

## Condition of the State 2021

Mr. President, Mr. Speaker, Lieutenant Governor, legislative leaders and members, justices and judges, my fellow lowans:

Our state constitution says that, every year, the governor must communicate to the general assembly the condition of the state. That usually happens in the morning on the second day of the legislative session, but tonight I'm breaking with that tradition so that I may speak directly to lowans.

It's been a year—and I'll let you fill in whatever adjective you want. Covid-19. Civil Unrest. A drought. A derecho. We've been beaten and battered in about every way imaginable and some unimaginable. But together, we've met every challenge with bravery and outright grit.

We're told that "tribulation produces perseverance and perseverance, character." From what I've seen, there's no shortage of character in the people of Iowa. And despite what we've been through—or maybe because of it—the condition of our state has never been stronger.

We live in a place where 82-year-old Blanche Chizek from Britt sewed over 1,000 masks and baked dozens of pastries for healthcare workers. Where 17-year-old Tanner Kenin recruited his friends to start a grocery delivery company for the elderly. Where an anonymous donor gave out more than \$80,000 in gift cards from local businesses to every resident of Earlham. And where countless other lowans donated food, time, and resources.

Thousands of lowans—truck drivers, manufacturers, grocery store clerks, meat-processing workers, and so many others—showed up to work everyday to make sure that the people of this state, and the world, were fed. Police officers, social workers, and government employees worked around the clock to deliver PPE and make sure lowans continued to receive the services they depend on. Small businesses adjusted their hours and often how they operate to protect their employees and customers.

And nowhere was the dedication and commitment to others more evident than in our healthcare system.

Nurses, doctors, technicians, janitors, pharmacists, EMTs, social workers, and the thousands of direct care workers in our senior living communities: In 2020, you worked some of the longest hours, in the most uncertain conditions. Your actions saved lives. Your spirit inspired us.

And you didn't just provide medical care. Your patients often couldn't be with their loved ones, so you also provided them comfort and company. You sat with them when no one else could.

You held their hand, facilitated calls to family, and in some cases stood by them while they took their last breath. While many of us were shielded from the worst of the pandemic, you were on the front lines every day.

We cannot sufficiently express our gratitude, but we will try. Please join me in thanking these heroic Iowans.

Iowans are well-accustomed to the extremes of Mother Nature's temper, but the derecho in August was unlike anything we've seen. Hurricane-force winds recorded as high as 140 miles an hour raged across our state. Over one-third of our counties impacted; 584,000 households left without power; thousands of homes damaged. Millions of acres of crops were flattened, and as grain bins crumpled, we lost over 100 million bushels of grain storage. It was a disaster of unprecedented scope.

In Marshalltown, the derecho left behind three times as much debris as the F3 tornado that ripped through the city's downtown in 2018. And the scars will be evident for generations to come in places like Cedar Rapids and Marion, where they lost more than half of their tree canopy.

We praise the dedication of the more than 200 National Guard members who deployed to help remove debris; the local police, fire, public works departments, and emergency managers, who stepped up and served their neighbors tirelessly; and the dedicated staff of state agencies like DHS, DNR and DOT, who pressed ahead where their state needed them.

We thank the thousands of line workers who came from across the country to supplement the crews from Alliant, MidAmerican, and our other utilities to restore electricity with astonishing speed, often to the applause of Iowans.

I spoke with some of the line workers from out of state, and heard not only that our disaster was as bad as the aftermath of hurricanes whose names have been retired, but also that Iowans showed more hope, more patience, and more gratitude than people from anywhere else.

Good corporate citizenship was put on display not only by our power companies, but by essential suppliers like Hy-Vee and Fareway that donated food, water, and supplies. It was shown by small-business owners like Willie Ray Fairley, whose Willie Ray's Q Shack gave away hundreds of meals a day to people whose own refrigerators and stoves weren't working. Willie Ray didn't just fill hungry stomachs, he fed a sense of community. And that's what makes a disaster bearable.

What happened this year went beyond Iowa nice. You showed a humanity that rivals what most

of us have seen in our lifetime.

Our job now is to hold on to that humanity. 2020 left its mark on everyone, but not evenly. There are people across this state who are still hurting. Many lost their job or their business or even their home.

And many lost loved ones to this horrible pandemic. For them, and for anyone who lost someone this year, whatever the cause, saying goodbye was even harder than it usually is. You may not have been able to be with them while they were sick, to hold their hand one last time, or to fully celebrate their life at a funeral with all of those they loved.

Whether you're in the chamber or watching at home, please take a moment, bow your head, and remember all of those we lost this year and the loved ones they leave behind.

Thank you.

When I stood here last year, our fiscal health was strong. We had one of the lowest unemployment rates in the country, incomes were going up, and our economy was roaring. Then 2020 happened.

We took a hit like everyone else, but we didn't falter long. Because of conservative budgeting practices, Iowa's diverse economy, the decision to keep over 80% of our businesses open, and the tenacity of our people, Iowa isn't facing a massive budget shortfall like many states.

As I stand here tonight, our unemployment rate has returned to 3.6%, one of the lowest in the country, and our GDP grew over 36% in the third quarter of 2020, outpacing the nation. Iowa's coming back, and we're coming back strong.

Iowa's success has always been about turning obstacles into opportunities and overcoming adversity together. The post-Covid world won't be the same as the pre-Covid world. And it shouldn't.

We've learned a lot. Entire sectors of our economy were forced to innovate overnight and adapt to survive. We can approach Iowa's economic recovery in a number of ways. We can return to where we were, which is a realistic but still ambitious goal. Or we can take what we've learned and the innovation that's been applied over the past ten months and capitalize on the opportunity to reimagine, modernize, and possibly restructure everything from healthcare and education, to our workforce and quality of life.

It's about ensuring our future prosperity is widespread and reaches all people and all parts of Iowa, including those that too often feel left out when times are good.

That's why I formed the Economic Recovery Advisory Board this summer. Chaired by Ruan Transportation CEO Ben McLean, the 15-member board and 350 working group members volunteered their time and talents to meet my charge to be bold, innovative and direct about the challenges facing our economy. I want to thank them for their diligent work to make sure that we support every part of Iowa and every Iowan.

The report will be released soon, but there are a few big issues that we can begin to address tonight.

The need for universal broadband is one of them. As we've seen during the pandemic, high-speed internet is as vital to our communities as running water and electricity; if they don't have it, they can't grow.

Every year I've been governor, I've focused on expanding broadband to every Iowa community, and we're making progress. But not enough.

About a third of our counties are still broadband deserts, where high-speed internet is rarely offered. And for many Iowans, it's just not affordable. Iowa also has the second lowest broadband speeds in the country.

I'm done taking small steps and hoping for big change. This is the time for bold action and leadership. Let's plant a stake in the ground and declare that every part of Iowa will have affordable, high-speed broadband by 2025.

We'll get there by committing \$450 million over that time period, which will leverage millions more in private investment, giving Iowa the biggest buildout of high-speed internet in the country.

Iowa has more households with all parents working than any other state, yet we've lost one-third of our childcare spots over the last five years. When schools abruptly closed last spring, a system already under stress was pushed even harder.

Some families were able to adapt by working from home. Others leaned on grandparents, aunts and uncles, and family friends for support. In Pottawattamie County, a group of daycare providers and other partners teamed up to provide free daycare for essential workers.

But many parents weren't so lucky and struggled to find ways to care for their children and still show up for work—often in roles that are essential to all of us. Even when the coronavirus is a distant memory, Iowa will still need an abundance of high-quality child care so that families can prosper and children can grow.

Many of our communities and businesses are working together to address this issue. In Stuart, seventeen local businesses joined together to purchase an empty building, with plans to renovate and lease it to a childcare provider.

It's in our state's interests to encourage these types of public-private partnerships, which is why we created the Child Care Challenge Fund last year. It's an innovative program that encourages employers, community leaders, and others to collaborate in developing child care facilities.

This year, we need to fund that program, so I'm allocating \$3 million to jump-start these public-private partnerships. I'm also using \$25 million of child care development block grants to further promote child care startups. Every community has different needs and different resources. Just as the leaders in Stuart found a solution that fits their hometown, we want to facilitate local solutions in other places, too.

Let's remove the obstacles to high-quality, affordable child care so that Iowa families can nurture their kids while parents maintain the maximum freedom to enter and remain in the workforce.

As our economy comes back, we're facing a familiar problem: more job openings than there are people who have skills to fill them. That's why we need to continue the work we started with Future Ready Iowa, a program that is designed to increase the number of Iowans with education or training beyond high school.

Education or training. That's worth repeating. We have exceptional universities, colleges, and community colleges in this state. But not all skills are learned in a classroom. On-the-job training and reskilling are some of the most valuable ways to advance our workforce and increase Iowan's wages. We need to continue to find ways to recognize this type of experience.

We took a big step in June by passing a significant licensing reform package. It didn't get a lot of attention at the time, but at the beginning of this session we should stop to recognize how important it was: Iowa now has the most flexible licensing reciprocity and recognition laws in the nation, which sends a signal to the country that Iowa is open for business.

And we're not done. This year, we'll begin the task of reviewing each of our licensing boards and commissions to make sure they are serving their purpose.

We must also continue the great strides we've made by integrating work-based learning into the K-12 curriculum. We know that many kids think of education differently when it involves real-life experience. They see why education matters and it can be key in helping them choose and prepare for a career that fits them.

Many schools across the state are offering these work-based learning experiences. Let's make sure that every high-school student gets that same chance. I'm calling on the legislature to make that an expectation of all our schools.

When Iowa families come together after work and school, they need a place to call home. Unfortunately, we have a growing mismatch between where job opportunities are thriving and where people can find affordable places to live.

Some communities have rallied to buck this trend. Forest City hadn't seen a new affordable apartment complex in more than 25 years, so community leaders raised \$4 million in financing by leveraging local and state resources. And a new apartment complex was built in 2017.

In Davenport, leaders used the same public-private partnership to convert an old, vacant school building into 41 affordable apartments, which were rented within two months. This project brought new housing to the historic riverfront and served as a catalyst for redevelopment.

Forest City and Davenport exemplify the spirit of Iowa communities. But the reality is, there aren't enough resources to go around. Last year alone, Iowa communities requested more than three times what was available.

We must expand initiatives like these that address pent-up demand for affordable housing, helping our communities thrive and our families move where opportunities await them.

There's a lot to do this year, but if we tackle issues like broadband, childcare, workforce training, and affordable housing, we'll set Iowa on a solid path for economic prosperity for years to come.

And remember, that unlike many states we're starting from a good financial position. We aren't looking at tough budget cuts and we're certainly not looking at raising taxes. If anything, we need to continue the conversation about cutting taxes, and we can start by getting rid of the unnecessary triggers that were put in place in 2018. Let's make Iowa more competitive and guarantee our taxpayers that they can keep more of their hard earned money.

A high-quality education system is the foundation of our state. Historically, we've had some of the best schools in the nation. And I believe we still do. What many of our teachers and administrators did this last year was nothing short of amazing.

In Clear Creek Amana, Barb Hunt's special-education students were struggling with virtual learning, so she worked with transportation director Denny Schreckengast to convert a camper into a classroom. Since the kids couldn't come to the classroom, they brought the classroom to

them.

In Hinton, when the school went to a hybrid model for a few weeks, teachers spent hours holding individual Zoom calls with students, sometimes going into the evening, to make sure they weren't falling behind.

At West Sioux, teachers personally went to the homes of Spanish-speaking families who needed help setting up internet service.

In Clarinda, the district was short on bus drivers so Josh Porter, a school administrator with a CDL, jumped behind the wheel to make sure his kids could be in the classroom.

And in Cedar Rapids, Noreen Bush, Superintendent of the second largest school district in the state, and her team, made heroic efforts to get her kids back into the classroom just weeks after many of their schools were ripped apart by the derecho, and she did it while receiving chemotherapy.

There are stories like this from all across the state. Teachers and administrators put their students first in uncertain and difficult times, especially as they implemented plans to safely and responsibly reopen schools.

But that hasn't been the case everywhere. Over the last few months, I've heard the frustration from many parents, students and teachers who didn't have the opportunity to go back to school. Let me give you just a sample of those frustrations.

I talked to a passionate teacher whose student hasn't logged in for class in nine weeks, and there is nothing she can do about it.

I visited with the parent of a child with special needs who is devastated by seeing her daughter's education and social progress fade because a computer screen isn't a substitute.

I spoke to a middle-school student who has to watch her younger siblings during the day and complete her own school work at night.

And I heard from numerous parents whose kids' school day consisted of just 60 to 90 minutes of online instruction per day, at most.

Nicole, a mother of three elementary students who, since March, have spent less than a week in the classroom, told me she's struggling to facilitate her children's online learning while keeping up with her job. She said she feels like she's failing as a parent, a spouse, and an employee.

These stories are heartbreaking. And let me assure you Nicole, it's not you who's failing. The vast majority of our schools found a way to safely and responsibly reopen, all day, Monday through Friday. It's past time that every district makes that happen. As one parent told me: "Options are good. But if some parents get the option to go 100% online, why don't my kids get the option to be 100% in the classroom?"

I agree, so tonight I am asking the legislature to immediately send a bill to my desk that gives parents the choice to send their child back to school full time. We can't wait any longer. Our kids can't wait any longer.

If there's one thing the pandemic has taught us about education, it's that our parents need choice. And it's not just in-person versus virtual. Sometimes it's about which school to attend altogether.

When some schools remained closed or went part-time this fall, a lot of parents sent their kids to private school or open enrolled. But not everyone had that option. Many parents can't afford private school. And because some of our larger districts prohibit open enrollment, they won't let you transfer to another public school.

One parent I talked to said that a school administrator actually recommended that she buy a house in the neighboring district if she wanted her son to go to school in-person.

We need to fix that. School choice shouldn't be limited to those who have the financial means or are lucky to live in a district that's confident enough to allow open enrollment. So let's make choice an option for everyone.

We can do that by making open enrollment available in all districts and by allowing our communities more flexibility to create public charter schools where there is a need for an alternative. And we should create education savings accounts for students who are trapped in a failing school; let's give them another choice by making sure money isn't their barrier.

Make no mistake, it's imperative that we have a strong public school system—which is why we have and will continue to prioritize school funding while many other states are cutting their education budgets. But school choice isn't a zero sum game. It has the potential to raise the quality for all schools. And for those schools that do fall behind, it ensures our children don't fall with them. Let's work together to make sure every child receives a quality education, regardless of income, and no matter their zip code.

In 2020, we saw an overwhelming call for racial justice in Iowa and across the nation.

We heard that call and, with a bipartisan effort, passed the More Perfect Union Act to improve



police work in Iowa. I'm proud of that legislation, and we're continuing to make criminal justice reform a priority.

I'm also very proud of our law enforcement. They put their lives on the line every day—something we should never forget. And if we needed a reminder, last year's civil unrest and last week's attack on the Capitol provided it. Violence and anarchy is not acceptable. Period.

Our prayers are with the families of the Capitol Police Officers, who sacrificed their lives to defend the beacon of our democracy and the people in it. And our prayers are with every other officer who defends us against those who are intent on violence.

This summer, when protests gave way to rioting and looting in the Quad Cities, three Davenport police officers were ambushed. Thirty-two rounds of gunfire were pumped into the truck that Sgt. Lansing, Lt. Behning, and Detective Sievert were in.

The truck windows were shattered, Sgt. Lansing was shot in the leg, and multiple bullets struck his headrest. The truck took so much fire that it could barely accelerate, but Sgt. Lansing navigated it to safety.

In her Quad-City Times column, Barb Ickes eloquently wrote that this nightmare scene is "precisely what police train for," but that "the resulting courage cannot be taught." "Their escape is astonishing," she said. "Most of us can't even imagine it."

I couldn't agree more; please join me in thanking these brave officers, who are with us tonight.

We should never take this bravery for granted, but in cities like Minneapolis, Portland, and New York, they have. They've embraced the attacks on law enforcement, and now their violent crime rates are rising for the first time in a generation.

That's not going to happen in Iowa; not on my watch. We should never be afraid to talk about ways to improve policing, but there will be no talk of defunding the police here. Our men and women in blue will always have my respect, and I will always have their back.

To that end, I'll be introducing a bill that protects law enforcement and continues our march toward racial justice.

The bill will make clear that if you riot or attack our men and women in uniform, you will be punished. We won't stand for it.

The bill will also ban racial profiling and other forms of disparate treatment. Because no actions should ever be taken based upon the color of someone's skin. As Martin Luther King Jr.

recognized, "injustice anywhere is a threat to justice everywhere."

Let's come together again, like we did last year, to support our law enforcement and racial justice. Let's make Iowa a safer place for everyone.

When Iowans come together, we do big things. We've grown our economy, protected life and our second amendment, lowered the tax burden on Iowans, supported our farmers and producers by increasing demand for biofuels, protected our environment by promoting renewable energy, and so much more.

Like this past year, when we watched healthcare in Iowa transform from a collection of competing hospitals and clinics to a single statewide healthcare system committed to collaborating for the sake of all Iowans.

As we move forward, let's build on this collaborative and innovative spirit. In my budget, I'm proposing \$1 million to encourage hospitals and clinics to start what's called a Center of Excellence. It's a program that aligns rural physicians with specialists, creating regional hubs that provide highly-skilled care closer to where patients and their primary-care providers live.

Whether you're dealing with the trauma of an accident or the joy of childbirth, it's not just the quality of the team that matters—it's the proximity. I want a better system of care for all Iowans, regardless of where they live.

I also want to be sure that when Iowans call 911 for an emergency, there's a quick response. I know members in this chamber are already working on a bill to improve rural EMS services; I look forward to working with you this session.

We must also continue our focus on mental health. While the virus threatened our physical wellbeing, the realities of last year placed unimaginable stress on so many Iowans. Seniors were isolated from friends and loved ones; kids were kept out of the classroom and away from the stability it provides; and thousands of Iowans had their livelihoods turned upside down.

In the last three years, we have reformed our mental health system and we're continuing to make it better. I'm proposing to increase mental health funding by \$15 million this year, and another \$15 million next year, to fully fund those reform efforts. And I know that our mental health regions are working on innovative solutions to address the unique needs of children who have been affected by the pandemic.

And because of the legislation we passed last year, which allows schools to host behavioral health sessions by using telehealth services, kids no longer have to leave school for hours to receive quality treatment.

That's a lesson many of us learned over the last ten months: telehealth is a powerful tool that we should continue to encourage and expand. And it's not just for mental health. Thousands of Iowans experienced it first-hand this year, receiving treatment and check-ups from their own home.

In 2020, we asked so much of our healthcare providers. And they've met those expectations at every step of the way. Many of our hospitals were at the forefront of developing treatments for Covid-19, and the University of Iowa has been key in the development of vaccines.

The availability of vaccines marks the most significant turning point since the pandemic began. And I'm proud to say that Iowa is one of the states leading the nation in administering the vaccine.

To date, nearly 100,000 Iowans, including our healthcare workers, have received their first dose, and several thousand have now received their second. By the end of the week, everyone at the Iowa Veterans Home, our largest nursing facility in the state, will be vaccinated. And by January 25, all 90,000 nursing-home residents and staff will have received the vaccine, ensuring that Iowans most at risk are among the first to have this protection.

I know we are all eager to be vaccinated and turn the corner, and wider distribution to more Iowans is imminent.

But as we begin to put 2020 behind us, I have two requests for my fellow Iowans.

First, let's not forget those neighbors who are still hurting. Reach out. Keep volunteering; continue to stock food banks. Continue to show the country that it doesn't take a pandemic or a derecho to lend a helping hand.

Second, let's not return to normal. Let's be better. Let's think bigger. Be bolder.

If anything, this year has shown us what we can accomplish, and how fast we can do it. Hold onto that spirit. To that ingenuity and collaboration. To the feeling that we're working for the greater good, and not ourselves.

If we can do that—if we can work with and for each other—then we will do great things.

I believe in this State, because I believe in you. I've seen what you've done; I've watched, sometimes with tears of pride in my eyes. And that's how I know that the condition of our State is strong. Because you are strong—stronger than you ever imagined.

Thank you, God bless you, and God bless the great state of Iowa.