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Mayor Michael Nutter said during a one-on-one interview with The Tribune that he wants to move the city forward, but not at the expense of leaving Philadelphia's needy behind. — PHOTO BY ABDUL SULAYMAN/TRIBUNE CHIEF PHOTOGRAPHER

Mayor says he will continue to focus on root causes of violence in second term

Many community leaders and high level city officials would admit that if Philadelphia is going to move forward, it is going to have to deal effectively with crime and violence in the African-American community — and do it without ostracizing the people in those neighborhoods.

Ideas will vary as to how to accomplish that, but there are several peripheral issues that consistently keep the numbers of homicide victims up: rampant joblessness, the proliferation of illegal guns and poor education. Layered into those issues are illiteracy, truancy, prison recidivism and ever-shifting moral values.

Now, in Mayor Michael Nutter's second term — and true to his no nonsense way of doing things — Nutter has

what he believes is a clear vision for carrying Philadelphia through the current difficult economic times. It's a vision to move the city forward, and improve the quality of life in some of the city's most distressed communities at the same time.

"We need to move the city forward, but we're not going to do that by leaving those most in need behind," Nutter said during a one on one interview with the Tribune. "Over the next four years we're going to zero in — in a much more focused way — on the issue of illegal guns in our city. You've seen some of the work we've done on education. Last summer we created the Education Accountability Agreement to create greater transparency with the School District and recently signed the Education Compact to zero in on those low performing, under performing and non-performing schools. We have to have quality education seats all across Philadelphia. Those schools will either perform, restructure or they will be closed. Children should not have to sit in a bad, unsafe school. We have 15,000 kids who don't attend school every day. There's no excuse for that."

Nutter said there are two main things that have to be addressed before the city can move forward: the 26 percent poverty rate, and high illiteracy along with a low college degree attainment rate. He referred to these issues as weights around the ankles of the city and they are holding Philadelphia back.

"These are clearly challenges, but they are challenges we can solve," Nutter said. "It's about best utilizing the resources that we have, greater focus, parents paying attention to what's happening with their children and these children seeing that they have a future. They need to see that being smart is a good thing, and there is a future, and that being a smart kid is going to lead to something. If you can't read, you can't get a job. If you can't get a job, what do you do? You become desperate. That's how you're going to lift people up, the more education you get, the easier it is to get a better job. If you can't read at a certain level, you're stuck. Education is a poverty reduction strategy. Thirty to forty years ago, that's all our parents talked about,

getting an education. What happened in that time? Something got broken. There's money out there, there's opportunity out there. We need to change the culture so kids will stay in school, graduate, then move on to college or higher learning. If we can get a thirty to forty percent college graduation rate, this city will be transformed."

A major component of Nutter's plan is Philly Rising – a cooperative effort that would coordinate existing city services and apply them in communities where the need is greatest. Director of Philly Rising, John Farrell said residents in those communities may not know what services are available to them or even that the city is willing to help them. But the residents have a big role to play.

"This isn't a handout; this is the city working with residents of a community to help them lift themselves up. There are communities in the city that don't have a whole lot of faith in the government. I was at a meeting, maybe two years ago, and [Police] Commissioner Charles Ramsey was talking, and he mentioned the crime triangle. The crime triangle is the actual crime, the victim and the environment. The police are equipped to handle the first two, but changing the environment isn't what they do. But there are agencies and departments, like the Streets Department, DHS, R.I.S.E., Licenses and Inspections that can," Farrell said. "Philly Rising isn't just a revamped version of the Blueprint for a Better Philadelphia or other programs, which saw some measure of success. This is a coordinated arm to the worst communities in the city, some of which have been underserved for years."

Farrell said that under Philly Rising, a point of contact person will go into a selected community and begin reaching out to the local residents. The mission is listening to those residents to find out what the needs and goals are and then partner with them to meet those goals. The pilot community was the area of 8th and Cumberland, which after eight months, saw a significant drop in part one crimes.

"We didn't expect those kinds of results as soon as we did," Farrell said. "We're now in seven communities. Now this is a time when we're strapped for cash, everyone knows that. But we're not bringing in new service entities - just better utilizing the resources we already have. Let's say we want to put a computer lab in a selected community. We look at who can donate the space, who can donate the computers and equipment. Add job resources into the mix and the computer labs stays. But the residents have to want it. The overall purpose of Philly Rising isn't to just fix things in these underserved communities – eliminating a drug corner isn't lasting. You arrest the dealers and in a few days new ones show up. We want residents who are tired of their communities being the way they are, and are willing to step up and work with us to make lasting, sustainable changes."



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