

## **State of the County 2019 - The Heart of America**

I am really honored to be here. As she mentioned, I recently ran for mayor of Shelby County, the largest county in TN and I won. But, I want to recognize my family is here. My wife and I have three kids so two out of my three kids are here today.

By the way, thank God for kids, because they surely keep us grounded. I just had my 40<sup>th</sup> birthday. My 10-year old daughter made me a birthday card, which was very sweet. The top of the card read, “Best Dad” and I loved reading that. The bottom of the card read, “In the House.” My daughter is not one to overstate.

Let me recognize the great employees of Shelby County. You have dedicated your careers and, in many ways, your lives to public service. You have tough jobs. You are on the frontlines and have the closest view to some of our community’s toughest challenges. Thank you for your service. Let’s give our employees a round of applause.

I would like to thank the Shelby County Board of Commissioners and their illustrious Chairman Van Turner. Chairman Turner understands that the toughest thing in politics is moving the ball forward. Thank you for your partnership. I would also like to say thank you to Commissioners Mills, Wright, and Ford for their devotion to service and detail; thank you

Commissioner Bradford, Morrison, Whaley for your patience and steadiness; thanks to Commissioner Billingsley, Jones, and Lowery for their collaboration and leadership; thanks to Commissioner Milton, Sawyer, and Brooks for their bravery and willingness to speak up. Let's give our board of commissioners a round of applause.

With 950,000 citizens, Shelby County is the largest county in Tennessee and includes 7 great municipalities, Arlington, Bartlett, Collierville, Millington, Germantown, Lakeland, and, where we are today, the City of Memphis. The State of our County is strong. The State of our County is strong. In fact, if you look at a map and place a dot over Shelby County, you'll see we are in the center of the country, but just a little to the right. If it was a map of the human body, and you placed a dot right in the center, but just a little to the right, that's where you would find the heart. Indeed, Shelby County is the heart of America. There are communities all over the country that want to emulate us. I believe Shelby County is the largest, greatest, and the most diverse county in Tennessee. It is one of the largest, greatest, and most diverse counties in the country. Our county is chock-full of young and young at heart, wealthy and hopeful, families that have been here for generations and millennials who just moved here to start a career. Our county is the proverbial melting pot or, as they say in New Orleans, where my wife Alena is from, our county is a gumbo.

We have real challenges. 950,000 people live in our great county and at least 200,000 of those live in poverty. But, we also have people who are committed to making a difference. I've been in office now for about 150 days. Our organization has 5600 employees and about billion dollars in annual spend. It is the one of the honors of my life to hold this job. Already, we have had some success in focusing on the right issues. We have recruited top talent to important leadership positions in Shelby County government, including our new CAO Patrice Thomas. Chief, thank you for being here. We raised the pay of our part-time county employees to \$15 per hour, and we plan to push to ensure that more public employees, like our Shelby County school cafeteria workers, are paid a living wage. We have eliminated the costs of phone calls charges for kids in detention because we what to make sure kids who are caught on the wrong side of the law can stay in contact with their parents. We have worked with the City of Memphis and Mayor Strickland to cement a plan to make sure that every child, regardless of their household income, has access to a high-quality early childhood education. And, most importantly to me, we have been able to work collaboratively with the Shelby County Board of Commissioners. We settled the long-running courtroom litigation between the County Commission in between the Mayor's office. We have agreed to create a new leadership role to give steady legal advice to County Commissions, another long-standing issue. So far, we have all

worked well together. In the future, who knows, we might be angry from time to time? Some of you may already be angry at someone, but certainly not me? But, on those occasions, we have to focus, wipe slate clean, and find our way back to working together for common cause.

First, let me say a word about jobs and economic development. When folks talk about economic development, they are usually talking about tax breaks to lure companies to a community. The tax breaks frequently create controversy and rightly so. These programs frequently use the force of government to transfer public resources into private hands. Sometimes these transfers to private business can represent millions, tens of millions, or even hundreds of millions of dollars. That is real money. As for jobs, I believe the jury is still out on whether government officials can create private sector jobs. I still believe that the private sector creates private sector jobs. Call me an old-fashioned, free-market conservative Democrat who represents working people. That works, I think. Seriously, I don't believe governments should be in the business of picking winners and losers. I believe governments should stay out of private business as much as possible. And I believe the public is right to want to see some level of scrutiny. Instead of tax breaks, when it comes to economic development, I believe the focus most of the time should be on investment in public assets and in people. That means we should invest more in workforce. We should make sure that our community is full of individuals with skills that employers find in-demand. If we do that, the rest will take care of itself. That's why workforce is one of the priorities of

Shelby County government. That's why we are prioritizing the work of WIN and the American Job Center, our effort to help job-seekers get a job. In fact, just this week, we opened a third American Job Center in Shelby County. And we will shortly bring in new leadership that will help set even higher expectations for what we can do to give our citizens the tools they need to succeed in today's workforce. The challenges are clear. There are simply fewer jobs associated with today's high-tech enterprises, like Google, Amazon, or Apple. And given the arrival of automation, there are fewer jobs at even low-tech companies. The number of middle-class jobs that are available in the New Economy seems to be shrinking. The jobs that are left are going to be won by a specific type of individual, individuals who can add some value, individuals who have the right kind of training, who can take on and handle responsibility, and individuals who show initiative. The American Job Center is in the business of making sure job-seekers in this community can compete in this New Economy. In addition, Shelby County runs an Office of Re-entry, which helps ex-offenders who are returning to our community after prison. This year, we will be asking the County Commission for new investments in our Office of Re-entry. We want to be in a position to start new programs to help these ex-offenders get the training they'll need to get a job or create a job in this New Economy. We have brought in new leadership, Harold Collins, and under Mr. Collins' leadership, later this year we will announce plans to turn part of the campus at the Office of Re-entry into a place where ex-offenders can learn a vocational skill and certification that make them eligible for a job. And that's just the start. If we make these

kinds of investments, investments in workforce, we are likely to see a high return on investment.

Related to workforce is public transit. Although it's not a super-sexy topic, public transit is one of the most important public assets we have. It's one of the best ways to spur economic development. It's one of the only ways to have a broad impact on the lives of thousands and thousands of citizens in our community. Consider these numbers, for instance. About a million people go to the Memphis Zoo every year and it's one of our most famed public assets. About 500,000 visitors go to Graceland in a year and, as a community, we committed over a \$100 million to build them a new campus. Shelby Farms has 3 million visitors a year. Beale Street, our most popular tourist attraction, has 5 million annual visitors. In terms of impact, none of those assets compare to MATA, which has 7 million rides a year and demand for millions more. Thus, if we can increase revenue to public transit, we can change the lives of many, many families. These investments have broad impact, second only to investments in education. Now as you know, the County has not invested in public transit, but we should. Later this year, I will be circulating a plan to the County Commission that gets the county, for the first time, invested in public transit. The plan will address the level of investment and set some reasonable expectations.

Our proposal to the County Commission will recommend a phased-in approach, an approach similar to the schedule of investments in other shared community priorities, like Pre-K.

Furthermore, as the County considers an investment in MATA, we have got to get bang for our buck. Like with all investments of tax dollars, the public expects us to be careful stewards and expects some level of accountability. For instance, we will propose that any County investment in MATA should be considered new dollars on top of the City's investment. The point is that the County's investment should not replace City investment in MATA or any potential increases in that investment. Also, we will propose that new dollars be devoted primarily to high-priorities for transit, like increasing the frequency of service in the urban core. Job-seekers should have a realistic chance of taking a bus and getting to work on time and getting back home to have dinner with their family and that means more frequent service.

Finally, the county will ultimately need a seat at the table—that is, on MATA's board of directors. But under the current proposal I will be pitching this year we don't necessarily need shared and equal governance between the City and County. For the most part, the City of Memphis should stay in charge of MATA and that's a good thing. It is likely better that only one side of Civic Plaza is in the charge of this important community asset. Sometimes I've found that when both governments are in charge that means that can be

that no one is charge. Important assets atrophy. Important opportunities are missed.

And we are taking on sprawl, an issue that our community has struggled with for years. We all know that we need to increase our density if local government is going to be able to continue to deliver service cost-effectively. In order to increase our density and reduce sprawl, we are going to have to change our mindset. For instance, the previous administration had submitted a very comprehensive plan for delivering sewer service to some of the outlying, under-developed parts of our county. If the plan was ultimately achieved, it would have led to tens of millions in government spending to create the new sewer system and the new system, in turn, would have spurred a new round of outmigration. Plus, a new sewer system and new infrastructure would have brought more traffic congestion to quiet roads and cookie-cutter developments to places were most long-term residents I talked to like privacy and country living. That's why, when I came into office, we scrapped that sewer plan and the entire sewer planning process. That doesn't mean development in outlying parts of the county won't take place. With respect to developments that are already in the pipeline, we will work in good faith with the City of Memphis to deliver sewer service. With respect to developments that have not ripened yet, we will spread the word of all the development opportunities with preexisting sewer capacity in our county's 7 great municipalities. I believe when it comes to our scare infrastructure

spending, Shelby County should focus on investments that increase density, not sprawl.

Now a word or two about criminal justice reform, which has been a major focus on my first 5 and half months in office. We have 5,000 inmates in Shelby County and our incarcerated population is growing. As you can imagine, this large incarcerated population comes at a very high cost. The criminal justice system is our second highest category of local spending, behind only spending on education. For instance, we have nearly 2,900 men and women in total at our county jail facilities—the Bailey Justice Center and Jail East. The average daily cost is \$100. If you can't do the math, let me help. That could easily work out to more than \$100 million a year for county taxpayers just to hold people, men and women who are pretty much just waiting for a trial. The jail population is at levels that threaten our budget capacity. And, more importantly, if we continue on the trajectory we are currently on, we will likely see the same well-known problems of inequality play out well into our future. We know that at least 80% of our county jail population has been African American; while about 54% county population is African American. Most of those detained or locked up in our local facilities have not been convicted of a crime. Many of them could go to their home to await their trial date, if they just had money for bail. Let me say it again. Many of the detainees have already been judged to be no risk to public safety. They stay in our jails because they don't have any money. This means

that, in many ways, that our we are punishing some detainees just for being poor.

So this is an issue, we have to address and we've already started.

For instance, this year, we have pushed to expand the number of grand juries so that indictments can be processed faster. We've also pushed to reduce the number of needless interactions many parts of our community have with law enforcement. For instance, too many of the arrests and interactions with law enforcement are because of driving with a suspended license. Across our state, we know that there are nearly 600,000 individuals in our state who have lost their licenses because of fines and fees. We believe that in Shelby County, there are likely more than 100,000 individuals who have lost their license because of unpaid fines and fees they don't have the resources to pay. Again, there are thousands and thousands and thousands and thousands of individuals in our county that have unnecessary run-ins with law enforcement because they for driving without a license, which they don't have because they can't afford to pay some unrelated court cost or fee. Driving without a license is quietly one of the most important areas for criminal justice reform and Shelby County will try to do something about it. By the way, hat-tip to our DA, Amy Weirch who has initiated a program significantly reduce these kinds of prosecutions. We can do more that's why we're lobbying the state to give our county the ability to issues licenses to our residents under special circumstances, so that we can see fewer run-ins with law enforcement

because of driving without a license. If we get permission from the state, Shelby County is in a position to reinstate thousands of licenses for people who simply lose their license because they were too poor to pay a fine or fee. We can do it at no cost to the state because eliminating this vicious cycle is an important county priority. Imagine if this population is given the means to legally drive to their jobs or to visit family, without fear of having a run-in with law enforcement or breaking the law. We are talking about transforming the lives of thousands and thousands. This is the real work of change and we can do it. And, finally, around this county many of our most important decision-makers—including our Sheriff, DA, MPD, courts, and clerks—are coming together and working on a solution to our growing jail population. Part of it involves moving away from a bail system that tends to lock up people who are poor and move toward reform. The problem is identifying those detainees who, number one, don't pose a public safety risk and, number two, can be expected to show up for their trial. The new tool we want to implement in Shelby County is called the Public Safety Assessment or PSA, which would help guide us on what data, what information we need to collect from detainees to predict, number one, whether the detainees pose a safety risk or whether or not they can be expected to show up for trial. The PSA creates a score based on several risk factors that we will enter into a computer screen, factors like age at current arrest, charges, prior convictions, prior failure to appear in court. This is the nitty-gritty, unsexy work of local government. But, the potential is enormous. If we can agree, we have a real chance of reducing our detainee population and maintaining public safety.

We have a real chance of saving a lot of money that can be used for schools, healthcare, or infrastructure, without putting anyone at risk. More importantly, we have a real chance of making sure that our system doesn't punish poverty and moves toward fairness.

Finally, let me also talk about kids who commit crime. We know that most of the crime in our city is committed by kids and every young adult under the age of 25. We know that while some of our crime statistics are decreasing, the crime committed by kids and young adults seems to be increasing. I believe helping these kids is our moral responsibility. Even if we don't all follow the same faith tradition, we all probably agree that it's the right thing to intervene in the lives of young people. I would argue that it's even more important to intervene when you know that the young people are in need. The kids caught on the wrong side of the law have almost all experienced a serious trauma in the childhood. Depending on the nature of the crime, some of these kids end up in our custody and care for 24 hours a day, 7 days a week. We can try to do something. Especially when they are in our care and custody, we are responsible for trying to do something. That's why when it comes to kids who commit crimes, we're going to work hard to eliminate detention and, when we have to detain, we are going to focus, like a laser, on rehabilitation.

First, when it comes to certain kinds of minor crimes—the kids who get caught trespassing, get caught with cigarettes or small amounts of drugs, get

pulled over for reckless driving or driving without a license—our goal is to reduce interaction with the criminal justice system and, instead, focus on getting these kids help.

One way we do that is through trying out juvenile diversion programs, like our proposal to initiate a Youth Assessment Center. A Youth Assessment Center is a place for kids can go to get help. It'll be a place that law enforcement can use instead of arresting young men and sending them to Juvenile Court, and giving their first court case.

This is a pilot project. Although the population of kids who will be served under the pilot project is small, the potential is enormous. There are at least 3,000 kids between the age of 12 and 17 arrested each year and given a criminal summons to appear in court or in front of a probation officer to answer for minor crimes. Kids that are referred to the Assessment Center will not interact with the system or the courts. Instead, they'll get just that—an assessment—and access to the services they need. The good news is that our County Commission has supported this new initiative. We also have support and leadership of MPD, the Sheriff, and our Juvenile Court Judge. Because of the support from the County Commission and these other stakeholders, we have a chance of creating a real alternative to interaction with the system for kids who commit minor offenses. As important, we have a chance of giving these kids the help that they really need.

When it comes to more serious crimes by kids, local government is often required to arrest and detain. For instance, state law requires arrest and detention for kids who commit a crime with a gun. Still, even in these cases, our goal has been the rehabilitation of our young men and women who get caught on the wrong side of the law. We have to give these kids some chance at rehabilitation. We have to try to make sure they are not consigned to a life of crime and repeated interactions with our system. Today, we have around 85 kids locked up in our detention facility right now. The average stay in lock-up is more than 24 days. During that period of time of detention, we are going to have to work if we are going to make sure some of these kids don't become hardened criminals. I believe many of these kids can be saved. Because it's likely that the kids locked up right now will be in this community and alive longer than virtually everyone in this room, I know that our future depends on us trying. As I mentioned, we have to make sure that the kids in the detention facility have relatively easy access to the parents or guardians. That's why my administration has worked the Sheriff to eliminate the cost of phone calls for kids that are held at juvenile court.

We've also got to build a new facility that puts kids on the road to rehabilitation and doesn't turn them into hardened criminals. The condition of incarceration that these kids have to endure right now is unacceptable. They are incarcerated in a facility that was designed decades ago and the model was detention-only. As a result, they don't really see anything green and they have no real recreational space. They don't have enough classrooms and the

kids in detention can least afford to go without adequate classroom instruction. Right now, they don't have enough desks in the housing units and almost no windows or access to natural light. They don't have adequate visitation space to visit with their lawyers or parents. They don't have enough private areas to receive medical care. I don't think it's too much to say that many of them go in as children and, because of the condition of their incarceration; they come out as hardened criminals. We need to scrap this old worn-out building and the detention-only model it represents. We are going to have to make an investment in these kids in a new facility that expands our opportunity to invest in them and put them on the path to rehabilitation.

That's why our administration and the County Commission is moving forward with real juvenile justice reform. We have plans to take a new approach, plan for a new building that makes sure that these children get recreational space. We have to make sure the children have a real shot at learning while they are incarcerated. As I mentioned, the average detained child stays detained for 20-25 days. \*\*\*That's not forever, but that's long enough for the children to lose interest in school and grow an even greater interest in crime. While these kids are incarcerated, we have to make sure that they have access to school and learning. And, by the way, I think we should make sure they get exposed to vocational training while they are there.

And we have to talk about trying to make sure that the next justice facility we build is smaller than the current facility. The current facility has 135 beds.

The usual strategy in these situations is to build the next facility to be even bigger so it can accommodate more kids. We'll be pushing the idea that the next facility should be smaller, fewer beds, in order to force everyone in this community to begin to look for alternatives to incarceration for our kids. Let me end by saying that I believe helping these kids, who are among the most vulnerable among us, is our moral responsibility. We are not in church today, but there are as many places to worship here as there are anywhere in the United States. I believe it's because the people of Shelby County are faithful, welcoming and generous. One of the most famous verses from Matthew says: "For I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me drink, I was a stranger and you welcomed me, I was naked and you clothed me, I was sick and you visited me, I was in prison and you came to me." "I was in prison and you came to me." We should not forget about that last part.

Feb. 15 is a good day for a State of the County, and not just because it's Friday and it's pay day for us County employees, though both of those are those are all good things. But, we should not also not let stray far from our minds that that this is the middle of the month when we celebrate Black History, which is the story of survival, progress, and change. When I think of Black History Month, I'm reminded of three things regarding progress and change. First, change and progress actually often starts at the grassroots. I think of the sanitation workers who went on strike in the 1960s. Those workers weren't led by elected officials. Black History Month reminds me that Everybody, Anybody can be of an agent of change. "The harvest truly is

plenteous, but the laborers are few.” It reminds me that we have lot of work to do. And, you don’t need an elected office to help move this thing along. Second, a key ingredient for progress and change is the ability to find common cause. Dr. King was able to build a broad coalition for instance. If you want change, you have to be able to bring together seemingly different people. Third, and perhaps most sobering, Black History month should remind us that transformative change is hard, slow-to-come and, when change comes, it likely comes at a very steep price. Dr. King, as we know, was assassinated on April 4, 1968. Violence erupted across the country. 39 dead. 21,000 arrested. According to Newsweek, it was the most violent and widespread wave of social unrest since the Civil War. However, the strike that led to his assassination and the wave of violence did end later that month. The main issue during that strike: The sanitation workers were pushing for 65 cents more an hour. Those workers got 15 cents.

I’m sure by now I have already said too much. So, let me say, thank you. Thank for your patience and attention. Thank you for being here. God bless Shelby County, TN. God bless our county.