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Black leaders to Trump: Chicago needs urban renewal not tweets

By Maudlyne Ihejirika

A coalition of black community leaders on Tuesday said they had a message for a U.S. president that keeps tweeting about Chicago's violence.

They said the nation's inner cities are at crisis, in desperate need of an urban renewal plan hoped for but never realized under President Barack Obama. So stop tweeting and put money behind rhetoric, the leaders said.

"With more than 750 murders last year — at our parish in West Garfield Park, 12 victims in one parish alone — the pain is real," said the Rev. Marshall Hatch, pastor of New Mount Pilgrim Missionary Baptist Church and Co-Chair of citywide clergy group the Leaders Network.

"We welcome any help that is substantial, that is resourceful. We encourage any kind of interface with the federal government that engages with community leadership. But the pain is much too real to be anybody's football," Hatch said, echoing others.

He and some dozen leaders led by the Rev. Jesse Jackson of Rainbow PUSH Coalition and Cook County Commissioner Richard Boykin held their news conference in the West Side Austin neighborhood, to shift focus to poverty and unemployment they've long called root causes of Chicago's violence.

Austin is among nine communities with unemployment above 20 percent — and some of the city's highest crime stats. Leaders were armed with data from a University of Illinois at Chicago report finding joblessness among young people in those communities at all-time highs.

President Donald Trump's tweets slamming the city for out-of-control violence and threatening federal action — including a recent influx of Alcohol, Tobacco and Firearm agents — are way off target, leaders said. And they extended an invitation to Trump to work with them on real solutions. "In varying degrees, Chicago, Baltimore, St. Louis, East St. Louis, New Orleans all



Civil rights activist Jesse Jackson (AP File Photo/Ben Margot)

have the same basic crisis of rising violence that correlates with poverty, a weapon of mass destruction. These have become zones, doughnut holes in the middle of urban centers," asserted Jackson.

"We deserve better. So if the president wants to come to Chicago with a serious plan for urban reconstruction, we welcome it. But this should not be a political foil for conversation," Jackson said. "Chicago can be a model."

UIC Sociologist Teresa Cordova shared sobering statistics from the new report bolstering arguments for neighborhood revitalization to fight crime. Joblessness among black 24-year-olds in 2015 was at 60 percent in Chicago, compared to 45 percent in New York City and Los Angeles, and 38 percent nationwide. In Austin, joblessness among 16- to 19-year-olds in 2015 stood at 91 percent, among the highest of all 77 communities.

"What we have found is joblessness is very much tied to the conditions of the neighborhoods. Joblessness is chronic. It's concentrated. It's tied to the decline of industry from neighborhoods," said Cordova, co-author of the recent UIC Great Cities Institute report, "Abandoned in their Neighbor-

hoods: Youth Joblessness amidst the Flight of Industry and Opportunity."

"A focus on revitalization of neighborhoods is indeed what needs to happen," Cordova said.

Potential solutions include legislation such as a bill sponsored by Boykin and expected to be introduced this week before the Cook County Board, leaders said. The Cook County Neighborhood Revitalization Act would create a homeownership program for teachers and first responders in beleaguered communities like Austin.

"That bill will provide free homes for police officers, teachers, firefighters and paramedics. But it actually requires developers to use 30 percent of the residents from at-risk communities to do the rehab and to build the homes. I think we need to pass that bill immediately," said Boykin.

"In the month of January alone, 310 people shot, 59 people killed; and the sad thing about this is that it's genocide; 49 of the 59 people killed were African-Americans. Eight of the other 10 were Latinos," Boykin said. "We are in a virtual state of emergency here in Chicago. We need real solutions, not rhetoric."