

Morial to keynote for Urban League at centennial celebration March 8

By *Chris King Of The St. Louis American*
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"It's great to be able to come to St. Louis during this 100-year anniversary," Marc H. Morial, president and CEO of the National Urban League, told The American in a phone interview.

Morial will provide the keynote speech Monday, March 8 when the Urban League of Metropolitan St. Louis celebrates the organization's centennial at its 92nd Annual Dinner Meeting.

The St. Louis affiliate may be eight years behind the national movement, in terms of chronology. The Urban League of the St. Louis Provident Association was formed in 1918, in the aftermath of the 1917 race riot in East St. Louis, whereas the Committee on Urban Conditions Among Negroes was established in New York City in 1910.

But for Morial, the St. Louis affiliate – led by President and CEO James H. Buford – is No. 1.

"We had a highly successful conference in St. Louis in 2007. Frankly, it was the very best conference we have ever had in the history of the Urban League movement," Morial said.

When Morial addresses what he describes as "one of the very best affiliates in the Urban League movement" next week, he will detail the national organization's new "I Am Empowered" initiative.

Morial said Jim Buford was part of a working group commissioned to come up with a campaign that would be set forth as part of the centennial.

"We wanted to talk about the future of America, of Black America, and how this nation needs to reset its priorities for the 21st century," Morial said.

The annual dinner in St. Louis will provide Morial with an opportunity, he said, "to speak directly to people in St. Louis about our four goals."

In a column that ran in The American last month, Morial described those four goals: "Every American child is ready for college, work and life. Every American has access to jobs with a living wage and good benefits. Every American lives in safe, decent, affordable and energy efficient housing on fair terms. Every American has access to quality and affordable health care solutions."

Morial appeared on the Today show Tuesday morning to outline the initiative and invite the public to join the National Urban League on the campaign.

"As we prepare to celebrate, we wanted to make sure we didn't miss the opportunity to talk to the nation about its future, our future, and not simply enjoy ourselves in celebrating the past," Morial told The American.

"It's about tomorrow, too."

As a former mayor of Baltimore, Morial knows well the difficulty in making progress and maintaining momentum in pushing the public toward policy goals. He said the Urban League begins this campaign mindful of that challenge.

"We live in a society where people have short attention spans, and good ideas of today are forgotten tomorrow," Morial said.

"We need to push against that and focus people on the long term."

The most important push, he said, is for greater access to jobs. He recently discussed this subject at the White House with President Obama, the Rev. Al Sharpton and NAACP President Benjamin Jealous.

"Most important, we must continue to push the president and Congress that we need targeted job creation, targeted job training. We have always believed that job-creation programs have to be targeted to different strata of the population," Morial said.

"We can not, because Obama is in office, sit back and think the things we need are going to happen. We need to raise our voices, be more assertive and aggressive."

For more information on the "I Am Empowered" initiative, visit www.iamempowered.com.

