

State of our City isn't just strong --- it is CAMDEN STRONG!

Mayor Victor G. Carstarphen Delivers 2025 State of the City Address

May 8, 2025

Remarks as Prepared for Delivery

Good evening!

Welcome to DCA Commissioner Jacquelyn Suárez, State Legislators, County Commissioners, Council President Fuentes and members of City Council, Chancellor Antonio Tillis, Camden residents, clergy, business leaders and community stakeholders. I am proud to once again deliver my annual report on the State of the City, and I thank you for joining me here at Rutgers University-Camden.

To my family and friends: your love sustains me. To my daughters—thank you for being my heart. To my mother—thank you for being my foundation. And to all my loved ones who have stood by me, believed in me, and prayed with me: I love you, and I thank you for your constant support as we rise together for Camden.

To my cabinet, staff, and every municipal employee—you are the unsung heroes of this city. The work you do every day may not always make headlines, but it changes lives. Thank you for your service and for keeping this city moving forward with heart and hustle.

That is why I am so pleased to inform you that the State of our City isn't just strong --- it is CAMDEN STRONG!!!!

Words like blight, poverty, crime, and neglect were used far too often to describe a city whose story had not yet been told by the people who actually lived here—by the people who never gave up on it.

Camden was on the negative end of news coverage, articles, special reports. Those old labels of “the nation’s most dangerous city” and “a car with no engine” --- no longer apply!

Because that “WAS” Camden...

Now let’s flash forward to the present day...to what Camden “IS” ---

Camden IS a city on the rise.

Camden IS living proof that resilience, when fueled by unity and vision, leads to real change.

Our success is a result of hard work and collaboration. It’s a credit to all of you in this audience. And it’s a credit to many people who came before me and led the city during difficult times. It’s the trust we build every day between residents, government, businesses, non-profits, and faith-based leaders.

And my administration is committed to honoring that trust—by showing up, listening, and delivering. Every single day, we’re managing the people’s business with transparency, accountability, and urgency. We’re not waiting for change—we’re making it.

Imagine that: good government—working for the people—delivering to the people. I wish folks in Washington, D.C. would come take a look at what we’re doing here in Camden.

Because in our corner of the nation, we’re not waiting for permission or validation. We are Resilient, and Camden is Rising—and getting better every single day.

Before I go any further, I’d like to invite you to turn your attention to the screen. What you’re about to see is not a campaign video. It’s not a commercial. It’s a visual reminder of how far we’ve come. It’s a celebration of our people, our progress, and our pride.

Please direct your attention to this video to learn more about Camden’s incredible transformation! (video plays)

As you can see, Camden has made incredible progress. My Administration is moving the City in the right direction and even more growth has taken place since last year.

This tremendous progress has been a product of a community that would not give up and kept on pushing. Even through the toughest times...a resilient community!

A resilient community that withstood difficult circumstances, years of disinvestment, decaying neighborhoods, high levels of vacancy, violence and crime.

But Camden bounced back, demonstrating its ability to adapt and recover from these challenges. Challenges that may have put another community down for good.

In Camden we learn to cope with adversity, we use it to motivate ourselves and we come back even stronger.

Because of your confidence in our city leaders, perseverance, and willingness to put forward 100% effort, Camden is not only Resilient, but Camden is Rising like never before.

And its tangible progress, you can see it and touch it.

There are always haters and naysayers who will never acknowledge our progress. But we control our narrative, and we will not allow others who want to bring us down tell our story.

Our story is one of pride, faith, care, hard work, innovation, and success --- that’s the Camden I know --- that is the Camden I grew up in.

It’s been said many different ways...Camden is a “City Moving Forward”, a “City of Opportunity”, a “City of Promise”, a “City Invincible”.

However it’s said, I can assure you—and I think everyone here tonight will agree --- Camden is Resilient and Rising.

Now, I’m going to start with a topic that may not be flashy. It may not get the biggest applause.

But it’s one of the most important things I can talk about as your Mayor: modernizing how your city government works.

Why? Because in today's world, everything—and I mean everything—is online.

And if our systems aren't up to date, then we're not just falling behind—we're putting your data, your privacy, and our city's operations at risk.

But worse than that --- governments are targeted by cyber hackers every day. I read the papers and see what's happening to towns and counties across the country when some foreign hacker infiltrates their networks and holds them hostage for ransomware. Recognizing this serious threat, we took decisive action to make it harder for Camden's network to be compromised.

We invested \$2 million to modernize Camden's technology infrastructure. This funding transformed our datacenter and networking equipment, while implementing best-practice security measures to shield our city from the constant danger of cybercrime.

For any techies out there...the city was not using “dual factor authentication” to log into our systems. We are now. The city's data was not backed up into the cloud. We are now. The city's operating systems were not running Microsoft 365. We are now. Maybe not the most exciting stuff to start a speech. But it's a great example of what we are doing behind the scenes to protect the city, modernize the city, and create a tech platform to grow from.

And our investment paid off. One summer afternoon last year, new detection systems sent an alert that a “threat actor” using a Russian IP address was attempting to root around in our network. We were able to identify the threat, pull the network offline, and prevent impact from malware or ransomware. The city was inconvenienced for a couple days, but our data and personal data of city residents, was kept secure.

In addition, we have become even more responsive to residents' concerns.

In 2023 we launched the My Camden NJ App. This digital service request system and public notification application, now puts the power of City Hall directly in hands of thousands of residents.

My Office of Constituent Services has received almost 4,000 requests from the community through the App. I am pleased to say 100% of those requests were responded to and a majority closed out or resolved.

That's not a statistic. That's service. That's what happens when government listens—when it's built to respond.

We're not here to delay. We're here to deliver.

And that same sense of urgency applies to the services we rely on every day—especially our Department of Public Works.

We all know how frustrating it is when the city's vehicles break down, or services are delayed because equipment is too old to function. That's why we've made a major investment to fix it.

We allocated \$2.4 million in American Rescue Plan Act (ARPA) funding to replace outdated vehicles and purchase new heavy equipment for DPW.

These new vehicles are game-changers. They can haul more debris in a single trip. They operate more efficiently. And they significantly cut down on fuel costs and travel time.

That means faster service, fewer breakdowns, and more efficient use of resources.

When residents see a cleaner neighborhood, or a pothole filled sooner than expected—this is what’s behind it. These investments don’t just improve operations. They raise the bar for how we serve our residents.

But the improvements don’t stop there.

I have invested over \$10 Million dollars into the Camden Fire Department to help enhance its operational capabilities with the acquisition of several critical apparatus (Thank you to Chief Jesse Flax)

The city is anxiously awaiting delivery of a brand-new ladder truck. Its currently being built according to Chief Flax’ specifications and we’re expecting delivery in September. This new ladder truck will join a brand-new Engine Pumper that was recently delivered. We’ve also shopped around for used equipment and recently purchased a 2007 Ladder Truck and a 2009 Rescue Apparatus. All of this totals nearly \$3 million dollars dedicated to the fire department apparatus all of which serve to strengthen our emergency response infrastructure.

In addition, through a generous donation, the CFD received a 2005 Emergency Vehicle to replace an outdated special operations unit, ensuring that our specialized response capabilities remain fully operational.

The city plans to leverage a grant from the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD), which my administration is pursuing, to support public safety improvements.

To date, nearly \$6.5 million in HUD funding is awaiting approval from HUD for the Fire Department, that includes some station repairs and the procurement of a new Squad Pumper and Rescue Vehicle, which are currently in development and will further modernize our fleet.

In addition to apparatus, the city has also received around \$2 million in HUD and FEMA funding to support essential departmental needs. This includes investments in firefighter training, equipment upgrades, special-purpose vehicles, and repairs to our firehouses.

Beyond equipment and infrastructure, the City of Camden remains deeply committed to its fire personnel as the city continues to ensure that staffing levels remain strong.

To that end, my administration has approved the placement of new recruit classes in the Fire Academy in both 2024 and 2025, securing the department’s future by investing in the next generation of firefighters.

These improvements, both current and planned, are a testament to the city’s dedication to public safety and to the hardworking members of the Camden Fire Department as they carry out their mission to protect and serve with excellence.

The state of our city is strong for many reasons—but one of the most important reasons is that we are fiscally accountable.

We have consistently delivered early-proposed budgets to the City Council for four consecutive years (2022, 2023, 2024, & 2025). Council adopted these balanced budgets, and the city submitted them to the Department of Community Affairs (Shout-out to DCA Commissioner Jacquelyn Suárez) well before the statutory deadline. We value the strong partnership we have with Commissioner Suarez and the state and thank them for the support they give to the city.

As a quick aside, I just want to acknowledge how fortunate I am to work with a cooperative City Council. I talk to mayors around the state and hear how things often go when politics gets in the way of people. I cannot think of one major initiative of mine that the Camden City Council has not brought over the finish line.

That unity, that collaboration, is not just rare—it's a gift to this city.

So thank you, Council President Fuentes and members of City Council, for your leadership and partnership. It's a big reason why Camden is rising.

But back to the budget --- my team understands the need for doing things on time – if not early – and making sure the public has full visibility into the process is just good government. And my team knows that I have the same expectation as we move Camden forward!

Before I took office, the city was not investing its cash in a way that maximized the interest we earned. We were leaving money on the table. For that reason, we changed our investment strategy by taking city's idle cash and put it to work.

The city negotiated higher interest rates on our banking services contract. Along with this initiative the city begin to invest short term CDs to that earned favorable interest. With this new strategy the city has seen its interest earnings grow from \$808,000 in 2022 to \$6.8 million in 2024.

Think about these numbers. The city increased its investment earnings by six million dollars without incurring risk. That's eight times what we were budgeting. And it didn't require raising taxes. It didn't require cutting services.

It required focus, foresight, and fiscal discipline.

We dove into every line item of the budget. We sought out every opportunity to be good stewards of the city's money – money that belongs to the people!

And I have outstanding news to announce...the global rating agency Standard & Poor's (S&P Global Ratings) has upheld the city's A bond rating with Stable Outlook.

In its report, issued just days ago, S&P stated, "The stable outlook reflects our view that the city will maintain its strong overall financial profile throughout the two-year outlook horizon, supported by strong state support and good recent economic momentum."

Years past, the city could not muster an investment grade rating. Now, two years in a row, we're A rated.

Let's have a round of applause for that accomplishment!

Because while I'm proud of the city's progress—we must be honest about our challenges ---and there's one we all know about.

Let's address the elephant in the room. The Camden City School District is facing a projected budget deficit of nearly \$100 million dollars.

And that's not just a number. That number represents real people --- and that means that some of our friends, neighbors, and family members have been notified by the school district that they are being laid off. When I heard this news, I was saddened.

I reached out to the Commissioner of the State Department of Education – you see, the Camden School District is what is known as a “state operated school district.” The ultimate decisions are made by the Commissioner and the State Board of Education – not the local advisory board and certainly not by me or the City Council.

When I spoke with the Education Commissioner, I offered my services and those of my financial team. I was – and remain willing – to talk about strategies that we've employed to improve the city's finances.

Things like shopping around for the best price on health benefits, developing multi-year trend analyses, formulating revenue and expense projections and, as I just mentioned, investing our money in a way that brings in significantly higher returns.

I'll continue to offer help to the state and school district. While I don't run the schools, I'll never stop caring about the children going to school in Camden. And I'll never stop caring about the educators, para-professionals, security officers, custodians, truancy officers and the many people who work to educate our kids and keep them safe!

Camden is rising because our city is safer than it's been in more than 55 years. Let that sink in.

Safety isn't just a stat—it's the foundation for every other form of progress. It's what allows families to thrive, businesses to invest, and children to play outside without fear.

Since the transition to the Camden County Police Department --- from 2012 to 2024, we have witnessed an overall 75% reduction in homicides.

While 2024 was a banner year for crime reduction, crime is down an additional 16% from last year!

All the key indicators and statistics are down and continue to be down even further this year and maybe just as important we have seen the solve rate for crimes skyrocket.

We now have parks—real, beautiful, open green spaces—that are used and loved by the community. That didn't happen by accident. It happened because Camden got safer.

Camden's parks aren't the only areas where the police are making a positive impact on quality of life.

Let's talk about a topic that bothers everyone in this room --- illegal dumping. I am shocked that people from both inside and outside the city have the audacity to take large amounts of trash and just drop them on the side of the road like Camden is their personal junkyard.

These people are too cheap to pay to dispose of trash properly. So ---we'll hit them in their pockets with fines and arrests.

Through the work of CCPD, our tip line, the STOPit App, and other resources, we've caught illegal dumpers red-handed. We don't just arrest them; we'll go so far as to seize the vehicles they used.

This is a perfect example of how when we bring the right people together, we amplify the impact that any one person could have individually.

Our officers work with our hard-working sanitation inspectors led by DPW Director Keith Walker. The sanitation inspectors work with the team from the City's Department of Codes and Standards led by Gabe Camacho, and everyone works with the municipal prosecutors who are led by City Attorney Dan Blackburn.

And --- we are gaining the upper hand.

Recently we had a rash of illegal dumping along city rights-of-way and --- if you can believe this --- a large amount of materials illegally dumped on the former "dirt pile" in Bergen Square. Yes, the very site that we spent over \$5 million cleaning up.

We finally took all the debris off that site, graded it, and put concrete barriers up and some contractor had the nerve to scatter bags of construction debris all over the site.

Well --- I have a message to these dumpers. Chief Rodriguez knows who you are. And when you're arrested, I'll know who you are. And then you can guarantee that I will make sure that EVERYBODY knows who you are. We will throw the book at you because Camden residents WILL NOT tolerate your actions against this great City.

Make sure you tell your friends --- Camden is not your dumping ground!

Under the leadership of Chief Gabriel Rodriguez our neighborhoods have changed for the better because of the community is safer thanks to the outreach and work that is being done. Together, as a community, we are building a better Camden.

Today, we are in a space unlike any other since I've grown up here, we are in a period where we are preserving life, whether that means, lowering the number of fatal pedestrian accidents, to reducing fatal overdoses, or seeing shootings at their lowest level in 50 years.

There is a lot to celebrate from a crime reduction perspective, but it's also important to recognize the programs like open gym that create safe havens every week for our kids or the Hopeworks truancy program that gets our youth off the street and provides them with a skillset for a job.

I want to shout out Captain Vivian Coley for being a change agent in our city and her many partners that care so deeply about our kids. She knows that just having a program to read to kids or to play dodge ball with them goes a long way in making Camden a better and safer.

Unlike other police departments, ours knows that we are all one community. There needs to be real partnerships to create change, and you can't build credibility until you roll your sleeves up to do the work.

They embody the change the city is going through and the men and women in uniform do a tremendous job of working on our behalf.

Let's give our officers a round of applause for the commitment and dedication that show to our city every day.

And Camden is rising because more than \$150 million has been invested in improved parks and open spaces

Let's take a moment to think back—to remember the parks of our childhood.

I know for me growing up, our community park was everything.

The slides were metal, which meant in the summer, you learned really quick to sit on your shirt or risk a second-degree burn.

The swings were rusty, the seesaws were unpredictable, and if your park had one of those old merry-go-rounds, you either felt like the luckiest kid around—or the most bruised, depending on how fast your friends pushed.

And of course, our playing fields.

We shared them. Baseball, soccer, football—sometimes all at once.

And that was fine ----- That was normal ---- That is how it was.

But just because it was all we knew ----- it doesn't mean it's all our kids should have now.

As my fellow CCP co-chair and President of New Jersey American Water, Mark McDonough said during the dedication of the new basketball courts at Farnham Park: "Parks give life to a community."

Let me say that again ----- "Parks give life to a community."

He's right.

Parks are more than playgrounds and fields—they are where memories are made, where friendships are formed, and where a community takes root.

That's why I'm proud to say our administration has committed \$5.5 million dollars to upgrade 8 parks across the city—real improvements, not just touch-ups.

From 26th and Howell St. Park in East Camden ---- to Northgate Park in North Camden ---- to Whitman Square Park in Whitman Park ---- to Liney Ditch Park in Waterfront South ---- we are "giving life" to "our" neighborhood parks!

And thanks to support from Camden County and the County Commissioners, four additional parks will see major transformations ---- such as Judge Johnson Park in Centerville ----- Von Nieda Park in Cramer Hill ---- 7th and Clinton Street Park in Cooper Plaza ---- and Cornelius Martin Park in North Camden.

And we're not just making one-time or short-term investments.

With the extension of our grant through the Reimagining Our Civic Commons (RCC) consortium, the city will be able to study best practices from across the country on how to maintain parks and public spaces effectively.

But more importantly, we'll be creating and implementing a long-term plan—so the money we invest today keeps working for us tomorrow.

Our kids deserve parks that inspire, and our youth sports organizations deserve safe, functional fields.

Camden deserves spaces that bring us together and create even better memories for the next generation to look back on.

Let's talk about infrastructure.

We're not just repaving roads—we're rebuilding the foundation of this city. And in the last four years, we've made more infrastructure progress than in the past fifty.

Our municipality is responsible for maintaining over 154 miles of city-owned roadways.

In partnership with Camden County and all our utility partners, the city continues to make substantial investments in new infrastructure and critical utilities along our waterfront, at our ports, in our downtown, and in every neighborhood.

Just like resident Baleeia Baker's neighborhood.

Our roadway resurfacing projects are just one example of this tremendous collaboration.

We are improving both neighborhood streets and major throughfares --- and this work is “setting the stage” for additional future development.

Since 2021, more than 300 roads have been paved citywide. And we are paving 60 more over the summer and fall.

More roads have been paved during this 4-year period than at any other time over the past 50 years! This is an overall investment of more than \$23 million dollars.

Over the next three years, Camden County has committed \$85 million dollars to roadway projects including, a complete reconstruction of Haddon Avenue and the Port Area Roadways along with work along Mount Ephraim Avenue, and Federal Street as well as the replacement of the Kaighn Avenue Bridge over Cooper River and Collings Avenue Bridge over Newton Creek.

As we make roadway improvements, we also work with Camden County MUA to coordinated projects which assist with stormwater management and upgrades to our sewer system.

This means, as we pave roads, we are reducing flooding. And while I'm on the topic of CCMUA and flooding, did you know that in the coming months the city will finish a three-year project to clean every sewer line in the city?

Yes—every single line. We're removing sludge, sediment, trash, and debris so water can flow the way it's supposed to instead of backing up into the streets.

Again, that's smart government and that's coordinated infrastructure.

That's how Camden is building not just for now—but for the next generation.

The State of New Jersey continues to be one of Camden's most vital partners in this transformation.

Together, we are not only rebuilding a city—we're redefining its role in the region.

And two of the most powerful symbols of this shift will soon rise right in our downtown core.

Let's begin with transportation.

We're working closely with NJ Transit and Camden County to transform our gateway into New Jersey—setting the stage for even greater investment and mobility for our residents.

Under the leadership of Governor Phil Murphy, the State has committed \$250 million dollars to rebuild the Walter Rand Transportation Center—turning it into a 21st-century multimodal transit hub.

In addition, the Beacon Tower, is a 25-story mixed use high-rise, which will span 500,000 square feet and will be built directly across the street from the Walter Rand Transportation Center.

It will be the tallest office building in South Jersey and will include a public square and a new parking deck.

Again, we are leveraging public-private investment to spur even more new development.

And we are not stopping there...

Nowhere is Camden's transformation more evident than in our "Eds and Meds" corridor—our powerhouse network of educational and healthcare institutions that are making historic investments in our city.

Let's start with Cooper University Health Care.

Thanks to the leadership of Chairman George Norcross, Cooper has begun construction on a \$3 billion expansion of its Health Sciences Campus in Camden

When complete, Cooper's "Project Imagine" will mark the largest building investment in Camden County's history. The project solidifies Cooper as the leader in quality health care in Camden, South Jersey, and the region.

This investment not only reinforces Cooper's commitment to driving economic growth but also underscores their long-standing commitment to our Camden residents.

What makes it even more impactful is that Cooper isn't just building—they're training and hiring Camden residents through a groundbreaking partnership with the building trades.

The historic expansion leverages billions in capital already invested in Camden.

This public-private investment, in combination with Cooper's expansion, will not only transform the gateway into New Jersey but will spark even more new development in the city's downtown.

And Coriell Institute – which has been in Camden since 1953 --recently announced a major investment in creating a Strategic Innovation Center in partnership with New Jersey EDA, will create 150 permanent jobs and 100 construction jobs.

Thank you to President and CEO, Dr. Jean-Pierre Issa for his commitment to not only keep Coriell in Camden but expand the campus.

Coriell aims to attract world-class scientist and biopharmaceutical companies and house them at their facility---similar to what other universities have done.

They will do this in Camden to benefit the residents of our city and South Jersey and to further increase economic development activity.

Camden is becoming a national model of urban revitalization driven by anchor institutions.

And we're just getting started.

I have always believed that quality housing is the cornerstone of a strong, vibrant, and healthy community.

A place to call home—a place that is safe, stable, and dignified—is not a luxury. It's a fundamental right. And here in Camden, we are committed to making that right a reality. We recently announced the return of the Camden Home Improvement Program (CHIP).

CHIP is a citywide home rehabilitation program, which provides low- and moderate-income homeowners with forgivable loans to make essential life safety home improvements.

This includes exterior façade repair, painting, roofing, energy efficient system upgrades, window replacement, entry door replacement, electrical and plumbing work, and addressing code compliance matters.

This program doesn't just beautify homes—it protects families, improves property values, and ensures that longtime residents can stay in place as our city grows.

Because revitalization must never mean displacement.

In Camden, we rise together.

In addition to upgrades to existing housing units, brand new affordable housing development is coming.

Whether it's the \$130 million dollar renovation of North Gate One in North Camden, \$165 million dollar development of Ablett Village and The Harrison in the Cramer Hill, or the new Oliver Station in the Whitman Park neighborhood.

The city and its partners at Virtua Health and The Michaels Organization are currently under construction at Oliver Station.

A \$24 million-dollar mixed-use housing community and healthcare facility near the Ferry Avenue PATCO Station.

The project will integrate quality affordable senior housing with top-notch health care --- focused on delivering and advancing health equity for residents.

Oliver Station will be the "1st" community in South Jersey of this kind.

We are so excited to have two great community partners bring affordable homes and direct access to high-quality health care within the community.

In 2024 a report found that the top three ZIP codes with the greatest home appreciation in the Philadelphia metro area were in the City of Camden.

The city's market rate prices are up 40% since last year, while maintaining the lowest average property taxes in New Jersey.

In February, we hosted an event at two newly constructed market-rate homes. The lot originally held a house that was destroyed by fire and demolished. The city took ownership of the vacant lot and maintained the property for more than 30 years.

In 2022, the city sold the property through the Municipal Tax Lien Reduction Program. The lot was subdivided into two and a private developer built two semi-detached homes. The new homes include garages and high-end finishes throughout. Both 2,400-square-foot, four-bedroom homes were listed at \$340,000. Both sold for above their asking price at \$350,000 and the other for \$360,000.

In 2015, the average price of a home sold in Camden was \$61,748. The average price has since increased by 79% in 2025.

While the number of homes sold was down in 2023 and 2024 statewide, the number of homes sold in the City of Camden was up 16% in 2023 and 4% in 2024.

This demand for housing in Camden is proof that our public safety improvements and investment are resulting in real change.

As Camden continues to grow and attract investment, we must always ask:

Who benefits?

Who gets the opportunity?

Because we know—real progress isn't measured in ribbon-cuttings or balance sheets. It's measured in people—in the lives changed, in the doors opened, in the futures made brighter.

That's why workforce development is at the heart of our strategy.

Since its launch in 2019, Camden Works has served more than 1,200 residents through career navigation, training access, and direct connections to employers.

In 2024 alone, we supported the hiring of over 200 Camden residents and already in the first quarter of 2025, more than 70 residents have secured employment through our network.

Camden Works is driven by a coalition of committed managing partners: Camden Community Partnership (Thank you President & CEO Dana Redd), the New Jersey NAACP, the Latin American Economic Development Association, the Camden County Workforce Development Board, Hopeworks, Center for Family Services, Volunteers of America Delaware Valley, the Rowan University/Rutgers-Camden Board of Directors, Saint Joseph's Carpenter Society, Camden County College, Camden City School District, and Camden Education Fund.

This kind of multisector collaboration is what drives real, lasting impact.

When government, business leaders, educators, workforce providers, nonprofits, and community stakeholders come together, we're not just coordinating services — we're investing in social capital, expanding access to opportunity, and building the foundation for long-term economic mobility.

That alignment — of people, purpose, and resources — gives us the power to design systems that don't just serve individuals but strengthen the entire city. It's how we ensure that growth is sustainable, inclusive, and built to last.

And for our regional employers, this is where you come in. Camden Works is not only a pipeline to qualified, motivated local talent; it's also a platform to demonstrate your commitment to inclusive hiring and equitable economic mobility.

If you want a workforce that's motivated, prepared, and connected to the community—look no further than Camden.

That's not just workforce development — that's Camden Strong in action.

Last week, the United Way of Greater Philadelphia and Southern New Jersey, in partnership with Cooper University Health Care and Virtua Health, announced the launch of the Camden Community Uplift Initiative.

This is a new effort to fight poverty and increase employment opportunities for Camden residents. This multi-sector initiative will be implemented over the next four years, backed by an initial \$5 million investment.

The initiative represents a data-driven, community-informed response to persistent challenges in Camden with a focus on two core strategies: expanding benefits access and connectivity and improving pathways to family-sustaining employment for Camden residents.

Because the barriers our residents face—like health inequities, financial hardship, and limited access to opportunity—can’t be solved in silos.

This partnership brings the right players to the table and leads with data, compassion, and community insight.

And I want to personally commend Cooper and Virtua for going beyond medicine—to tackle the root causes of poverty and build something truly transformational.

A thriving city depends not just on major institutions—but on the small businesses that line our corridors, serve our neighborhoods, and reflect the spirit and diversity of our community.

That’s why in October 2024, I launched the city’s newest tool to help small businesses. It’s called Buy Camden 1st! Thank you to our partners at LAEDA (President & CEO Raymond Lamboy and DiLorenzo Davis Consulting).

This initiative is more than a slogan—it’s a movement.

It’s about putting Camden’s small and minority-owned businesses at the front of the line when it comes to purchasing goods and services.

It’s about encouraging our large corporations, institutions, and anchor partners to do what we all know works: spend local, hire local, and invest local.

For the first time, we have a searchable directory of Camden-based businesses and that’s located on the recently launched website, BuyCamden1st.com.

And the businesses listed in the directory are ones that are interested and prepared to do business with large corporations and institutions.

Now large businesses and institutions and their employees will have a place to go to find our city’s small businesses that can provide specific goods and services.

BuyCamden1st.com recently launched a Procurement Portal, which gives those listed in the online directory the opportunity to respond to micro-purchasing opportunities posted by the city’s large corporate, healthcare and institutional sectors.

When a micro-purchase opportunity is posted on the site, businesses listed in the directory are notified of the opportunity, including the link to a form to respond. Now all those listed in the directory are the running for that sale.

I urge our small business community to join in the Buy Camden 1st movement today and get listed so you can share in the prosperity!

At the same time, we’re investing in the well-being of our people—from our youngest learners to our most cherished seniors.

Our Department of Human Service (Thank you Director Dorri Brown) have been hard at work retooling their workshops and enhancing programs to meet the needs of our seniors, youth, and families.

In addition, the city's community centers have recently been renovated and are open to the public. The centers are at the heart of the community and offer a range of dance, arts, athletics, job readiness, financial educational, health and wellness programs for people of all ages. This is another commitment by my Administration and City Council to strengthen our city.

We've also expanded emergency services and homeless prevention, afterschool programs and youth engagement, and our summer employment opportunities for teens.

Through the City's afterschool program, our youth can learn, explore, and grow together. In partnership with Rutgers-Camden, students receive academic assistance, participate in hands-on activities, and go on exciting educational trips that spark curiosity and growth.

In collaboration with the Y (also known as the YMCA), the Camden Achievers program is preparing teens for college and career, helping unlock their full potential and plan for a successful future. It empowers students to set high academic goals, discover college and career pathways, and build confidence and character.

These are not just services—they are lifelines. And we deliver them with compassion, commitment, and excellence.

This year, we are so excited to launch the Camden Youth News Network (CYNN). This is dynamic media program for Camden youth. CYNN gives teens the tools to tell their stories, report on their community, and build real-world journalism and media skills. From video production to social media reporting, CYNN is where youth voice meets impact.

Many of our students from the Camden Youth News Network are here tonight working alongside Dave Goodman and filming tonight's event.

Let's have a nice round of applause for these outstanding young people.

On April 22nd we Kicked-off our 2025 Camden Strong neighborhood cleanups. Now in the 2nd week, we are back and even bigger and better than in previous years!

I big shout-out to Camden's own Tasha Smith, DEP Commissioner Shawn LaTourette and Assistant Commissioner for Community Investment & Economic Revitalization Elizabeth Dragon for joining us at this year's kickoff.

I made it clear back in 2021, and continue to reinforce the purpose for these cleanups --- which are:

Care about investing in people.

Commitment to improving the quality of life in our neighborhoods.

And being Consistent with outreach and engagement.

I feel every year, we have stayed true to those 3-C's and that's why the cleanups remain such a great success with over 400 volunteers at our event on April 29th with The Campbell's Company and CEO Mick Bekhuizen in Whitman Park.

This year, I am pleased to introduce the: Volunteer In Camden (V.I.C.) Portal which can be found at CamdenNJ.Gov/volunteer.

This is a new hub connects residents, nonprofits, faith-based organizations, and corporate partners with volunteer opportunities.

We had over 4,500 volunteers participate over that past 4 years!

Please give yourselves a round of applause!

Just like in past years, the Camden Strong initiative will consist of a series of neighborhood cleanups and a cemetery cleanup.

And we are realizing tangible results. We average 100-150 tons of trash per cleanup --- that's over 1,300 tons of trash and debris removed per season.

That trash would otherwise be clogging up stormwater grates, junking up lots or end up in streams or places it should not be.

And we're not just picking up trash and debris, we are tackling everyday issues...abandoned cars, vacant houses, code issues, and other quality of life matters.

With every successful event, we are building trust with our residents and building confidence throughout the community.

Because service isn't seasonal—it's who we are!

Just know, the time and effort "WE" and I'm talking about Team Camden are putting in now will result in progress down the line.

WE are leading by example --- talking the talk and walking the walk!

If you want results, you got to put the work in --- and we are doing just that!

As your Mayor, I am humbled and blessed to stand before you in this moment.

And as we stand here today — in a city that once symbolized hardship, but now stands as a beacon of hope, growth, and resilience — let us remember this:

We are given one shot, one chance, to make a positive impact — so let's not waste that opportunity on talk. Let's put it into action.

Camden is making the most of that opportunity.

We've seen real gains in public safety.

Rising home values and housing opportunity.

Breakthroughs in education and workforce development.

And a surge in local pride and investment from people who believe in this city.

We still have work to do—but we are doing it, together.

Our journey has not been easy --- but no great city's story ever is.

But this is only part of the work — and only part of the reason Camden is not just strong — Camden is resilient and rising.

None of this happens in a vacuum. It happens because of YOU — our residents, our faith leaders, our non-profits, our business community, and every partner who believes in what Camden can be ----and is.

You have defied the critics, silenced the doubters, and shown the world that:

Camden is not a city of what was—it's a city of what's possible.

We are not broken—we are building.

We are not stuck—we are soaring.

Camden is a place we want to live, to work, to invest, to enjoy, to celebrate culture and faith, and a place where a community has demonstrated the transformative power of collaboration!

We have the right team, the right strategy, and the right momentum.

Camden doesn't just have potential — Camden is achieving.

The future is not coming --- it's already here and it's rising from Camden.

Thank you and may God continue to bless the great City of Camden.

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