

ADDRESS TO THE CITIZENS OF CHARLESTON, SC

MAYOR JOSEPH P. RILEY, JR.

June 5, 2008

Since the night of June 18 last year, our nine brave, heroic firefighters and their families have never been far from my thoughts, and they have been in my daily prayers. I know that is the case with you, the citizens of Charleston, because your outpouring of sympathy, support, generosity and encouragement has been extraordinary. Our community's response to this fire has been a profound reminder why the Charleston community is such a special place.

Immediately after the fire I sought the best team of national experts to help us understand how this fire started, why it spread and how it cost the lives of nine dedicated and brave firefighters. This was a responsibility that I have, as your Mayor, and I accept the responsibility for all the actions of this City government. For the buck stops here.

With the impaneling of our fire review team of experts, we began a process which has continued, to understand every lesson that can be learned from this fire, lessons which will benefit this Fire Department and every fire department in America, and also to assist us in our goal of making the legacy of this fire that the historic City of Charleston Fire Department, our nation's first, becomes a national leader in the best practices of fire fighting and fire safety.

The Fire Review Team quickly came back with a comprehensive report outlining first steps, all of which have been accepted, and include:

- After a national search we brought in a new training officer, and an ambitious training agenda for our firefighters is being carried out.
- We have purchased new, best in the country, self-contained breathing apparatus for every firefighter, new personal protective gear and work uniforms, and new 5 inch supply hoses have replaced 2 ½ inch supply hoses.
- We have hired and trained new fire inspectors and are cross training all current city building inspectors in fire code enforcement.
- We have instituted new procedures for firefighter hiring and promotions, and created a series of new committees, which give our firefighters direct input into the development of new policies.
- New health and safety and respiratory protection programs will bring the department in line with the highest standards of firefighter safety. We have a new chief officer position whose sole responsibility is this new program.
- We are in the process of bringing our staffing level for fire companies up to the highest national standards
- We urged the General Assembly to pass sprinkler legislation to improve the safety of every citizen of South Carolina, and hope very much they will do so in the waning days of this legislative session.

Last month we received the second report from our Review Team, which was the thorough analysis of the Sofa Super Store fire. It pointed out many tragic causal factors, from the illegal addition to the Sofa Super Store building, without which this fatal fire would never have occurred, to a number of operational policies in our department that may have affected the safe and successful fighting of this fire. I recognize and acknowledge these shortcomings, I take responsibility for them, and state once again my commitment to correcting them. We know that we can always do what we do better, and I commit to you that we will implement this nation's fire service best practices as we continue our effort to make our fire department a national model.

That report examined every facet of our fire safety responsibilities, and led to additional recommendations for us to implement, such as developing new, national state-of-the-art building inspection software that will enable us to better determine if there has in fact been an illegal and unpermitted addition to a building, to following through on the fire department operations and equipment recommendations previously made. This report is now available to every fire department in America and is being used to make those fire departments safer. Just this week I received a letter from a small fire department in North Carolina where the Chief said, and I quote, "I have read the report for the benefit of my department and have made some changes in our Standard Operating Guidelines due to the information gathered from the report. A fire chief will do themselves and their department an injustice by not reading the report and looking to find anything that they might need to address. I assure you, there is something there that can help every fire department that is in existence world over."

Just as surviving members of our Fire Department could have been injured fighting that fire, so they have received emotional injuries and scars from the tragic loss of their dear colleagues. We have set up what I think is the best counseling program ever developed to work with the members of our Fire Department and their families to heal their emotional wounds. I want to publicly thank the National Fallen Firefighters Foundation, the South Carolina Firefighters Association, and Debbie Blalock, retired Chief Gerald Mishoe and the wonderful members of their team who have so helpfully and lovingly been responding to our firefighters. And I want our firefighters to know that the love that our community has for them and our appreciation of their courageous service is unbounded. This counseling program, with its own separate office will continue for as many months and years as it is needed and is of service to the fine members of our Department.

With the support of our City Council, we have acquired the site of this tragic fire, for it is a sacred battlefield. We will work with our fellow governments and with you, the citizens of our community, in determining how to make this a special and reverential place to forever honor the sacrifice of our fallen heroes.

With the retirement of Chief Thomas, we are losing a wonderful, honorable man. Part of my responsibility as the Mayor of Charleston is to choose his replacement. I have begun the process, a national search, to find the very best person in America to lead this Fire Department. We hired the most experienced person in America to help us identify the best possible candidates, and in time we will bring the finalists to our community for our City Council and

members of our Fire Department to meet, and with their input and my best efforts to determine who the best person is, I will recommend to our City Council a new fire chief to lead this great department.

One the new Chief's responsibilities will be to implement a strategic plan. With the help of our fire review team, our City Council and the new Chief, we will develop a plan to move our department toward our ultimate goal, to be among the select fire departments in our country who are accredited by the Center for Public Safety Excellence.

Since June 19 of last year, amid the heartbreak, we have been seeking to move our department forward, for we know that that is how we honor our nine brave heroes, Mike Benke, Billy Hutchinson, Louis Mulkey, Brad Baity, Mark Kelsey Michael French, Melvin Champaign, Earl Drayton and Brandon Thompson. We honor their memory not with petty political disputes or theatrics, but with hard work and progress in our department. Continuing to move ahead with sharp focus on our most important mission - making this fire department among the best in America – is the way we will remember these brave men. We must not rest, nor will we be diverted by anyone from the achievement of this goal. I ask that you, as citizens of this wonderful and historic city, give our fire department the support they deserve as we remember our nine fallen heroes in the coming weeks, and as we honor their memory by building a Fire Department second to none in our country.