

Bottom to Top Process Changes

Building Faith in the City

**An Interview with Julien X. Neals, Esq.,
Business Administrator, City of Newark**



Julien X. Neals, Esq.

EDITORS' NOTE In December 2010, Corporation Counsel Julien X. Neals, Esq., took his oath of office as the City of Newark's Business Administrator. Since February 2008, Neals has served as the City of Newark's top lawyer. In his role as Corporation Counsel, Neals managed a department of 75 employees. He began his legal career as a law clerk in the Hudson County Superior Court. He eventually became a partner with the Secaucus-based law firm of Chasan Leyner & Lamparello, PC. Neals is a trustee of the New Jersey State Bar Foundation and currently serves as Chairman of the Board of the Volunteer Lawyers for Justice. Neals received his Bachelor's Degree in Communications from Morehouse College and his Juris Doctorate from Emory University School of Law.

How do you define your role and what excited you about taking it on?

My primary focus is the budget – city operations from a financial standpoint – how the city is able to operate within its means and ways we can maximize revenues. Those are the keys to survival for any municipal government today, because so many financial resources are drying up.

My secondary focus is on operations relating to the performance of public services. We have to pay attention to quality control as we provide those services and continually evaluate whether it's necessary to provide them today; there is a balance between public expectation and your ability to provide particular services.

Has the progress on resolving the budget issues been what you had hoped?

Yes, we were able to accomplish what we hoped to in 2011. In 2010, we had significant staffing reductions and furloughs – things that hurt the individual employee were the primary source of cost reduction.

In 2011, we started streamlining operations to cut costs without reaching back into the employees' pockets. We substantially reduced our structural deficit.

It's a year by year challenge, but we find new ways each year to create new revenue streams or to cut costs in order to continue to provide services. And that is in light of rising tension over health care costs, which are exorbitant for our municipality.

How challenging is it in Newark to create real change?

It's challenging because true change has to be institutional. You have to create operational changes that are not temporary and the people who are performing those functions need to adapt to that change and continue to follow it without retreating to old practices that were too expensive or non-productive. So you have to ingrain bottom to top process changes.

Is there a need in this role to reach out to the private sector in order to partner with them?

A strong public/private partnership today is the only way that municipal governments will survive. If we don't start adapting some of our business models similar to those in the private sector, we're not going to keep up.

We can't completely go private, because we still have certain legal requirements that have to be met in a municipal environment, but taking more of a business approach to efficiency and productivity is key to our future survival. ●

**An Interview with Modia Butler,
Chief of Staff to Mayor Cory A. Booker, City of Newark**



Modia Butler

EDITORS' NOTE Prior to becoming Chief of Staff in 2008, Modia "Mo" Butler served as Co-Chair of Cory Booker's 2006 mayoral transition team. Since 2006, Butler has served as the Chairman of the Board of Commissioners for the Newark Housing Authority (NHA). From 2003 to 2008, he served as the President and CEO of Newark Now. Prior to that, Butler led the Do Something after-school program as its first Executive Director. Butler has received the Bank of America Neighborhood Excellence Award, the Gustav Heningburg Civic Fellowship, the Newark Little League Committee Larry Doby Award, the Freedom Foundation's Best Men's Award, and the Leadership Newark 2008 Distinguished Fellow Award, among others. Butler holds a Bachelor's Degree from Franklin and Marshall College and a Master's Degree in Public Policy from the Eagleton Institute of Politics at Rutgers-New Brunswick.

In looking at the transformative changes that Mayor Booker has envisioned, how challenging has it been to implement them?

First and foremost, there had to be a civic and spiritual renewal within the city – in order to achieve real change, we had to get people to believe in Newark again and what we were trying to accomplish.

When Cory Booker became Mayor in 2006, I was President of Newark Now, a nonprofit that he founded in 2003. The organization works with the city to provide better services to Newark's residents. We created key partnerships with nonprofits throughout the city and initiatives designed to empower individuals and restore their faith in what can happen here.

In 2008, I made the transition from Newark Now to Chief of Staff to the Mayor. The work is more focused on the physical renewal of the city, with an emphasis on the safety and well-being of its residents. We have revitalized numerous parks across the city, offering Newarkers a place to engage in healthy outdoor exercise and activity. Working closely with our Deputy Mayor for Economic Development, we have unveiled exciting development projects that are positively transforming the fabric of this city; we have a new hotel under construction and an independent hotel being retrofitted, not to mention more businesses choosing Newark as their home – so it's an exciting, albeit challenging, time.

How challenging was it to get the community to believe change was possible and to bring them onboard?

We spend a lot of time trying to engage as many residents as possible. Initially, the Mayor hosted open office hours once a month to engage residents on a personal level. In the past few years, the Mayor has taken this citizen-centered approach to a new level by leveraging the power of social media.

We also designated a Deputy Mayor for Community Engagement whose primary responsibility is to act as an interface with different communities throughout the city.

Today, operating within the constraints of an austere budget, tough choices have to be made, with greater focus on the Mayor's core mission.

Is it tough to be patient when change doesn't come about as quickly as you would like?

Yes it is, but you combat that by working with a sense of urgency and purpose to enact the Mayor's agenda. Obstacles are overcome through clarity of vision and diligence. ●