

700 Black mayors mean emerging political clout

Written by George E. Curry, NNPA Editor-in-Chief
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ATLANTA (NNPA) – Sacramento, Calif. Mayor Kevin Johnson, the newly-elected president of the National Conference of Black Mayors (NCBM), told his colleagues that if they don't improve the lives of their constituents, they don't deserve to remain in office.

"We got these good seats, we've been elected and we get honored and esteemed everywhere we go," Johnson said at a luncheon here at the group's 39th annual convention. "It's not just for us. It's for the communities that we represent. Our obligation is to bring more and more people along. Because if we don't do that, then we're not fit for the seats that we hold."

Johnson, a former star NBA point guard for the Phoenix Suns, cited the enormous growth of the mayors' group. He noted that the NCBM began as a small, Southern organization in 1974 and now is a national force with nearly 700 mayors in the U.S., representing 48 million people or 15 percent of the U.S. population.

In recent years, it has expanded its international reach and now has more than 26,000 mayors on its roll, including many from Nigeria, Senegal, Uganda, Columbia and throughout the Caribbean.

"In terms of [population served], we're bigger than Spain, Canada and Australia," Johnson said. "Think about that. If we come together in numbers, we have that type of strength as an organization to do some remarkable things."

He continued, "The question we all have to ask ourselves is this: As African-American mayors, are our cities better off because we're elected? Are the people we represent better off because we hold the seats that we hold?"

In too many cases, Johnson said, the answer is no.

"Any category that's bad, Black folks are at the top," Johnson said. "Any category that's good,

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Blacks folks, we're at the bottom. That's hard to do. We have somehow managed to do that.

"If you think about obesity, which is bad, we're at the top. If you're talking about unemployment, which is not good for us, we're at the top. If you're talking about dropping out, we're at the top. If you're talking about teenage pregnancy, we're at the top. If you're talking about being a renter instead of a homeowner, we're at the top. Come on now."

Because mayors work so closely to people, they are in position to bring about some fundamental change.

"We're where the rubber meets the road," Johnson explained. "Don't expect Washington to solve our problems. That's what this organization is all about."

He said, "I'm just saying to us today, we have an opportunity to do something really special. And it's not only about talk, it's about us holding ourselves up and banding together as one unit and making sure our voices are heard, that we have a seat at the table.

"We don't just want a seat at the table, we want more than one seat at the table. And when you're at the table, we need to be able to make decisions at the table and give some solutions and problem-solving ideas."

Johnson was passionate as he discussed the future of the organization.

"The National Conference of Black Mayors – that name needs to mean something," Johnson stated. "Every decision that we make going forward needs to be in the best interest of this organization. It's not about one individual, it's not about our cities, it's not about any staff or mayor. It's about what's in the best interest of this organization. And that's the commitment we're all making here."

He also said, "There are many people who counted us out. They said over and over, this organization can't last. And we're standing here after 39 years and the best days are ahead."