

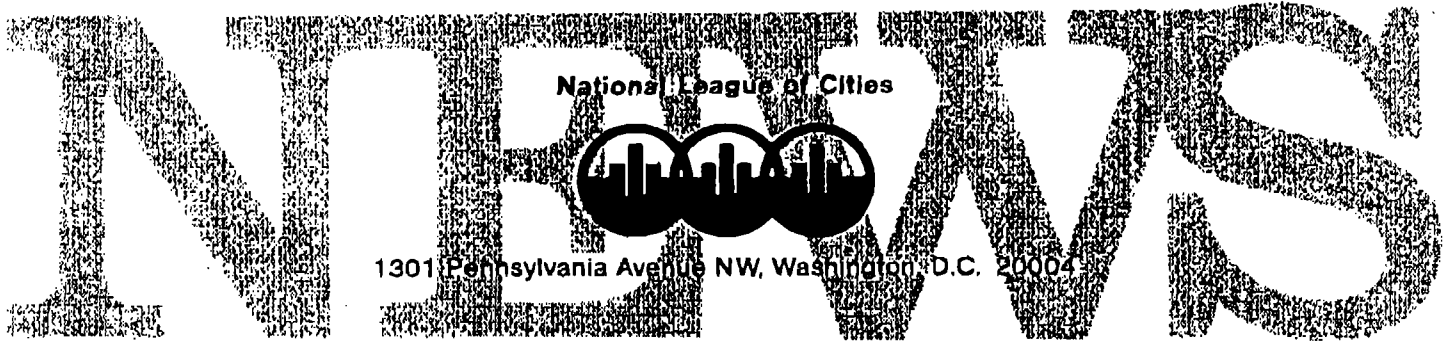
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THE WHITE HOUSE  
WASHINGTON

January 13, 2000

Mayor Bob Knight (R-Wichita), president of the National League of Cities, announced January 12 that he will focus his presidency on carrying out a broad, locally sustained and collective effort to overcome racism in America. He also released the results of the 16<sup>th</sup> Annual NLC "State of America's Cities" survey. The survey, based on the response of 389 municipal officials, shows improved conditions and optimism as well as growing concern about sprawl.

Mickey Ibarra



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FOR INFORMATION CONTACT:  
Randy Arndt (202) 626-3158  
John Pionke (202) 626-3051

**NLC President Calls for Concerted and Sustained Effort to "Undo Racism" in America;  
"State of America's Cities" Report Finds Broad Support for Local Efforts and Policies;  
Annual Survey Shows Improved Conditions and Optimism, Growing Concern About Sprawl**

As the first observance of the Martin Luther King Jr. Holiday of the 21<sup>st</sup> century approaches, the president of the National League of Cities (NLC) is calling for a concerted and sustained effort to "undo racism" in America.

Mayor Bob Knight of Wichita, Kan., issued the appeal for leaders and people throughout the United States to "face up to the tangled emotions, inexplicable behavior and imbedded institutional biases that continue to haunt us even as we seek to honor the life of Dr. King and the legacy of his work."

"As a nation, we have condoned the injustice, tolerated the suffering and ignored the consequences of racism," Mayor Knight said. "We have so much to learn and unlearn, and many wounds to heal, but we have so much more to lose if we don't confront each other on the issue of race."

Mayor Knight issued his call while releasing the findings of the 16<sup>th</sup> Annual NLC "State of America's Cities" report, which found a readiness among local government officials to provide leadership both in their communities and as part of a nationwide effort to mitigate racism.

In the report, based on a survey of 389 municipal leaders, more than 9 out of 10 city leaders (92 percent) saw opportunities they can and should pursue to model behaviors and practices that contribute to undoing racism in their role as elected officials.

Eighty-seven percent saw themselves playing a significant or moderate role as advocates for local policies and programs to promote racial equity, and 83 percent saw themselves playing similar roles in partnership with other groups. Four out of five (79 percent) also saw themselves playing a role in engaging various members of their community in discussions about race and racism.

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Carrying out a broad, locally sustained and collective effort to overcome racism in America will be at the heart of Mayor Knight's leadership agenda as NLC president this year.

To help launch and support local efforts around the country, the 80-member NLC Advisory Council conducted a year-long study focusing on racism in 1999. Its findings are presented in a new 32-page report, *Undoing Racism: Fairness and Justice in America's Cities and Towns*, that includes examples, contacts and other resources to help city officials and community leaders start working.

In the survey, a majority of city leaders (58 percent) said their cities and regions have become more diverse over the past five years. More saw better race relations in their cities (44 percent) as compared to their region (32 percent) during that time. Twice as many (18 percent) said race relations had worsened in their region as compared to worsening in their own cities (9 percent).

The NLC survey also tracked the continuing improvement in most indicators of local conditions during the past year. City leaders gave their brightest assessment ever of local conditions, local service levels, and their outlook both for their community and the nation as a whole.

Nearly half of the city leaders (47 percent) said they increased local service levels during the past year, and 90 percent rated their current service levels as good or very good, both all-time highs for the NLC survey. Improving local economic conditions were mentioned most often by city leaders (27 percent) when asked to rate positive changes during the past year.

"In their assessment about the way things appear to be going in their communities and for the nation as a whole, 93 percent were positive about the general direction in which their city is heading, and 81 percent were optimistic about national trends, as well. Both of these responses are up from a year ago and are the highest levels we have seen," said Donald Borut, NLC executive director.

Growth and development are inevitable aspects of a robust economic climate, and the growth-related issues have become pressure points in many communities. Two-thirds of the survey respondents (66 percent) said the shape and form of development in their city or region will have a large or very large impact on local conditions.

Looking at local strategies to deal with unchecked development, or "sprawl," 89 percent of the city leaders said redevelopment strategies would have political acceptance and citizen support. Other approaches having significant levels of support include citizen input and planning initiatives, environmental strategies, land use strategies and design innovations.

"The best answers for assuring sensible and sustainable development will come from processes that take the concerns of all stakeholders and all of the affected jurisdictions into account," said Borut. "Divisive or exclusionary local policies won't work, and neither will arbitrary federal or state standards and interventions. The challenge is to help changes happen wisely and prudently, not heedlessly and haphazardly."

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Infrastructure needs, the vitality of downtown/Main Street areas, and the availability of affordable housing topped the list of most important local issues needing attention. And when asked about the impact of certain factors on the future well-being of their communities, quality of local education drew the highest response.

Thirty-four percent of the city leaders said needs for survival services such as food, shelter, clothing and health care increased during the past year. One out of four said the availability of quality affordable housing worsened. Nearly one-quarter (23 percent) said development patterns in their region are harmful or undesirable.

Twenty-seven percent said there weren't enough good job opportunities for people trying to move from welfare to work in their community, while 37 percent said there were jobs available but individuals didn't have the support systems necessary to get the jobs and keep them.

Assuring the quality of local education drew the most responses when city leaders were asked about six critical factors affecting the future well-being of America's cities, with 78 percent of the city leaders saying education will have a large or very large impact. Local revenue systems, the changes associated with today's "new economy," and dealing with the shape and form of development also were seen as having large impacts by two-thirds or more of the city officials.

Looking at the wide-open race for the White House now underway, city officials said the presidential contenders should focus their campaigns on issues that will help ensure America's future well-being: health care and insurance, social security and Medicare, public education, and making changes in the federal tax system.

"As we begin the 21<sup>st</sup> century, our nation is enjoying widespread prosperity and a broad sense of optimism about our future," said Mayor Knight. "We should recognize and be grateful for that, and we should also draw upon these bountiful times to expand and assure them in the future.

"At the same time, we must not lose sight of the inequities, deficiencies and vulnerabilities that still exist in our society," he said. "Some, such as hunger, poverty and racism are clearly visible now. Let's do something we can all take pride in by focusing on positive and constructive ideas for good jobs, neighborhoods and schools, healthy families, racial harmony and an inclusive society. Good ideas and diligent, sustained effort can make it happen."

NLC's Center for Research and Program Development prepared the survey document and conducted the analysis, with assistance from the Center for Urban Studies at Wayne State University in Detroit, Mich., which coded and tabulated the results. The report was written by Emily Stern, NLC Research Associate.

Copies of the 16th annual *State of America's Cities* report (#3552) can be obtained from NLC's Publications Center, P.O. Box 491, Annapolis Junction MD 20701. Phone (888) 571-2939 or (301) 725-4299; fax (301) 206-9789. The price is \$10 (\$5 for NLC members), plus shipping and handling. Publications can also be ordered by e-mail from: [nlcbooks@pmds.com](mailto:nlcbooks@pmds.com).

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