



2025 Condition of the Judiciary

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Madame President, Mr. Speaker, Members of the General Assembly, Governor Reynolds, Lieutenant Governor Cournoyer, state officials, colleagues, family, friends and all Iowans.

Thank you for the invitation to address this joint convention of the 91st General Assembly on the condition of the judiciary.

As introduced, I am Suzy Christensen, and I am honored to stand before you today as your chief justice. I continue to live in Harlan with Jay, my husband of 43 years. Jay has a knack for knowing exactly what I need—lifting me up when I'm feeling low and keeping me grounded when I start to lose my balance. He is here today along with our five children.

My sister and her husband, and my brother and his wife join me today as well as my mom. And for the fifth time, I am keeping Dad with me in spirit by wearing his robe for this special day.

Many of you know me in my professional role, but without a doubt, the title I cherish most is being Grammy. So, as is tradition, here's the shoutout my nine-member crew has come to expect.

Thank you to members of the Iowa Court of Appeals as well as the chief judges from our eight judicial districts across the state who are in attendance today.

It is my great privilege to recognize the six other members of the Iowa Supreme Court. Please stand as I call your names: Justices Tom Waterman, Ed Mansfield, Christopher McDonald, Dana Oxley, Matt McDermott and Dave May.

Each of my colleagues brings to this court wisdom, integrity and a deep commitment to justice. It is an honor to be chosen as their chief justice, and it is an honor to stand shoulder to shoulder with such outstanding public servants.

Each year, members of the legal community carefully track and analyze the work of our court. They break down statistics like how many cases we heard, how often we ruled unanimously, who wrote the most opinions, and even the average length of those opinions. One statistic is noticeably absent, and I'd like to take this opportunity to advocate for its inclusion.

Last year, Justices Waterman and McDonald joined the grandparent club and by springtime, Justice Mansfield will proudly join our ranks. So, for you bean counters sitting out there—grandparents now represent a majority on this court. And I am in the lead. By a long shot. I'd say it's only a matter of time before our decisions begin to reflect the added wisdom that naturally accompanies such a distinguished title.

Today marks my fifth condition of the judiciary. Each year I select a theme to guide my remarks. My first theme was hope as a reminder that, even in the uncertain early months of the pandemic, there was light ahead. My second theme was peace. As the pandemic continued, I wanted Iowans to know that, despite the surrounding chaos, the judicial branch remained calm, steady and unwavering in its dedication to ensuring meaningful access to justice.

The theme of my third speech was listening. Partnering with Director Kelly Garcia of the Department of Health and Human Services, we traveled across the

state to explore ways our two branches could better support the state's most vulnerable children and families.

Last year my theme was building connections. This is what I said:

I am no Pollyanna. I respect that you may not agree with every opinion issued by the Iowa Supreme Court or decision handed down by one of our trial court judges or magistrates. Heck, I don't agree with every opinion issued by the supreme court. But from the bottom of my heart, I believe that every judge in this state is trying his or her best to apply the law to the facts of a case and make a thoughtful decision.

I then went on to say:

If your constituents tell you a judge got something wrong, or maybe you tell your constituents the same thing, that is your right to hold such a belief. I may even agree with you. But what I'm asking you to do is to take that opportunity to explain that, even when you believe a judge is dead wrong, they are public servants—just like you—and they are committed to the rule of law—just as you would want them to be.

When I said those things, I was attempting to signal that we have a responsibility to the people of Iowa to build and strengthen the connections that support our government and communities. Even when we disagree with one another, it is essential that we do so with civility and respect.

So did my Pollyanna speech bear fruit? I believe it did. This past year, I spent more time than ever talking—and more importantly listening—to lawmakers from both sides of the aisle. Maybe what I was pitching didn't always make it to home plate, but I hope you found me approachable and open to collaboration.

Every year, we judges attend the governor's state of the state address. You may have noticed that when the governor outlines her plans for the upcoming

session, some people in the audience erupt with applause while we sit quietly, hands neatly folded, as if we were part of the furniture. We do that on purpose. We're not supposed to tip our hands on current legislative discussions.

I suspect the judges and magistrates in this room today would maintain their usual decorum and melt into the surroundings if the topic comes up of you fixing our judicial pension last year and providing judges and magistrates with a 5 percent cost-of-living increase. But do not let their stoic expressions fool you. Imagine more than 400 men and women in black robes—hooting and hollering. That's exactly what was going on when we learned of the incredible support you showed our branch. On that day, judges across the state felt truly recognized. On behalf of those 400+ judges and magistrates, please accept our deepest appreciation for your support of the judicial branch and the people we serve.

Enough about last year.

This year my theme is commitment. In my prior speeches, I've used this opportunity to focus on priorities that require long-term commitment—issues like judicial pay raises and indigent defense. These priorities oftentimes have no quick fix and take time, effort and—above all—commitment.

It's about staying the course on the work we've begun while also reaffirming our dedication to the people of Iowa, the hardworking public servants with the judicial branch, the lawyers who provide essential indigent defense, and most importantly, the vulnerable children and families who depend on our system of justice.

Let me start with the people of Iowa. My commitment to the people of Iowa is to ensure that our courts remain accessible, efficient and fair. While we respect the priorities of leaner government and fiscal responsibility, I ask for your partnership in ensuring our courts have the resources needed to fulfill this promise to Iowans.

The foundation of our court system is the principle that justice must be accessible to everyone. Yet, more and more Iowans are navigating the courts without legal representation. The numbers are striking: in fiscal year 2024, over 9,000 divorce cases were filed and in two-thirds of those cases, at least one party represented themselves. In civil cases, excluding small claims, 78% involved at least one self-represented litigant.

We know that many self-represented litigants are low-and moderate-income individuals who simply cannot afford an attorney. But even for those who can, Iowa faces the challenge of legal deserts—areas where attorneys are scarce. According to the American Bar Association, we rank 44th in the nation for attorneys per capita.

To help address this gap, the judicial branch has developed fillable court forms available on our website for self-represented litigants. We also introduced interactive forms that function like Turbo Tax, guiding users through a question-and-answer process to complete forms to be filed online. The Iowa Access to Justice Commission, chaired by my colleague Justice McDermott, has also collaborated with the State Library of Iowa and the University of Iowa Law Library to create the People's Law Library of Iowa, a critical resource for legal information

And while technology is an efficient tool for improving access to justice for Iowans, sometimes people just need to talk to someone. That's why the supreme court approved a pilot court navigator program in Clinton County. These non-attorneys can't give legal advice, but they assist self-represented litigants by explaining court rules and procedures and helping them out with forms.

Just like technology has helped us address our access to justice challenges, technological advancements such as electronic search warrants, online filings and remote hearings have allowed us to serve Iowans more effectively while using fewer resources.

Building on these innovations, we are recommending a modernization of our magistrate system. By reducing the number of magistrates required by statute—a step made possible by these technological efficiencies—we can save taxpayers \$2 million annually.

Let me explain how we arrived at this recommendation. Magistrates in our state are part-time judicial officers who, unlike full-time judges, are permitted to practice law outside of their judicial duties. Their pay is based on the expectation that they will spend approximately 31% of their professional time performing magistrate responsibilities.

The Iowa Code mandates at least one magistrate in each of our 99 counties. I have no doubt that, at one time or another, each of the 99 counties needed at least one magistrate. However, a review of magistrates' workload reveals that, through no fault of their own, most magistrates are devoting substantially less than 31% of their professional time to magistrate work. Only 16 counties out of

99 are close to the sweet spot of 31% for magistrate workload. Of the remaining 83 counties, 75 counties are far below the target (some as low as 4%) while 8 counties are well above it (upwards of 48%).

Even if we tried to level out the magistrate workload within judicial districts or even statewide, it would be impossible for us to boost all magistrates to the expected average of 31%. We simply have more magistrates than magistrate work. The solution we propose is to reduce the number of magistrates required by statute and, when necessary, assign some magistrates to serve multiple counties to ensure workloads are properly aligned.

I'm not saying we don't need magistrates. We absolutely do. They play a critical role in the judiciary. However, we must ensure that our resources are being used wisely and effectively. By aligning the number of magistrates with the actual workload, we can better meet this goal.

I understand that change is rarely easy, and the unknown can feel uncomfortable. Even within our own branch, there are some magistrates and judges who have expressed reservations about this proposal. For instance, I've been asked more than once, "Chief, are you trying to shut down our rural communities?" For me, those are fighting words, and I could not disagree more.

I was born and raised in Harlan, the county seat of Shelby County. My husband, Jay, grew up just outside of town on a farm. Except for our college years, Harlan has always been home. I served on the Harlan Community School Board for over a decade and was president of our Chamber of Commerce and Economic Development. Jay has practiced optometry in Harlan his entire career

and now serves as mayor after several years on the city council. From my window at home, I can see the Shelby County Courthouse—the crown jewel of our community.

Several years ago, when the state nominating commissioners asked if I would be willing to move to Des Moines to serve on this court, I told them I would withdraw my application if it meant leaving my hometown. I share this with you because I know how essential a courthouse is to the heart and strength of rural Iowa. As long as I serve in this role, the judicial branch will never support any initiative that would diminish rural Iowa.

With that in mind, how do we reconcile the judicial branch's efforts to modernize our magistrate system with a deep respect for rural Iowa? We take the same approach we used to successfully address the clerk issue through what we now call the Workshare program. You may remember I talked about that program in my first speech several years ago. Instead of looking at the workload and staffing of one county compared to another, Workshare evaluates the workload and available staff of an entire district and redistributes the work to keep things running smoothly. Of course, it's great that this program provides urban counties with much needed support, but the truly exciting part of Workshare, in my opinion, is that smaller counties now play a significant role in the district's overall workload. In other words, it ensures that every county, no matter its size, remains relevant and engaged in the judicial process.

I am confident the modernization of our magistrate system has the potential to be just as successful. Much like the Workshare program for clerks,

this approach ensures magistrates in rural counties stay relevant by extending their service beyond their home county's borders. If one magistrate can serve multiple counties, perhaps that magistrate will hail from a rural county like Ringgold, Palo Alto, Audubon or Van Buren?

I want to talk about another commitment the judicial branch has made to the people of Iowa. Lately, there's been a lot of buzz about Iowa's business specialty court—and for good reason. Last year, the business specialty court handled a record 60 cases—more than double the number just two years ago. This growth shows how valuable the court has become and how much trust Iowa's businesses have in it. We're proud of the court's success and remain dedicated to keeping it strong and continuing to find innovative ways to support the businesses that are so important to our state.

Now I'd like to take a moment to tip my hat to the judicial branch's 1500 hardworking employees. I see the work they do—work that is often difficult and goes unnoticed. For them, it may seem like just another day at the office, but for the people they serve, it's often one of the toughest days of their lives. They handle cases of divorce, child abuse and neglect, domestic violence, criminal charges and mental health commitments with remarkable professionalism, care and dedication. These 1500 people are the backbone of our branch, and they give meaning to the work we do. As chief justice, I am committed to supporting our judicial branch's workforce in every way possible.

While I strive every year to make my speeches engaging and share fresh, compelling insights about the judicial branch, I've come to understand that

many of our priorities take time to accomplish and require ongoing dialogue to emphasize their significance. Judicial pay is one such priority.

As I touched upon a few minutes ago, we are truly grateful for the legislation passed last session that stabilized our judicial pension contribution rates and provided a 5% pay raise—the largest cost-of-living adjustment for judges and magistrates in over 16 years. While this was an important step forward, addressing judicial pay should not be a rare occurrence. It must be part of a regular and ongoing commitment to supporting the judiciary.

Even with last year's 5% increase, our judges and magistrates still earn well below our counterparts in every state we touch. Nationally, we rank 41st, right after Oklahoma and just ahead of Guam, where the judges earn only \$845 less than ours. Without meaningful change, we risk continuing this race to the bottom.

When adjusted for inflation, our district court judges are now earning 16 ½ percent less than they were 15 years ago. It's no surprise that the appeal of applying for a judgeship has diminished, with applications for vacancies dropping by 56 percent over the past 20 years.

We are doing everything we can to be responsible stewards of taxpayer dollars. Our branch of government operates on just a little more than 2 percent of the entire general fund appropriations. So where does that money go? About 96 percent goes directly to our workforce. As one of the most important enterprises in the state, we must keep salaries competitive to attract and retain

the talent needed to provide Iowans with a strong and independent judiciary. That's why we are proposing what we call the Kansas Plan.

We call it the Kansas Plan because, as you might guess, it originated in the Sunflower State. I like pointing to Kansas as an example to follow because, like Iowa, it is a Midwestern, rural state facing similar challenges. Before this change took place, the Kansas judicial branch spent a significant amount of time and energy each legislative session advocating for judicial salaries, which are set annually by the legislature. Sounds familiar. Wouldn't you love for me to quit talking about judicial pay? Trust me. Me too.

And this plan gets us there.

Before Kansas implemented their plan which became effective just a couple weeks ago, they ranked 51st in the nation for judicial pay. Depending on the raises other states provide their judges this fiscal year, it is estimated they will jump from 51st to 29th. This is the kind of meaningful change Iowa needs to ensure a fair and competitive judiciary.

Let me explain the Kansas Plan in more detail. Under our proposal, a statute would set the salary of a state district court judge at 75% of a federal district court judge's salary. To provide a little perspective, in 2024, state district court judges earned 68% of their federal counterparts' salaries. Rather than moving directly to 75%, we are proposing a four-year phase-in period to ease the transition. As in Kansas, salaries for other classes of judges would be calculated as a percentage of the state district court judge's salary, which is how we do it

now. This system provides a consistent, equitable framework for judicial pay across all levels of the bench.

I recognize this would represent a significant change in how judicial salaries are determined. But, like my dad used to say, “You get what you pay for.” If judicial salaries remain uncompetitive, we risk attracting a pool of applicants who may not have the right qualifications or proper temperament to serve effectively. This could lead to rulings that are inconsistent or poorly grounded in the law, which ultimately undermines confidence in our courts. While our judiciary is strong today, we cannot afford to let these challenges become tomorrow’s reality.

I’d like to switch gears and talk about my commitment to indigent defense. Like judicial pay, some issues take more than one legislative session to fully address. Well, this marks the third time I’ve raised the topic of indigent defense in my condition of the judiciary address. Some might suggest that I should stay in my lane and not talk about it so much. I respectfully disagree. As chief justice, this lane is mine to swim in—just as much as it was Mark Spitz’s when he dominated the Olympics in 1972.

According to the 6th Amendment of the United States Constitution and Article 1, section 10 of our state constitution, criminal defendants have a right to counsel. As I’ve said, this is constitutionally crystal clear. Yet today, we have only half the number of contract attorneys we had just ten years ago.

Our system of law and order requires competent and dedicated professionals at every stage: good cops, good prosecutors, good judges and yes,

good defense attorneys. If a criminal defendant isn't provided court-appointed counsel, critical deadlines may be missed, and the case could fall apart, allowing the defendant to avoid prosecution entirely. It's that plain and simple.

In fiscal year 2024, the judicial branch processed approximately 87,000 serious criminal cases where defendants were entitled to court appointed counsel if indigent, and the majority of them are. Maybe I'm not moving the sympathy needle with some folks when I talk about how a lack of contract attorneys is threatening to result in criminal defendants sitting in jail longer than they should or not getting a speedy trial as guaranteed by the constitution. But they're not the only people profoundly affected by this crisis.

Last fiscal year, our court system handled about 8,300 juvenile cases. While their numbers may not be as high as criminal defendants requiring court-appointed counsel, their cases are often the most resource intensive. Every child in a child welfare or delinquency proceeding is entitled to court-appointed counsel. So is every parent or guardian of a child within the child welfare system if they are unable to afford private counsel. And unlike criminal proceedings, these cases are rarely one and done. Juvenile cases often span months or even years and require frequent hearings, demanding significant judicial resources. Without a healthy stable of contract attorneys, we cannot adequately protect the fundamental rights, well-being and safety of our most vulnerable population.

On behalf of the supreme court, I express our deepest gratitude for those attorneys who *do* take court appointments across the state. They tell me they

are overwhelmed and burned out. I asked some of our judges what it looks like out there in Iowa's courtrooms. This is what I heard:

"I worry about good, hardworking attorneys getting ethical violations because they are simply shouldering such an outsized burden of this crisis, and frankly they can't do so and fully meet their professional obligations."

Another judge said:

"A very seasoned attorney in my district told me that he is afraid he might snap—the strain of taking so many cases has put him at risk of slipping into a major depressive episode."

And another judge said:

"We are walking a delicate tightrope trying to meet speedy trial deadlines, provide the constitutional right to counsel and protect victims. It is more like triage than the organized process it should be."

These observations highlight a troubling reality: when our attorneys are forced to triage cases, we fail everyone who depends on our justice system, including victims. Contract attorneys are crucial to the system, yet they find themselves caught in a relentless tug of war—feeling undervalued because of low compensation while struggling against the pressure to keep going. So why don't they leave for greener pastures? For many, it is their conscience. They feel guilty about leaving their clients in a lurch or burdening their fellow contract attorneys who will have to pick up the pieces and take on even more cases.

We need to throw these attorneys a life ring. Just like the judicial pay issue, our contract attorneys are paid at a lower rate in comparison to every other state that touches Iowa. I know our state public defender is doing what he can to make the work as attractive as possible. And our chief judges across the state are imploring Iowa attorneys to sign up for court appointed work with little success

because, we are told, attorneys won't work at our low state rate when they have clients who can pay a competitive hourly rate.

By the way, the "clients" of contract attorneys are by no means powerful people. They aren't an organized group of individuals. They don't have well-connected lobbyists walking the halls of our capitol. Oftentimes, the situation which led to their involvement in the judicial system makes them neither sympathetic nor even likeable.

While these individuals may be cloaked with constitutional armor, they do not have the opportunity or privilege to stand before you and plead their case. But I do. And that's why I'm committed to talking about this issue until it is adequately addressed. So call me Suzy Spitz if you like, but I won't step aside or ignore an issue so essential to justice, due process and the protection of the most defenseless among us, because I've seen the good that can come from helping this population.

For those of you who have heard me speak at this podium before, you know that I always include an update on a man I first met nearly ten years ago. Shawn. In 2015, Shawn was battling a severe meth addiction. Within a couple years, he was on the brink of losing his parental rights when he made the life-changing decision to join STEPS, my family treatment court.

Shawn was a piece of work. Week after week, he would attend STEPS but he kept testing dirty for meth and lying about it. We had reached a crossroads. I told him we could work with positive drug tests, but we couldn't work with dishonesty. That was the moment something clicked with Shawn. He began to

turn his life around, taking real steps towards successfully reuniting with his son.

Shawn's case is a perfect example to illustrate the critical need for contract attorneys. In addition to having an HHS worker assigned to his case, every hearing included me as the presiding judge, the county attorney, Shawn's court-appointed attorney, the mother's court-appointed attorney, and a court-appointed guardian ad litem for his son. For over two years, we held hearings every two months and STEPS every week. That's a lot of court time where court-appointed attorney services are needed.

I recently visited with Shawn while preparing for this speech and learned that, since my last update, he has been working to restore the citizenship rights he lost as a convicted felon. He's also taking steps to regain his CDL license, which he lost due to an OWI. Today, Shawn is 2,495 days clean and sober—that's about six years and nine months of hard-earned recovery. He is here with us today, joined by his son, Rylan. Shawn, thank you for being here and allowing me to once again share your story. And Rylan, happy 13th birthday! Catch me afterwards—I've got cookies for you.

My path to helping Shawn and others like him began long before I became a judge. I will never forget my very first day in juvenile court as a prosecutor. I had been a licensed attorney for less than a month and did my best to prepare for all the cases I'd face that day. But one case stood out—a group of siblings who had all been sexually abused by an older family member. As I dug into the file, I discovered that the same perpetrator had been sexually abusing young

family members for generations. One of the older cases mentioned in the file involved a girl from my childhood. Of course I knew her. But I had no idea what she had endured. My heart dropped to my feet. This happened in my beloved county, to someone I knew. I was gob smacked.

For the next 16 years, I continued prosecuting juvenile cases in my home county, followed by eight years serving my district as a district associate judge in juvenile court. Devoting my entire career to addressing child abuse and neglect has been both immensely fulfilling and profoundly challenging. The work can be overwhelming and, at times, absolutely heartbreaking and horrific. While the weight of it remains, I have grown more accustomed to the harsh realities—and I am no longer gob smacked.

Across our entire state, in communities just like yours, children are enduring the pain of physical abuse, sexual abuse and neglect. They need and deserve our collective focus and attention. To bring this reality closer to home, I reached out to several juvenile court judges from all eight districts, asking them to share examples that might resonate with you as our elected legislators. I asked them about the cases that have stayed with them—the ones that keep them awake at night.

One judge replied, “To be honest, when I received your request, I felt a great deal of anxiety. The cases you asked about never go away. They will be with me forever. I have no idea how you will present this to the legislature. They are too horrific.”

She's right. I heard countless stories from those judges, and nearly every one is too devastating to recount in this forum. I never want judges to relive their most haunting cases or for listeners to feel overwhelmed by the gravity of these stories. But this is the dilemma we face: I want you to share my passion for protecting Iowa's vulnerable children and families, but I know my passion was forged through years of exposure to the heartbreaking realities out there.

Many of the stories shared with me were among the darkest, but I've attempted to present just a few in a way that captures their impact without traumatizing my audience. Even with some of the details set aside, these stories reveal the incredible challenges children and families face—and the critical work being done in our courts to help them.

Without disclosing any identities or specific locations, here are a few brief case summaries from courts across Iowa:

A young girl was sexually abused by mom's boyfriend. Mom didn't believe her daughter and stood by her man. The young girl openly sobbed in court, begging her mom to "Choose me!" That same judge is jolted awake at night with images of an infant death and autopsy photos from a different case.

Dad brought an unresponsive baby to the emergency room where the doctors determined the baby had been dead for longer than the father's story. An investigation of the home found two other emaciated young children.

Six year old enters the system and remains through childhood after being sexually and physically abused by parents. At 19 she returns as a mother herself. After many pregnancies and termination of parental rights, she said, "Judge, I'm just going to keep having babies until you let me keep one."

16-year-old girl spent last two years in court due to delinquent behavior and mental health issues. Mental health facilities won't accept her because of her criminal history, and detention placements require her mental health needs to be addressed first. Her judge fears she is at risk of abuse or trafficking.

6-year-old boy physically and sexually abused by mom's boyfriend to the point the child died. Mom stood by her boyfriend, even after she saw the trauma her son endured. Mom bonded boyfriend out of jail and had another child with him before he went to prison. The judge said "I can't unsee pictures of the child's body."

I don't want you to get the impression that, other than Shawn's case, juvenile court is hopeless. So I also asked judges to share a few stories of triumph:

A 16 year old with a lot of special needs, including a pretty severe learning disability, fell in with a bad crowd. He was arrested by police for possession of a stolen firearm. His juvenile court officer worked hard with the family to get services in place for him and after a period of residential treatment, he is back in the community and staying out of trouble. Instead of being on track for prison, he is on track to graduate.

After 18 months of a mom participating in drug court, she secured housing, employment, a driver's license and regained custody of her son. That mom now mentors parents struggling with their own addictions and often brings her son to court, where he loves sitting with the judge on the bench.

Three young men deep into the criminal world to the point of placement at our state training school. Each earned his high school diploma. Today one is a welder, one is working in culinary arts, and the other is enrolled in community college.

I urge you to connect with all of these stories as they collectively reflect the shared struggles and triumphs of children and families throughout Iowa. Although our juvenile court judges witness extraordinary resilience and hope with the children and families who stand before them, they are also grappling with heartbreaking challenges. That is a common truth for our entire state.

Iowa's vulnerable youth deserve more than just the court's protection. They deserve the opportunity to dream and achieve a brighter future. I often ask myself, what can the judicial branch do to help? That led me to start asking

questions of professionals involved in the juvenile justice system—what is or isn't working well? Are we making a difference in juvenile court? It didn't take long for me to realize I was asking the wrong people. The voices I needed to hear were those of young people who have lived experiences in Iowa's juvenile justice system. And that's how I discovered the remarkable work of the Youth Justice Council.

The Youth Justice Council is a subcommittee of Iowa's Juvenile Justice Advisory Council. It is made up of nine young people ages 16-28 years old who have directly experienced Iowa's juvenile justice system. These remarkable individuals have faced and overcome significant challenges in their lives. Now, they are using their voices and experiences to serve on the council, working to create meaningful improvements in the juvenile justice system for kids who face similar struggles. I am pleased to recognize the council members who are able to join us today. Would you please stand.

Recently, I had the privilege of meeting with several members of their council. After a few moments of introductions to break the ice, they quickly got down to business. I asked them what the judicial branch could do better for children and youth in the juvenile justice system. Time and again, their responses were the same: They want to feel heard.

I heard that same message loud and clear through the Talking Wall Project. This annual project invites youth in detention centers, group homes, youth shelters, select community locations and the state training school to share their thoughts by writing on sticky notes in response to questions displayed on the

walls. Thus, the Talking Wall. In fiscal year 2024, 570 young people poured their experiences and ideas into those notes. Their words were later collected and shared to help policy makers better understand what they are dealing with and how we can do better.

I asked members of the Youth Justice Council to review those heartfelt comments and point out the ones they want me to emphasize. To all the youth who chose to share these deeply personal notes, let me turn up the volume of your Talking Wall, using this microphone in a roomful of some very important people.

One question displayed on the Talking Wall was this: “What is one thing that has helped you while being in the system?” From the thousands of sticky notes, I have been asked to share these particular responses with you:

- Having trusted adults in my life
- Staff who care
- Access to family
- Sibling visits
- My probation officer understanding me
- Meeting people like me who have been through similar stuff
- Drug treatment
- AA/NA while in placement
- Home passes
- Youth Justice Council
- Outings make me feel normal
- People who turn into family

Another question posed on the Talking Wall was this: “What do you need that you’re not currently getting?” From the thousands of sticky notes, these are the things they want you to hear:

- Bigger portions of food
- Music
- Games

Being outside
Jobs
My own clothes
To see my attorney before court
Haircuts in placement
More time to speak in court
More court hearings
More services
Contact with mom who has lost her rights
More one-on-one time, love, attention
Support for my suicidal thoughts
More phone calls
Better hygiene products
Culturally appropriate skin and hair care
To do things on the holidays

I want to leave you with the voices of Iowa's youth hanging in the air. Those heartfelt sticky notes are a powerful reminder of the responsibility we have. They compel me to remain committed to truly listening to what they have to say, to being their voice once their wishes are known, and to doing everything in my power to ensure their needs are met.

Of course turning those wishes into action requires collaboration and understanding. That's where you come in. I'm committed to working closely with the legislative and executive branches to explore how we can create better opportunities and outcomes for Iowa's most vulnerable children.

To begin those conversations, I will be holding office hours at the capitol every Monday from 10 a.m. to noon starting January 27 through March 31 in the historic Supreme Court Chambers. Together, we can make a difference for the children and families who need us most.

I hope everyone will join us shortly downstairs in the historic Supreme Court Chambers for coffee and cookies.

Thank you, my esteemed colleagues, for your dedication to our work.

Thank you, legislature, for supporting our branch and inviting me to speak today.

And finally, to the many youth who jotted down thousands of wishes from your hearts, keep talking. We're listening.

Thank you.