. Where the courts, juvenile justice, police, CVI organizations, and educational institutions work collectively to reduce the number of our children that are swallowed up, drowned by a sea of despair and the lack of opportunity. We did all of this while adding 196 more police officers to the force. Commanders from each of our precincts held monthly community meetings. We are investing in our alternative police strategies while building a new Police Academy on Bergen Street.

And all of this, by God's grace is working. How do I know? Just look at the incident when officers Jabril Paul and Johnny Aquino were shot in the line of duty. It was Newark resident Angela Walker that came to their aid. She put her life at risk to help and render assistance to Officer Aquino while he lay bleeding on the ground. The narratives they are pushing around the country have no real life here. We are reducing arrests and reducing crime. We are focusing on community and are getting less and less police involved incidents. And I will be the first to say that we are not perfect, that we have a long way to go but it is undeniable that here in Newark we should be proud because we are in fact leading the way.

Last year, 40 Newark students with GPAs ranging between 1.8 to 2.5 that have been in some way affected by violence and incarceration were provided with an opportunity to attend St. Elizabeth University for free, for four years through our Guaranteed Education pilot program spearheaded by the Brick City Peace Collective.

These young people get a chance to experience life through dreams that were once unattainable. We built a ramp, a universal entry point for those that were looked over. And you may not feel that now, but that has generational implications way beyond loud talk at Municipal Council meetings. There's not much said about the Mayor's Scholars program at NJIT that we worked out with former President Joel Bloom that allows some of our best Newark students to intern and to go to college for free at one of the best institutions in the region. We partnered with the Newark Teachers Union, the Newark Public library, the Newark Board of Education to give out 40,000 books through our Office of Comprehensive Education. We held an educational conference on equity to address the uneven development of young people in our schools and address age-old systemic barriers that obstruct

pathways to achievement and self-development. We want to erase these lines and embrace ourselves. And we need your collective help to do so. We need every educator, every resident, and all families to combat inequity—real and perceived—to push back against the ahistorical idea that we are so different. Our lives began in the same place and intersected many times on our journeys in this Promised Land. Those who try to divide us are enemies of our future, saboteurs, provocateurs, agents that work to keep us wandering around lost in poverty and wallowing in powerlessness. Our unity is the first step toward our freedom. That being said, we want all of our schools to be desegregated: the ones here in Newark and the ones all over this state. Segregation is economically unsustainable and morally untenable. Look at how we are preparing the future leaders of Newark.

We renovated the JFK Recreation Center and put in a first class gym and tech center. We joined Nassan's Place to open Ridgewood Park in the South Ward. The park has new equipment for youth aged 2-12, as well as a separate section with sensory play equipment, for children with autism and special needs. We expanded our senior programming, completed the final phase of the new Jesse Allen Park, and are building out a state of the art playground on Hunterdon Street. But most importantly we have been working hard to bring free or low-cost high-speed internet to every Newark resident through our Newark Fiber program. Just this year, we have increased our fiber network by 30 percent connecting businesses, affordable housing developments, and recreation centers in all five wards. Fiber is not a luxury. It is a necessity. It should be a utility, like water and electricity. Broadband access should not be based on your zip code or financial status. Children should be able to access school, workers their jobs, and doctors their patients no matter where you live or what neighborhood you call home. We are starting this here in Newark and we have a lot to be proud of because if you look around it is easy to tell that we are leading the way.

Last year we approved Newark360, a master plan created in collaboration with Newarkeers from every part of the city. This was the largest community engagement process in the history of our city. We had over 10,000 touchpoints with residents through our website, community discussions, Facebook live sessions, focus groups, and surveys. This plan will guide us for the next 10 years. It will help us prepare for climate change by building resiliency, make our neighborhoods more connected, and accessible through public transit and pedestrian infrastructure. We will expand green zones, plant more trees, create more density and build more affordable housing. Our plan earned an award for

excellence from the New Jersey Chapter of the American Planning Association for planning excellence. Why? Because we are leading the way.

We are leading the way in equitable growth. We are still building affordable units. We strengthened our inclusionary zoning ordinance. We have invested \$20 million in units that are for households that earn less than \$32,000 a year. We built a housing search tracker so residents can keep track of available affordable units. We are advancing legislation to ensure that our residents are actually going into these affordable units and that developers actually stay true to their agreements with the city to build these units. We have also approved new affordable construction in every ward. That includes veterans' housing, housing with a childcare center and retail, senior housing and mixed-use housing on Stratford, Third Avenue, Thomas Street, Fairmount Commons, and Mount Prospect Avenue.

We have created over 9,000 units and more than 2,400 affordable units that amounts to about 13,000 construction jobs and up to 2,000 permanent jobs. We have collected more than \$2.5 million for the affordable housing trust fund. We rehabbed 10 deteriorating properties and three more adaptive reuse. We have also began to develop a long-term strategy that will expedite and enhance community development through partnerships with Invest Newark, local small to midsize Black and Brown developers, nonprofit affordable housing developers, lending institutions, and philanthropic organizations. We have created an acquisition fund and expedited the pathway to assist this process. We are targeting communities that have been disinvested in for decades purposefully and neglected over time. We will focus on building affordability and commercial space to bring these neighborhoods back to life. We are not waiting for the market. We are becoming the market!

We are leading because we took city properties and hired local Black and Brown developers as contractors to renovate them, and then turned them over to new homeowners that once lived in public housing using their Section 8 Voucher with the help of Invest Newark, NACA, and Bank of America. And now, we have agreed upon and begun the process to expand that program to all Newarkers 80 percent or below of the area median income.

We will sell them the property for \$1 and their mortgage will be whatever it costs them to rehabilitate the property. They pay no money down and have some of the lowest interest rates in the country. We put these houses back on tax rolls. Create homeownership and tackle the wealth gap, all at the same time.

Newark was one of the first cities nationally to join the Mayors for a Guaranteed Income. Which now is made up of more than 100 mayors across the country. We provided 430 residents with \$6,000 a year for two years. They receive the payments on a bi-weekly and semiannual basis. They had to be at least 200 percent of the poverty line or below and negatively impacted by Covid-19. Shortly, you will hear what some of the participants said on their own. This is our effort to join the national stage in calling for a guaranteed income as MLK did for those that need it the most. We need to expand those stimulus checks, Child Tax Credits, Earned Income Tax Credits or find a way to lift families up, boost our economy, and tackle poverty all at the same time. This is Newark leading the way.

During the COVID-19 pandemic our unemployment rate reached 21 percent in July 2020. By September of 2022 our unemployment rate fell to below 5 percent, the lowest it's been in 20 years. We were able to service over 21, 000 residents once we opened up and put our innovative WOW bus or Workforce on Wheels on the road. We deployed it to over 200 events in every ward where we brought career and technical training and jobs directly to your neighborhood. And while our summer youth program has always been first in class, we have now introduced a virtual reality world building class to our young people, where they actually go to work in the virtual space.

When you look at what's happening in our city, no matter where you stand philosophically, its undeniable that our city is growing, changing, becoming more vibrant and when you look at our downtown community, we are rapidly moving in to a destination city. A place where people are congregating and doing business. And I have to use this time to make it clear that this change this vibrancy has not missed our community. There are numerous Black, Brown, and women-owned businesses staking their claim in our downtown newly developed Arts and Education District. On Mulberry Street we opened Good Eats and Tossed; Brownmill Clothing and Tainos Kitchen on Halsey Street; and Black Swan Café, Tonis Minis, and Willies Wings on Bergen Street—which will soon open a new location in the Junction at Gateway, thanks to a citywide contest to bring a Newark-based restaurant to the Gateway Center.

We have Source of Knowledge Book Store and the new Salsa Bistro on Broad Street; Thee Yard in Military Park; Swahili Village across from NJPAC; the two Ghanaian brothers in Gateway One with Dumpling House, a spin off from the famous Brooklyn Chophouse. And in the beautiful new Terminal A at the Newark

Liberty International Airport, you cannot go through there without seeing the beauty of our city on the walls with our artwork and in the commercial spaces being occupied by Newark small businesses. Newark, we should be proud, because we are in fact leading the way.

And on December 5, 2022, The Newark Central Planning Board approved the Lionsgate Film Studio in partnership with Great Point Studios. This is a great partnership with NJPAC, Newark Housing Authority, City of Newark, and the State of New Jersey. The project will be built at the former Seth Boyden Housing site. It will not just be studios, but also include senior housing, a wellness clinic, and retail spaces. This neighborhood will be completely revived. And when we get the Port Authority to open access on Frelinghuysen Avenue to give people the opportunity to leave the airport and land in the South Ward or leave the ward and get to the airport in five minutes, this entire neighborhood and region including the City of Elizabeth and surrounding towns will be elevated because of the work we are doing here. And to those that emailed me saying all Newarkers don't want to be actors, I agree. In fact, most of the jobs there have nothing to do with your ability to act, they include grip and electric, props and set-building, location catering and restaurants, cleaning services and security, and more. There will be at least 600 new jobs created there, and it will generate over \$800 million in economic impact, not just for Newark but the entire state. And through our workforce development office we can help prepare, train, and certify residents so they can be ready for these jobs.

Before I leave this topic, I want to reiterate that there IS no real labor shortage – there is an investment shortage. Many employers are saying they can't find people to fill the positions they are looking for and are blaming it on COVID-19, stimulus money, and even unemployment benefits that people desperately needed. This is absolutely wrong, there is an entire labor force that has been left out, that do not apply for unemployment that we send to the side, that we do not train, certify, or give access to our educational institutions. We stop people from working because they don't have a driver's license. We require them to have Bachelor's Degrees to be call takers. There are people in black, brown, and marginalized communities that are ready for these jobs. Women we need to train to be CDL drivers and other nontraditional jobs. Undocumented populations that we need to train, certify, and put to work above board. The formerly incarcerated, our opportunity youth. We are going to do that in Newark and we need you to give them the opportunity to work.

This year we launched our strategic plan to end chronic homelessness. The first of its kind in our city. We have an ambitious goal to end chronic homelessness in our city in three years. This is a heavy lift and would be impossible for us to get this off the ground without our partners. I am proud to day that since we began participating in counts since 2018, in 2022 we were at our lowest number of residents without addresses. We are leading in this work in cities like ours—not just in New Jersey, but in many places around the country. We are in the process of constructing our second Hope Village for the chronically homeless in the South Ward and are holding meetings to build our third with the help of NJIT, whose students created a beautiful plan and design as we move forward. Which can also be expanded in to the area of affordable housing altogether. We are working with and waiting on the state to build a drop-in center by Newark Penn Station that will give our residents without addresses a place to get help with services and place to sit down, hopefully wash their clothes, use the bathroom, and take a shower things we take for granted. Listen to the story of Walter Singleton, a resident at Newark Hope Village I.

And I want to remind you how Newark led through the COVID-19 pandemic. 82 percent of our residents are fully vaccinated and 98 percent have received at least one shot. Our hospitalization rate remains low and our mortality rate even lower. We started off at the top of this list and now we are lower than the State across the board. We learned from COVID-19, the very real and deadly inequities in our health care system that had four times the amount of people dying in their home in 2020 than in 2019 in Newark. This is why the Department of Health and Community Wellness is opening school-based clinics to serve our neighborhoods. The first one will be opening shortly in Speedway Elementary School. We are also working on providing mobile healthcare to communities, where you can get service right on the corner of your block. Until the health care system reorganizes itself to give access to wellness and primary care physicians that are affordable to our families, we will bring care to you.

And while I'm talking about healthcare, I must say that the rising cost of our health insurance without any plan is criminal. Particularly since the five top insurance companies made \$11 billion in the second quarter in 2021, and that was a decrease from the previous year. They made record profits during the pandemic because while you didn't go to the doctor, you continued to pay your health care cost and so did the city, the county and the state. And they didn't pass those savings along to families. They pocketed it and rewarded us by raising our premiums barely out

of the pandemic by over 20 percent. Newark would've faced a price tag of \$87 million to provide coverage to our employees or pass the cost over to them. We quickly led the exodus out of that plan and saved about \$30 million to our taxpayers.

We continue to be good stewards of the City's finances and resources and ended FY 2022 with a budget surplus that we intend to reinvest in our communities growth and success.

We've continued the Creative Catalyst Fund to provide artists and cultural groups with flexible grant support. This program is expanding the creativity of our artists while inspiring our community, and helping beautify and revitalize our city.

Newark led the way in replacing lead service lines and led the way in transforming public safety. We are leading in Broadband, innovation, in the tech space, and startups. We are leading in closing the wealth gap and creating home ownership. We are leading in the fight for equity and social justice. We are leading on many fronts but...

We still have our challenges here in our city and we fight our way out of difficult situations. We face our problems. We don't turn and run. We deal with the circumstances before us and we remain steadfast even in the most turbulent times. We keep our hands in His hand and we make it out because we make it through. I'm proud of my city and proud of the families in it. I am ecstatic, "happy-glad" as Councilwoman Mildred Crump would say. Look at us how outstanding we look how beautiful and triumphant we are, even with all the negativity they try to heap us on every day. We are here in an NJPAC that's on its way to more expansion more arts space, residences, jobs. In the middle of the newly created Arts and Education District with a growing museum and expanding library. With Melbas Soul Food restaurant coming soon across the street from Harriet Tubman Square with the amazing Harriet Tubman Monument, done by the incredible artist Nina Cooke John. As the country took down monuments to express their disdain for white supremacy, we went further and constructed Black Moses under the lights of history, shining right next to Kenneth Allen Gibson Boulevard. Just like Angel Reese, an incredible Black woman that happens to be a basketball player, a national champion, we won't fit in your box, your definition on who we should be, and how we should be. We don't scratch where we don't itch and don't dance unless there is good music on. We love ourselves, we are proud of ourselves, and like her, we are exerting ourselves. We are a city that's coming into its own and the

country is beginning to recognize that on the other side of the river, there is an old industrial town of humble beginnings of immigrants and migrants from the south. Workers and descendants of those that were enslaved that staked claim here and have risen this city out of the punchlines of the cynical and the clutches of the hateful and those that try to humiliate and marginalize us.

Every day we hold the line and show them how beautiful we are, how amazing, and resilient we are. We show them that all we really need is a rock and slingshot and we will find our way to the top. This is why we are so proud, why we are leading the way. Not because we are trying to be first, or even if you don't see us that we won't continue moving forward. WE do this because we want to be like a well-watered garden, a spring whose waters never fail. We want our light to break forth the dawn. We want to restore the broken walls. And have our children love the images they see in their mirrors. And we know this can only happen when we work on the behalf of the hungry, satisfy the needs of the downtrodden, and the oppressed. When we provide the poor wanderer with shelter, and decide not live along side of inequity then we will be known as the repairers of the breach. The state is moving forward because Newark is moving forward. The state is prosperous when Newark is prosperous. The state is great because you are great. The state is leading because Newark is leading. Don't let them marginalize your journey, dismiss your success. Don't let them undermine your magnificence or downplay your triumph. Newark, you are incredible, you are beautiful, resilient, and powerful. You come from great history and extraordinary families. Newark, you are leading the way and should be proud of it! God Bless you! God Bless our City and God Bless the state of New Jersey!