



# Citizens for 1 Greater New Orleans

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[Home](#)
[About Us](#)
[Our Reform Initiatives](#)
[Resources & Collaborations](#)
[Archives](#)
[Contact Us](#)

## Media

[Criminal Justice Home](#)
[Criminal Justice Committee Activities](#)
[Committee Members](#)
[Legislative Activity](#)
[Resources](#)
[Archives](#)

### *The Gambit Weekly*

#### **Citizen Voices**

#### **Efforts by grassroots anti-crime groups reflect the diversity of New Orleans " and the complexity of the root causes of violence.**

By Ariane Wiltse

For Ruthie Frierson, it was the Legislature's old-guard attitude. For Norris Henderson, it was the wanton neglect of Orleans Parish prisoners in the days following levee breaches. And for Baty Landis, it was the murder of two friends in one week.

For each of these native New Orleanians, "it" was their personal flashpoint " the fated moment when they swallowed their grief, tempered their anger and launched a movement. In the year since thousands put aside historic class divisions to peacefully march on City Hall against rampant violence amid official complacency, they have led grassroots organizations dedicated to making systemic reforms in the criminal justice system while keeping public officials on the hot seat.

As founders of Citizens for 1 Greater New Orleans, Safe Streets/Strong Communities and SilenceIsViolence, respectively, Frierson, Henderson and Landis now see a city that has entered a new era. Reforms that were considered Utopian before the storm are being actively pursued, sparked largely by citizen activism. Moreover, they say the city's recovery depends more than ever on rethinking the way it arrests, prosecutes and jails violent offenders.

'Since Katrina, there's been a significant mobilization of community activism from diverse aspects of the city," says Silas Lee, a sociology professor and pollster at Xavier University. 'And we have seen a visible and active influence on local, state and federal levels because of that activism."

During the past year, citizen outrage, often voiced through these post-Katrina groups, has helped trigger huge changes in the criminal justice system while bolstering community involvement. Among them:

Former District Attorney Eddie Jordan resigned in October.

The number of '701" releases, which occur when the DA's office does not accept criminal charges within 60 days of an arrest, has plummeted under interim DA Keva Landrum-Johnson. Six suspects were released in December, and four in November. By comparison, 580 felony suspects were released from jail without charges in January 2007 alone.

The New Orleans Police and Justice Foundation, along with business and civic leaders, is working with Landrum-Johnson to replace the DA's old computer system with an integrated model that will track 701 releases, bond payments, evidence and police subpoenas to appear in court.

The DA's Violent Offenders Unit (VOU) achieved an 87 percent conviction rate for violent cases in 2007. As of December 2007, it had landed 26 guilty verdicts and 28 guilty pleas resulting in the incarceration of 54 violent criminals with an average sentence of 16 years in prison. By comparison, four of the unit's cases ended in acquittal last year.

The City Council added \$200,000 to the 2008 budget to fund an Independent Monitor to review investigations into misconduct at NOPD.

Crime Stoppers' anonymous tip line helped clear 40 murder cases last year. The organization awarded \$101,000 for tips in 2007, up from about \$60,000 in 2006.

About 60 Neighborhood Watch groups have been formed.

Even with these changes, fear of crime continues to keep thousands of residents away. Last year, New Orleans saw 209 murders. While the city's population is hotly debated, no one doubts that we were the nation's murder capital in 2007 " for the second year in a row. By comparison, in 2004 New Orleans had 264 homicides with a population of roughly 460,000.

Frierson, Henderson and Landis know the grim statistics. While all three groups work to make the city safer, their methods differ. For example, Citizens for 1 Greater New Orleans

works within the system, using volunteers as 'citizen lobbyists.' Safe Streets works primarily with people most often victimized by the system, highlighting alleged acts of police misconduct and injustices at Orleans Parish Prison (OPP). SilenceIsViolence focuses on the root causes of crime by mentoring youngsters.

The organizations' diverse approaches reflect the experiences of New Orleans' many communities. Citizens 1, for example, consists mostly of white, affluent women. The membership of Safe Streets/Strong Communities includes many low- to moderate-income African Americans, many of whom live in the city's most violent neighborhoods. SilenceIsViolence, based in the Faubourg Marigny, is a racial and socio-economic mix that includes many musicians, writers and artists.

While research supports the notion that people of different races and classes view crime and punishment differently, pollster Lee says the effects of crime are inclusive. 'Regardless of race and socio-economics, crime affects everyone,' he says. 'You don't have to be directly affected to feel the effects of crime, because it affects businesses and investment as well as our perception of safety.'

Despite differing memberships and agendas, citizen-led reform efforts face a shared challenge: the many entrenched factors affecting the criminal justice system. Peter Scharf, a former professor of criminology at the University of New Orleans who now teaches criminal justice at Texas State, says the complex, interconnected social issues affecting the crime rate "the quality of public education, rampant poverty and limited employment opportunities " can sometimes reduce grassroots efforts to 'a teacup in a tidal wave.'

Because these grassroots groups 'go against the grain,' Scharf and Lee agree that they have increased citizen pressure on the system and on public officials to treat 'any murder as a public outrage.'

Ruthie Frierson launched a movement from her dining room table.

After returning to her Uptown home in October 2005, Frierson was struck by the silence that permeated the city. She knew that New Orleans' survival demanded real flood protection, yet levee board reform legislation was dying in Baton Rouge. She mobilized a group of friends and neighbors to circulate petitions and lobby legislators for levee board consolidation. After gathering more than 53,000 signatures, Frierson rallied 1,000 people on the steps of the state Capitol. Less than a year later, voters overwhelmingly approved a constitutional amendment consolidating local levee boards.

Frierson next turned her attention to New Orleans' seven property tax assessors. Again, she marshaled her army of volunteers. They sent more than 1.6 million emails to lawmakers calling for consolidation of the assessors' offices. In November 2006, voters approved a constitutional amendment merging the offices.

Since those early victories, Frierson has refocused her attention on the criminal justice system. 'We want to build a whole community, one where we have an educational system that builds opportunities for everyone, where you catch corruption because that benefits the poor the most, and where the criminal justice system is transparent and accountable,' says Frierson, a former teacher and high-end realtor who now works full time on reform issues.

Last January, Citizens for 1 Greater New Orleans joined the executive committee of the Crime Coalition, a diverse group of business, civic and minority organizations that urges leaders to focus the city's limited resources on arresting, prosecuting and imprisoning violent career criminals. Since then, Frierson has worked alongside Crime Coalition partners and lawmakers to secure \$4.2 million from the federal government to pay 40 retired police officers to provide administrative support at NOPD, freeing up an equal number of officers for community policing. The money also has helped station assistant DAs at NOPD districts to make sure evidence is properly gathered and police reports are solid.

Since shifting the organization's focus to the 'war on crime,' Frierson and Ann Rabin, the chair of Citizens 1's Criminal Justice Reform Committee, have met with just about every ranking member of the criminal justice system. Local leaders are listening because they realize that 'citizen-led groups are not going to go away,' Rabin says. 'And we're going to continue to shine a light on the system.'

Frierson, Rabin and other Crime Coalition partners are pushing local, state and federal lawmakers to fund a variety of programs, including:

A prisoner pre-release program;

Screening for the mental health, drug rehabilitation and job training needs of parolees;

A witness relocation program;

Professional development training for police;

Money for the Indigent Defender Program;

A professional support staff for the DA's office; and

Alternatives to detention for nonviolent youth offenders.

Experts from the Vera Institute of Justice (a highly regarded think tank) and the Annie E. Casey Foundation (which works solely on juvenile justice issues) have lauded each of these ideas.

"We are moving very thoughtfully," Frierson says. "At the same time, we are trying to move the system forward as quickly as possible because we need change."

In another pro-active move, Citizens 1 and other Crime Coalition organizations fund Court Watch NOLA. The independent and nonpartisan organization, modeled after Mothers Against Drunk Driving, is dedicated "to promoting accountability and transparency in the criminal court system [while] exposing the best and worst of what is happening," says coordinator Karen Herman, who worked for eight years as an assistant DA under former DA Harry Connick, during which time she argued about 100 jury trials, more than 30 of them homicide cases.

Since Herman was hired in June, she has recruited and trained 60 volunteers to observe the goings on at Tulane and Broad. Herman says her volunteers "transcend race, class, age [and] economic backgrounds."

Armed with yellow clipboards and case histories, volunteers monitor some 300 criminal cases, ranging from high-profile murders to rape and drug distribution. Monitors also try to follow cases when the public requests a court watcher. While tracking the progress of cases, they also pay close attention to courthouse players. They watch how judges run their courtrooms. They note whether prosecutors and defense lawyers are prepared. They record who asks for continuances and why, whether sheriff's deputies maintain order, and whether police officers called to testify remember the details of a case. It all gets recorded on detailed data sheets.

Herman collects the data and publishes a quarterly report detailing the group's findings. In her first report, covering the third quarter of 2007, Herman found that trials were continued to a later date 68 percent of the time, which she calls "a disturbing trend." During this period, court watchers saw only four cases go to trial.

In December, the group published its second report. This time court watchers tracked the 10 oldest cases in each section of Criminal Court. "The longer a case stagnates, the more difficult it becomes to prosecute," Herman noted. "Unless and until all participants in the criminal justice system embrace the need for prioritizing effective case management and working toward the final disposition of cases, the community as a whole will be impacted."

Norris Henderson's movement began in a hurricane shelter.

After Katrina's levee breaches, Henderson and other volunteers combed hurricane shelters across the state trying to connect family members with their loved ones. The missing loved ones had been incarcerated in OPP when floodwaters rose "chest high in some places" in locked cells. In the chaos that ensued, prisoners were scattered across the South, leaving family members in the dark about their whereabouts and fearing the worst.

Other volunteers worked to track down missing prisoners and interview them about their experiences and treatment. The stories of neglect and brutality, coupled with the belief that the city has entered "an age of accountability," sparked Henderson's December 2005 establishment of Safe Streets/Strong Communities.

From its headquarters in crime-ridden Central City, Safe Streets seeks to end police misconduct, protect prisoners' rights and demand official transparency. Putting more cops on the street does not make Safe Streets' members feel safer, the group's leaders say. Instead, they'd like to see resources go toward police oversight and training.

Henderson knows the criminal justice system and street violence firsthand. He spent 29 years in Angola for murder. Three years before his release, his son was murdered. After studying law in Angola and helping other inmates gain their freedom, Henderson was released in 2003 and put on five years' probation. The respect he gained from inmates, prison activists and officials helped him land a paralegal job soon after his release.

Today he co-directs an organization with nearly 250 members, most of whom are "the folks most impacted by the criminal justice system." They live in neighborhoods like Hollygrove, the Irish Channel, Tremé, Central City and Algiers "communities that often make the news as a backdrop for yet another murder.

At its monthly meetings, Safe Streets provides inmates' family members with advocacy training and young people with de-escalation techniques "so they can better handle confrontations with police."

More than 60 percent of the group's members claim they or a family member have been a victim of abuse of power by police and/or prison guards, says Evelyn Lee, the group's communications coordinator. Several claim they or family members have been wrongfully accused of crimes and have little legal recourse because the public defender's office remains overworked and underfunded. Others have spent months in OPP for nonviolent municipal offenses, some of them petty in nature.

Safe Streets has published three studies, based on nationally recognized best practices, outlining concerns about the criminal justice system in an effort to give voice to the people Henderson says, most often "pay the price of our broken system."

In one of the three reports, Safe Streets documented the dearth of counsel that more than 100 indigent inmates received in the months following the storm. The report tells a story of neglect during an era of pandemonium. According to records and interviews, the inmates hadn't spoken with their court-appointed attorneys once since being evacuated, and they had remained jailed for an average of 385 days "without being convicted of a crime.

A second study, conducted shortly after the June 2006 execution-style shootings of five teenage boys in Central City, surveyed more than 500 residents of crime-weary neighborhoods to measure perceptions of safety and attitudes toward police. Two-thirds of respondents stated they are afraid police will harm them or a loved one, while another two-thirds said they fear police harassment if they gather in public places.

The Metropolitan Crime Commission (MCC) published a report last January echoing some of these findings. In the report on perceptions of crime and safety among residents of Central City, only 51 percent of the 324 respondents surveyed said NOPD officers act in a professional manner, and a mere 43 percent said police are 'trustworthy.'

In addition to joining a chorus of voices calling for an independent monitor at NOPD 'with broad investigation authority,' Safe Streets calls for NOPD to collect and report demographic data on all stops and arrests 'to prevent racially based policing.'

In its final study, Safe Streets interviewed 50 OPP inmates to determine incarceration costs for inmates, their families and taxpayers. The report found that 'gross inefficiencies' caused by a 'lack of communication between criminal justice departments are keeping people in custody for far longer than necessary.' The report states that 80 percent of inmates interviewed were held for nonviolent offenses, and 40 percent were incarcerated for misdemeanors, probation or parole violations, or for unpaid fines. In addition, 20 percent of respondents did not have bond set 72 hours after arrest, as state law mandates, and 18 percent said they remained in jail, some as long as 36 days after charges were dismissed.

The MCC tracked the number and type of arrests and prosecutions in its 2007 first quarter report. According to the accountability report, 51 percent of arrests were for minor, nonviolent traffic and municipal offenses.

Safe Streets has provided Mayor Ray Nagin, Police Chief Warren Riley, Criminal Sheriff Marlin Gusman and members of the City Council's Criminal Justice Committee with copies of its three reports.

City Council members as well as Riley and Gusman have contacted the group to discuss findings and ongoing criminal justice concerns, Cruz says. The group has strong ties to council members James Carter and Shelley Midura, as both plucked key staff members from Safe Streets at the beginning of their terms.

Nagin has not responded to the reports, says group co-director Rosana Cruz.

'We feel like leaders should have a relationship with our community, people who know what it's like to be inside [prison],' Cruz says. 'They know what it's like to not be able to get your meds or what it feels like to incur thousands of dollars in phone bills. The folks we talk to have a very sophisticated understanding of what needs to be changed in the criminal justice system, and that expertise is important.'

Baty Landis started a movement from her coffee shop.

After the murders of Hot 8 Brass Band snare drummer Dinneral Shavers and experimental filmmaker Helen Hill, both parents of young boys, Landis couldn't stand on the sidelines mourning. So when Ken Foster, an author and creative writing instructor at the New Orleans Center for Creative Arts, walked into Sound Café the morning of Hill's murder reeling from the news, they teamed up with Shavers' younger sister Nakita Shavers and marched on City Hall. They could not have predicted that nearly 5,000 people would join them.

The organization SilenceIsViolence sprang from the march. In the year since, SilenceIsViolence has worked to sustain and channel the outrage that brought the marchers together, while keeping pressure on public officials. The group organizes weekly neighborhood walks with 20 to 30 people to help generate dialogue between residents, business owners and community leaders. It also sends a weekly email to more than 1,000 people across the city, telling them how to get involved and updating them on recent events. 'The more New Orleanians are informed, the less likely our leaders can slack off,' says Landis, a Princeton-educated musicologist who owns Sound Café and works as the managing director of YA/YA (Young Aspirations/Young Artists).

The group has met with Nagin, Riley, prosecutors in the DA's office, U.S. Attorney Jim Letten and several council members since the march. However, Nagin has not responded to requests to meet since the first weeks after the march.

The organization has issued multiple calls for Nagin to appear at murder scenes to send a message that every life has value and every murderer will be pursued to the full extent of the law. Landis wants the mayor to make good on his statement after the march, when he said, 'One murder is one too many. Every person's life in this city is precious.'

'If there are too many people being murdered that the mayor can't get to all the scenes, then that should stop the city's leadership in its tracks,' she says. 'Could you imagine if you lost your sister or brother, and the city didn't reach out and say, "We grieve for you?" It sends a negative message because it trivializes murder.'

The mayor's office did not respond to questions about why Nagin does not make public statements after murders.

Following the group's principle of taking 'simple, common sense and immediate action,' last November SilenceIsViolence stepped up to fill an administrative void at the DA's office. The Violent Offenders Unit was hemorrhaging seasoned prosecutors last summer in part because they were spending precious hours on administrative duties such as making photocopies.

"What do you do in that situation?" Landis asks rhetorically.

The group decided to hire an administrative assistant at \$600 a week, allowing prosecutors to focus on putting together cases. This temporary partnership, however, will end March 15. In addition, the group monitors criminal cases in which friends and/or family members have been victimized. Dinneral Shavers' murder case is one of them.

"Someone has to be there to say, 'I don't like that call. Make a better call.' Or, 'You dropped it. You better pick it back up,'" says Nakita Shavers, a political science student at Florida A&M University who took time off from college last year to work with SilenceIsViolence.

Activism by SilenceIsViolence, coupled with public outcry, pressured then-DA Eddie Jordan to reinstate charges against David Bonds, 18, the man arrested for putting two bullets in the back of Shavers' head. Since then, Bonds' case has been continued several times.

Pointing to both the 'emotional' and 'strategic' impact family members of murder victims have, Landis says Nakita's experience is an example of how personal tragedy can be channeled into social change. 'People are inspired by her,' Landis says of Nakita, who receives calls from Riley updating her on her brother's case.

In the months since Bonds' initial 701 release, mothers and sisters who have lost loved ones to violence have contacted the group for help. 'By Nakita sharing her experiences and reaching out to other family members of victims,' Landis says, 'it's already having a healing effect on the community.'

In that spirit of healing, the group launched a writing and art program last spring at Rabouin and Fredrick Douglass high schools called 'Peace in the Schools' " a fitting title for a program linking teenagers who have long been archrivals. Shavers loved both schools, as he graduated from Douglass and taught at Rabouin. Where better to help teenagers channel the anger and fear so many felt after his murder, Nakita thought, while bringing their voices into a larger discussion about how to abate violence.

'So often we just stereotype them as young, black, angry kids,' says Nakita, who at 20 is seen as a peer mentor. 'But they're not. They're intelligent kids who wanted to work together even when their administrations were against it at first.'

In addition to the Peace in the Schools program, the group has held dozens of musicians clinics at Sound Café during the past year. Dedicated to providing a safe and creative outlet for youngsters, the clinics aim to counter the pull of the city's crime culture while mentoring children traumatized by violence. Led by trumpeter Shamarr Allen and aided by several musicians from the Hot 8 Brass Band, the clinics instill values of hard work, patience and cooperation in the budding musicians. At the final 2007 clinic, Allen, 26, handed out brand new trumpets, violins and snare drums to more than a dozen children " instruments he purchased with his own money.

SilenceIsViolence now seeks funding for a spring semester of youth musicians clinics. The organization plans to resume the clinics as well as the city walks and the Peace in the Schools program after Mardi Gras.

On another front, SilenceIsViolence has raised thousands for the Dinneral Shavers Education Fund, which provides college money for Shavers' 7-year-old son and funding for the bands at Rabouin and Douglass high schools. Most recently, it raised \$6,000 at a benefit concert held on the one-year anniversary of the Jan. 11 march on City Hall.

Earlier that day, Landis, Shavers and Foster joined other anti-violence leaders and family members of victims for a press conference on the steps of City Hall. Each speaker took a turn reading names from the list of 209 people murdered last year " a chilling act that Landis says underscored the city's 'stark reality.' Some only read the person's name, while others included the age or how the person was murdered.

'The slight nuances on how each person's name was read really brought home the individual tragedy of these deaths and how people are struck by them,' Landis says. 'For some people, it struck them that a 16-year-old was murdered. For others, it was the fact that someone was strangled. As a city we are all feeling those losses even though often we don't realize how it affects us until we have some hindsight.'

Landis already has started to think about Jan. 11, 2009. She would like to see the date become a time when 'we re-establish our commitment to one another.'

'That date should become a confirmation of how important it is for us to continue acting and speaking out as citizens,' she says. 'Because citizen voices matter.'