

**2018 State of the City
Mayor Jorge O. Elorza
February 6, 2018**

President Salvatore, Members of the City Council, Members of the General Assembly and members of the Providence community—good evening.

It's been the honor of a lifetime to serve as your Mayor. Three years ago, you voted for a city that listened and a city that worked. You voted for a better tomorrow and a safer today. But most of all, you voted for the promise of One Providence, a city with 25 distinct and different neighborhoods that come together as one community.

In the past few days, we've seen an extraordinary example of the strength and unity of our city and we've seen yet again that out of the darkness comes light. A disturbing and hate-filled flyer was distributed by folks who have been emboldened and encouraged to come out of the shadows. They think that if they can cause enough fear and anxiety, and convince us that someone is coming to take away our security and our dreams, that then, we'll turn against each other. But instead what this incident provoked, was a resounding show of unity, where our city came together to say that we will not be divided; because our love trumps your hate.

And so it is in that spirit – of coming together – that I deliver today's State of the City. Over the past three years, we've been continually reminded of the power of the people and of what we can accomplish when we're united. Here in Providence, we'll continue to add our voice to the chorus and lend our hand to the cause whenever someone tries to divide us. And, we will stand up for our values whenever they are threatened. As a city:

We've stood with Standing Rock, and we're divesting our pension fund from the filthy fifteen;
We've stood with Paris, and opposed an LNG facility here in our port;
We've stood with Dreamers, and announced our own city ID program;
We've stood with Black Lives Matter, and invested in cradle to career programs;
We've stood with the Women's March, and instituted Paid Parental Leave; and
We've stood with Orlando, and offered gender-affirming health care.

Cities have always been places that bring people from all and different walks of life to coexist and thrive together. This is what cities do, in spite of all the forces that are working to divide us. And that's what our city will continue to do because that's what makes us so strong.

Last year we hosted the first ever All In: Providence Education Summit. Over 400 parents, students, teachers, businesses, and community leaders, came together to create a cohesive, comprehensive vision for education in Providence.

IN CITY COUNCIL

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We asked the public, what is missing from our schools? What do you, the school community need? We heard loud and clear. We heard that our students and teachers want facilities that better support 21st century learning. We heard that our students craved curriculum that was culturally responsive, that they wanted to look at our staff and see themselves in 10-15 years. We heard that students wanted equity in education and increased access to multilingual learning. We heard that our community partners wanted to be involved, they wanted to help us.

When our students told us they wanted a more culturally-responsive curriculum and role models that look like them, we took that to heart. We hired a full-time professional to evaluate our entire curriculum, to see how it can better reflect and support our students. And we know how important it is that our students are surrounded with role models and emotional supports that they can relate to; so we also hired school culture coordinators for each one of our seven middle schools. These individuals will build relationships with our kids, provide supports to our teachers, and engage outside partners. I believe this investment will be a success if our students are exposed to mentors and community leaders whom they turn to think: "I want to be like her when I grow up." I want to take a moment to recognize the seven community leaders who've been hired as the school culture coordinators. We have with us today Elsie Palmiera, Nerise Beckford-Joly, Carina Monge, Jason Figueroa, Stephen Larbi, and Nicholas Bernardo. Please join me in giving them a round of applause.

We took what you said and we're putting it into action. This past August, we announced that over the next 10 years we'll be investing up to \$400 million in our school facilities. We're doing this because our students and our teachers demanded it and also frankly, because they deserve it. We've begun a year-long community engagement process and we've already had hundreds of people participate. Your feedback has already made our plan richer and it will directly inform the 5 year plan we submit to the state.

While classrooms themselves are important, so are the tools we give them to learn with. That's why we have made a commitment to increase our students' access-to-technology, so that every child in every classroom has access to a tablet, laptop or computer when they need it. I'm happy to announce that because of this multi-year commitment, we're 90% of the way towards achieving that goal, and we will get to 100% by the end of this summer.

But we're not stopping there. We've heard directly from students that it's not enough anymore that they just have access to computers at school. The next frontier in the digital divide is to ensure that they have access to high speed internet. More and more, our students are being asked to complete homework assignments and to do basic research online. But many of our families don't have internet connections at home and it causes the digital divide to grow even wider. I want to take a moment to recognize some very special guests who are helping us reverse this trend. We have built a strong partnership with Sprint whereby they've committed to providing 600 kids from all ten high schools with free 24/7 access to high speed internet throughout their four years of high school. I want to recognize Kevin Farren, Thomas Robertson and Gabriel Torres from Sprint who are joined by Hannah Zahn, a graduate from the Juanita Sanchez Educational Complex, who benefited from this program. Please stand and be recognized. With your support, we will indeed close the digital divide.

Our city has significant resources, but we know we can't do it alone. The research told us that our students were losing ground during the summer, so we did what we do best: we engaged the community for support. We created the Summer Learning Task Force and invited over 20 organizations to be a part of it. We partnered with Breakthrough Providence, BELL, PASA, Generation Teach, Providence Community Libraries, the Boys and Girls Club, our Recreation Department, and many others to provide our students with meaningful, summer-long enrichment. And we saw results!

Hundreds of students participated in free, high-quality summer learning this past year; and parents loved it. But what we love most is that a high percentage of the 480 students who participated in BELL's summer program gained roughly two months in literacy skills and three months in math skills during the summer. Our students are no longer going backwards over the summer—they're getting ahead and we're closing the achievement gap. We're joined today by BELL CEO Dr. Lauren Sanchez Gilbert and two BELL scholars – fourth grader Mia Estrella Gomez and second grader Maximo Estrella Gomez who participated in the program. Let's give them a round of applause because they're proof that when we work together, there is no challenge we can't overcome.

We've known that the summer is a critical time for our kids. We know that our students crave summer employment opportunities and many of them rely on summer jobs to help support their families. We also know that beyond earning a paycheck, having a job also teaches our kids about the dignity of work. With the City Council's support, we have more than doubled the number of summer jobs we offer in the city, we're instilling a sense of pride in our kids, and we're preparing them with the essential skills they'll need to succeed in this world.

Too often, people look at the adversity our students face and they see our students from a deficit standpoint. But to paraphrase one of my favorite artists from the 90's, Talib Kweli, a flower that grows through the concrete know more about survival than one that grows in an open field. The adversity our kids have to overcome just to get to school each day isn't a deficit; rather, it's the asset that makes me believe they can overcome anything. If our kids have the same opportunities that upper middle-class families provide their children, I'd put my money on our kids any day because I know they will persevere, overcome, and outcompete anyone else in the class.

While we're preparing our youth with the skills they need for the future, we know there are so many residents who have the skills and just need to be connected with the right opportunity. That's why we created the Office of Economic Opportunity. In the past month, we announced the creation of the PVD Self-employment program, a partnership with the Center for Women and Enterprise that is helping entrepreneurs get their businesses off the ground.

And two weeks ago, we held a forum in which 150 business people participated to be connected to opportunities throughout the state. And, through a partnership with DesignxRI, we have relaunched the Providence Design Catalyst program that has already led to the launch of several design-based companies, including one that was recently featured at the prestigious CES conference in Las Vegas. I ask you to join me in recognizing DesignxRI, the Center for Women and Enterprise, and the Office of Economic Opportunity for their incredible work.

In Providence, we leave no one behind. We have partnered with Amos House on A Hand Up, a program that connects people experiencing homelessness with daily work opportunities. To date, over 350 people have participated in A Hand Up since it launched just over a year ago and we're finding that people are hungry for work. We're using work as a tool to connect people to services and helping them get back on their feet. We're proud of folks like Baudilio Marrero and Matthew Schmidt, here with us today who have participated in the program. We're proud of Kali Otto-Gentry, the program coordinator, who is committed to creative solutions and unique partnerships. Thank you Baudilio, Matthew and Kali for all of your work.

We're seeing collaboration in every corner of our city. Earlier this year, we launched Providence Safe Stations to address the opioid crisis in our city. After hearing of a successful program in Nashua, NH, Captain Kenyon from the Fire Department brought the idea up the chain of command. Immediately, the Commissioner and our Healthy Communities Office jumped into action to support this idea. Led by the fire department, the team called all the necessary partners, like the state and the Providence Center, to make this program a reality. Because of the work of all of our partners, anyone can walk into any fire station at any time and be connected to recovery support. Our Providence Safe Stations partnership is addressing the opioid crisis head on and keeping people alive in the process. Please join me in thanking the Fire Department, the Providence Center, and all of our partners for this amazing work.

When it comes to keeping people safe, our police officers take this responsibility to heart and put their own lives on the line for our residents every day. And our officers would be the first to tell you that they can't do their jobs effectively without the relationships that they build in the community. Whether our officers are coaching middle school students, advising our neighborhood watch groups, attending a local ribbon-cutting, or coordinating with the Nonviolence Institute, it's their integration in the neighborhoods that makes our police department so effective. Because of the entire community's work, we've seen amazing results in our city. While some cities in the US have seen an increase in crime, homicides, shootings and burglaries in Providence have declined dramatically.

Our police are keeping people safe and they're keeping people alive during a time when it's never been harder to be a police officer. That's why we continue to invest in our department by graduating our largest and most diverse class in the city's history, by deploying body worn cameras for our officers, and purchasing 71 new vehicles so that our officers have the best equipment possible. I want to take a moment to recognize the best police department in the country, led by the best police chief I've ever known. Thank you for your leadership.

We're building safe and vibrant neighborhoods where people want to be. And believe me, people want to be here.

When we look up, we're seeing cranes throughout the skyline. With over 60 projects in construction or in the pipeline—great things are happening and more great things are coming.

Through our collaboration with the State, we've businesses like Johnson & Johnson, GE Digital, Virgin Pulse, Infosys, VistaPrint, Trade Area Systems, eMoney, Evolis, and other companies moving to our city. All of this would not be possible without the help of so many civic groups, such as the Providence Foundation, that has been investing in our downtown, the universities that continue to supply top tier talent, the Chamber of Commerce that encourages business leaders to lean into civic engagement, companies like Hasbro that are investing in Kennedy Plaza, non-profits like AS220 that keep Providence unique and culturally rich, and so many more. It is the collection of all of these institutions that makes Providence such a special and attractive place.

And people from throughout the world are taking notice. They're coming because of our food, our architecture, our world-class art, our diversity, our culture, and our unique neighborhoods. They're coming because people like you make this city an amazing place to visit. And I hear, some of them are just coming for the bumper cars.

One person who visited was Carlos de Moya. Carlos is a fashion designer from Mao in the Dominican Republic, who has been featured in New York Fashion Week and whose designs are known throughout the world. Carlos and his partner came here for Providence's ultimate expression of bringing people together, PVDFest. Carlos enjoyed PVDFest so much that he fell in love with the city and he thought he and his husband might just stay. Carlos, can you stand up? I'm proud to join the residents of Providence to welcome you and your husband as new residents in our city. I'm also proud to announce that Carlos will be featured this year during StyleWeek NorthEast's February show. A beautiful example of the power of the Creative Capital at work. Congratulations, Carlos.

It's designers like Carlos, it's our entrepreneurs, our shops, our world-renowned restaurants, and our small businesses that make our neighborhoods so special. Whether it be the Raymond Brothers Tailor Shop, the local favorite Geoff's Sandwich Shop, or the nationally-recognized Los Andes Restaurant—these businesses make us Providence. We're proud to have supported their growth through the Providence Business Loan Fund and we encourage folks to call us to see if you too are eligible for an economic development loan. You've invested in our city and since we're in this together, we want to invest in you.

But investing in our economy is only successful if we invest in our neighborhoods too. That's why this past year, working collaboratively with my colleagues on the City Council, we passed a 5-year, comprehensive capital improvement plan for the first time in anyone's memory. This spring, we'll be investing \$45 Million and being strategic about our infrastructure investments so that we're not waiting until things are broken to fix them.

But with your help, we're already fixing things through our Mayor's Center for City Services. PVD311 is a way for businesses and residents to get in touch with us—let us know what needs to be fixed. When I took office I heard loud and clear that Providence residents were sick of having to “know-a-guy,” sick of calling the city and not hearing back. I get so happy now when I'm out in the neighborhoods and folks say, “I used PVD311, it actually works.” And the reason why it works is because we ask the entire community for help. We can't possibly know where every pothole, dirty lot, or stray mattress is. But we've asked the public to help us crowdsource the information. You tell us where it is, and we get on it right away! With your help, we've increased downloads of the smart phone app by 153% and recently closed our 25,000th case in the MCCA office.

I ask Director Andy Jacques and his team in MCCA, as well as Director Emmanuel Echevarria and his team in the Innovation Department, to stand and be recognized for the amazing work you do.

Now, the folks at MCCA and Innovation are only a part of the team, and they couldn't do their work without the amazing support of the men and women of Local 1033. I want to thank all of the members of 1033 here in the room with us tonight, please give them a round of applause as well for their partnership.

We've done substantial work over the past two years to make sure City Hall is working better. And one aspect that we've prioritized is ensuring that our finances are strong. We've had two consecutive years with record surpluses, we paid off our cumulative deficit sooner than anyone expected, we had our credit rating upgraded two notches, we have the first rainy day fund in many years, and our short-term finances are stronger than they've been in a decade. To use a medical analogy, we've stopped the bleeding and we've stabilized the patient. That's a good thing, but now we have to talk about long-term health.

We must and will continue to pursue every avenue to resolve our lingering pension issues. We'll work with the urgency it deserves to find a once-and-for-all solution to our city's retiree liabilities, and I ask everyone for your help in pushing at the Statehouse to make sure it happens.

We can't do it alone, and I want to close by letting you know that all of the progress we've made as a city has been because you, our residents, who have have been behind it. I thank you for shoveling out your neighbor, for reporting all those potholes, for attending the All In summit, for challenging the 6/10 connector design, for dedicating your summer to our students, for performing in PVDFest, for participating in community clean ups, for planting trees in your neighborhood, for supporting a non-profit, for adopting a local park. I want to thank you for being part of One Providence.

We've done so much together as a community, accomplished so much together as neighbors. But we have so much left to do. Over the next 5 years, I look forward to rebuilding our schools so they inspire our kids to learn. To resetting our relationships with our universities to invest in our city of the future. To rethinking transportation to better connect people to opportunities. To re-envisioning Kennedy Plaza to be our central meeting space. To redeveloping vacant properties to build strong and vibrant neighborhoods. To recommitting ourselves to our artists so they can unlock our creative potential.

To the thousands of residents who've participated in these and other projects. To the 4,000 employees who render service to the city every day. To the hundreds of people who serve on city boards and commissions. To the countless people who believe in our amazing city. You all have done so much and we all have so much more to do.

I look forward to pushing the envelope to create a more resilient city, where neighbors are helping neighbors, a more compassionate city where no one gets left behind, and a more inclusive city that remains open to welcoming new people to be part of our community.

But most importantly, I look forward to continue doing this work by your side, with all of you. Thank you Providence, good night and God bless.