

## Baltimore mayor talks women's issues at Urban League's 90th year event

By Jessica Bassett Of the St. Louis American  
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Baltimore Mayor Shelia Dixon's political focus is simple: meet people at the level where they are and focus on changing systems, not people.

The first black woman mayor of Baltimore was in St. Louis on Monday to talk crime, education and, of course, The HBO drama *The Wire* at the Urban League of Metropolitan St. Louis' 90th anniversary celebration.



*The Urban League of Metropolitan St. Louis, Inc. celebrated their 90th anniv. at the Millennium Hotel on March 3, 2008. The Hon. Sheila Dixon, the 48th mayor of Baltimore was the guest speaker. Photo by Erica M. Brooks*

"When I started working, I noticed that people were very disenfranchised, weren't involved, disengaged and didn't vote because they didn't get the connection to see the difference that they could make," Dixon said.

"People who you represent need to be empowered. You don't determine the destination for that community, they should."

Dixon developed her tough persona in Ashburton, a black suburb in west Baltimore. Her father, Phillip Dixon Sr., was a car salesman and her mother, Winona, was a community activist, heavily involved in her church, political causes and her children's education.

That influence led Dixon to pursue teaching as a career with a master's degree in educational management from John Hopkins University. Troubled by Baltimore's education system, it was there that Dixon decided politics would give her the greatest authority to make the change she sought in the classroom.

Dixon began working for a number of elected officials, including former U.S. Rep. Kweisi Mfume, who recommended her to finish out his term on the Baltimore City Council.

"I had a case where I had some students who socially needed to be in kindergarten but academically they were at a higher level," Dixon said. "I wanted to make some changes as a teacher, but I realized I didn't have the authority to do so."

Dixon, 53, spent a dozen years on the council. In 1999 she became the first African-American woman ever elected council president.

That momentum, Dixon said, carried her to her first full term as mayor in November 2007, becoming the first female mayor in Baltimore. She said she wanted to focus on strengthening neighborhoods by building a “cleaner, greener, healthier and safer” city.

“It wasn’t about a personal agenda,” Dixon said. “It was about the empowerment of the community as a whole.”

As mayor, Dixon got points for funding extra trash recycling, building more affordable housing units, and reducing police overtime, but was criticized for not significantly addressing the bigger problems, such as crime.

The murder of six people during one weekend changed that. Dixon unveiled a crime-fighting strategy that included cracking down on illegal guns, improving relations between community and police, and targeting the most dangerous criminals and crimes.

Her strategy paid off. In January, Baltimore had the fewest number of homicides in 30 years.

“It was a matter of putting our egos in our pockets and focusing on your goals and objectives,” Dixon said.

Among other initiatives, Dixon is working to lower Baltimore’s property tax, which has the highest tax in Maryland, and leading an effort to refurbish the city’s deteriorating east side.

“People didn’t come in and say, ‘We’re going to move you out and take over the community,’” Dixon said. “They were at the table from the very beginning.”

Dixon is the mother of two children and the aunt of professional basketball player Juan Dixon, who now plays for the Detroit Pistons.

Her family has not been immune to the pain of a city plagued by drugs: Her brother and sister-in-law were heroin users who died of AIDS.

An active member and former trustee of Bethel A.M.E. Church, Dixon is grounded in her faith. When the political pressure gets too tough, she said she immediately looks to God.

She also admits to being a fan of HBO’s *The Wire*, which is set in Baltimore and dramatizes the guts of the city’s politics. “In looking at the show, it does give you an example of what we struggle with, but there are so many great things that are happening in our city,” Dixon said.

She is credited for passing a comprehensive smoking ban, securing funding to build more affordable housing and launching a new HIV awareness campaign.

Dixon is still a relative newcomer to the mayor's office, so she seeks guidance from other major urban cities and more experienced mayors, including Mayor Shirley Franklin in Atlanta, who in 2001 became the first African-American woman to serve as mayor of a major Southern city.

"In a society that is still predominately white male, sometimes you're challenged more from those in the business community than, say, a white or African-American male," Dixon said.

St. Louis and Baltimore are similar in many regards, Dixon said. Baltimore was number two - behind St. Louis - in the number of homicides in 2006 and both have struggled with State intervention in the administration of City schools.

"You can't ignore the least of those who don't necessarily feel they are part of a city or a system," Dixon said.

"You have to be able to show them they are part of it and there are opportunities in helping them reach that potential. That is where we're going to change our urban cities."

### **National Urban League report**

The National Urban League released its 2008 State of Black America report on Wednesday with the focus on black women. The 242-page report revealed the economic, social, political and medical challenges faced by African-American women in the United States.

"The only thing that is certain is the need to hear and amplify the voices of black women," Dr. Dorothy Height, president of the National Council of Negro Women, writes in the foreword.

"Too often our needs, concerns, struggles and triumphs are diminished and subordinated to what is believed to be the more pressing concerns of others."

The report notes that black women are more likely than white or Hispanic women to run a household and raise children on their own. According to Julianne Malveaux, the president of Bennett College for Women, black women hold more jobs nationwide than black men, yet earn less on average, \$566 a week compared to \$629 for black men.

The report showed black women have above-average rates of cancer, diabetes and heart disease. The gap in total uninsured also slightly increased this year.

However, the report also details some minor victories for black women. Black women have made huge strides as entrepreneurs. The number of businesses owned by them increased by 147 percent between 1997 and 2006, compared to an overall growth of 24 percent.

For a complete copy of National Urban League's report *The State of Black America 2008: In the Black Woman's Voice*, go to [www.nul.org](http://www.nul.org).