



# ALBANY COUNTY STATE OF THE COUNTY

Daniel P. McCoy, Albany County Executive

Thursday, January 25, 2018

***“The vast majority of us want the same things. We want to live together, we want to improve the quality of our lives and we want to improve our community. So let’s dedicate ourselves to that mission.”***



Good evening and welcome to my State of the County message and to our beautiful new Times Union Center atrium.

I decided to hold this event here tonight, not only to show off this wonderful new space, but to speak for a moment on why we made this investment and what we hope it will mean to our community.

We built this atrium in the hope that it would be a space that brings people together – not just on event nights – but throughout the year. We designed it as a space that people can come into, and enjoy for many reasons and our future plans call for creating event space in front of the building for street festivals and farmers markets as well as for outdoor movies and special events. It is our hope that the vibrancy of this space will become a catalyst to a greater vibrancy in our community at large.

The author Ellen Kent writes, “Buildings are monuments within our environment, testimonies to our sense of place. A memorable building, one that is responsive to the needs for which it was built, helps shape a community and its people.” This space, and the upgraded walkway connecting it to the new Convention Center and to the Empire State Plaza, will create new opportunities for our Historic Capital City and for our region; opportunities that we believe will help shape our community and its people.

In each State of the County message I have delivered, I have promised that we would strive every day to make a positive difference in the lives of the residents of Albany County. I believe this building is tangible evidence of that effort. And for that effort, there are a lot of folks who deserve the credit for bringing this project to fruition. Our County Legislature, our architects, our construction manager and most especially all of the men and women who labored to make this building a reality. The ironworkers, the carpenters, the electricians, the painters, the laborers and so many more, for whom this was a labor of love. Thank you again for a job well done.

In the coming months, we will begin another exciting project, the long overdue renovation to our County Nursing Home. That project, totaling over \$60 million in improvements, will transform the building into a state of the art facility, an investment that will be nearly fully reimbursed by New York State.

Already, the improvements and changes at the nursing home have cut our County's subsidy of nursing home operations by half, and with future improvements, we anticipate turning what had been a major liability into a County asset worthy of the County residents who call the facility home. I look forward to reporting to you next year on continued progress, but tonight I want to thank the County Legislature for the partnership we have shared on this project and hold it

out proudly as an example of what we can achieve when we work together for a common goal.

There is no question that the financial turnaround at our nursing home has contributed to our overall strong record of fiscal progress and growth. Despite the pressures of unfunded state & federal mandates, our 2018 budget stayed under the state tax cap for the fifth year in a row; left our tax rate unchanged and saw our fund balance grow to a modern high of over \$60 million.

Again, I want to thank the Legislature for being an important partner with my administration in our success in stabilizing County finances and for the second year in a row unanimously approving the 2018 budget I submitted.

Over the course of the coming year we will continue our ongoing efforts to streamline services and to put into place additional reforms to ensure this progress continues and that our County taxpayers are not additionally burdened.

Toward that goal, I will continue to partner with local governments within the County in pursuit of savings from shared service opportunities.

During the past year, with the assistance of the Rockefeller Institute of Government, Albany County led a shared service panel that included representatives from local governments and school districts within our County.

The result was a plan that identified more than \$15 million in savings when fully implemented in 2019.

To assist with that implementation we have again partnered with the Rockefeller Institute to work with us on the steps necessary to achieve these savings. Some of the steps, such as the creation of a Community Choice Energy Program, will require municipalities to pass local laws to participate. Those participating in the program will be able to enter into energy contracts at lower prices for their localities and their residents will likely be able to enter into these contracts to lower their individual energy bills.

One of the proposals we are most excited about will involve an agreement with Saratoga County and our Water Purification District for the construction and operation of a facility that will be able to accept organic waste.

This project will reduce our carbon footprint and will continue our commitment to make Albany County the greenest county in New York State. It will also demonstrate that being green can also be beneficial to the bottom line.

As we continue to face the very real possibility of even more cuts and more unfunded mandates from Washington and from New York State, it is critical to remind ourselves of the mission of County government and what is at stake.

Our mission is about serving those most at need in our community – our children, our seniors, our veterans, and those struggling with the challenges of poverty, illness and addiction. It is a mission to create better opportunities,

economic and otherwise for our struggling middle class and poor, for young and old alike, so as to improve their lives and the quality of life of our community.

Tonight, I am pleased and proud to review the significant achievements our departments have made in pursuing the mission of County government and to outline the work being done to move that mission forward.

Mental Illness will touch one in five individuals over the course of a lifetime. Our Department of Mental Health effectively provides critical services to those suffering from such illness to help them attain meaningful improvement in the quality of their lives.

The department does this through direct counseling as well as through mobile crisis services, and through strong community partnerships.

During 2017, the department provided mental health training to nearly 200 law enforcement officers around the capital region. The department also took a leadership role in bringing together an array of community stakeholders that included law enforcement and health and social service providers to develop community wide plans to better address the needs of individuals dealing with addiction, with developmental disabilities and with mental illness.

The department continues to work with LEAD on criminal diversion opportunities and has been an important voice on our opioid task force. For their passion and dedication to the mission they serve, and for their belief that hope and

caring are the most powerful medicine, I want to thank the department for their extraordinary work.

Likewise, our County Health Department strives to protect and promote the health of individuals, families and communities within our County.

Through a variety of innovative and award winning programs, the department advances its vital mission to protect against environmental hazards; promote the health and wellness of our citizens and to prepare for public emergencies.

During the past year, the department submitted the necessary documentation for review by the Public Health Accreditation Board with the goal of receiving National Accreditation status. This has involved the development of a strategic community health improvement plan that was based on extensive feedback from staff and from community stakeholders and that identified assets and challenges in our community.

Achieving accreditation will be a major accomplishment for the department and I wish them well and congratulate them on this important effort.

I also want to highlight, that both the Health Department and the Department of Mental Health in collaboration with my office, took on a leadership role with the establishment of the Albany County Opioid Task Force. The task force received the 2017 Public Service Excellence Award from the New York State Academy for

Public Administration for its achievements, including the implementation of Project Orange, an initiative that works with local pharmacies to increase awareness of the importance of safe storage and disposal of opioid medication.

Last year, in my State of the County, I addressed taking on the pharmaceutical industry to hold them accountable for the loss, pain and suffering they have caused in creating the opioid epidemic. Working with County Executives of America and its national opioid task force, I had the opportunity to discuss with County Executives across this nation, the impact the opioid crisis has had on their communities.

In Albany County, total opioid deaths from 2010 to 2015 increased by 29 percent. While this number is significant, hundreds more suffer from the consuming and unending cycle of addiction. There is no doubt that our nation and our County face an opioid crisis. As a result of my work with the national task force as its co-chair, I had the good fortune to meet Joe Rice, one of the most celebrated attorneys in the nation. Joe's firm, Motley Rice, has represented plaintiffs in litigation against the tobacco industry, Volkswagen, BP oil, as well as the asbestos industry. With the Legislature's support earlier this month, the firm of Motley Rice and our County attorney filed litigation in federal court on our behalf against five of the leading pharmaceutical firms alleging violations of state and federal law including federal RICO violations.

It is our hope that along with other suits being filed across the nation, we will get the pharmaceutical industry to change the way it does business, so that the welfare of patients is placed ahead of profits. This is not about a financial recovery; this is about the welfare of our citizens. This is about the mission of County government.

A couple of days after Christmas, an op-ed piece in the New York Times dealt with one of the most heartbreaking consequences of the opioid crisis and the devastating effect it is having on significantly higher numbers of children who are being placed in foster care systems. From 2015 to 2016, the increase in the number of children across the nation who came into foster care as a result of parental drug abuse was far greater than increases in almost all other categories. From 2013 to 2017, our County saw an increase of 23% in the number of children needing foster care as a result of the consequences of opioid addiction, untreated mental health issues and domestic violence.

The result of all of this is that child welfare agencies across the nation cannot find enough foster families to meet the growing demand. The consequences for these kids is alarming. As many as 70% of young people in the juvenile justice system have spent time in the child welfare system. In fact, the crisis in foster care is at the root of so many problems, problems such as mass incarceration and economic inequality.

The Times op-ed piece goes on to ask: Why aren't these kids being made a priority? Why aren't more elected officials talking about them? Why is there no national movement to battle for these children?

Well tonight, in this County, we're making it clear, these children are our priority and in this County, we're going to do everything within our power to champion their cause. It's our mission!

So, I've asked our Commissioner of Children, Youth & Family Services, to convene a task force focused on the issue of children in foster care. And I am committing tonight that Albany County will be a national leader in the effort to focus on the needs of children in the foster care system.

Two years ago, we began the Albany County Cares campaign to reinforce the message that our County is dedicated to serving those most in need. And as I've often said, no department fulfills that mission more directly than our Department of Children Youth and Family Services, as it works with families to create safe, nurturing environments in which children can grow, learn and reach their true potential.

During the past year, the department's child welfare staff investigated over 5,000 reports involving over 10,000 children. Additionally, the Department's Special Needs Division, its Children and Mental Health Clinic and our Youth Bureau, assisted thousands more of our neediest and most vulnerable youth. To all

of our staff and to all of our many community partners, you give meaning every day to our campaign that Albany County Cares and to the mission we serve.

To create more opportunities for the children of our county, two years ago, with the support of the Legislature, we created the Albany County Recreation Department. Already the department provides recreational programming to thousands of young people throughout the county. Strategically, the department formed a partnership with the Amateur Athletic Association, the first of its kind in the nation, to offer AAU structured athletics in karate, flag football, lacrosse, baseball and track and field.

The department also manages the many activities at Lawson Lake and on our award winning rail trail. Both have become regional destinations for hundreds of kids and their families. Both the rail trail and Lawson Lake offer our residents outdoor activities and opportunities year round.

Be sure to attend the upcoming Winter Festival at the Lake and you'll see what I'm talking about. There will be ice fishing and all kinds of winter fun and activities. And I guarantee when you see the smiles on kids' faces, you'll see magic happen.

That's because we're giving kids opportunities they might never get elsewhere and nothing, NOTHING we do is more important than that. Nothing

defines our mission better. So to those involved in all of these activities, thank you for your commitment to our kids and to Albany County.

By the way, when you go to Lawson Lake, you're going to see that many of the buildings have been transformed, through hard work, and as a result of partnerships with organized labor and our County Probation department's Project Growth, a program that teaches young adults on probation a vocational skill geared toward a trade. This program is only one of many unique award-winning initiatives that the department has developed to help young probationers find a new and better path for life. During 2017, Harvard University recognized the department's Juvenile Accountability Program as a cutting edge best practice and presented the department with its "Bright Idea Award."

For 2018, the department is preparing for the challenges it will face as a result of the passage of the new Raise the Age. The department will be charged with assessing the risks and needs of an additional 400 juvenile offenders. Given this enormous challenge, the department remains committed to exploring how services can be delivered effectively to best meet the needs of probationers. I want to congratulate the department on the successes it has achieved and to thank the dedicated staff and leadership that have made that success possible.

Raise the Age will also place additional demands on our Public Defenders, our Alternate Public Defenders, and our County Attorneys. These offices provide excellent representation, but they will continue to be challenged by new mandates and additional responsibilities.

As all of you are aware, for the past three years, I have made the cause of reforming our system of indigent defense a priority mission. Since the landmark decision in Gideon vs. Wainright guaranteeing defendants the right to counsel, New York State has passed on the cost of public defense to County governments. As a result, New Yorkers unable to afford counsel have been subjected to a legal system that has been overloaded and underfunded.

Last year, largely as a result of our efforts and as a result of legislation we submitted to the State Legislature, New York State took a major step forward in ensuring the Constitutional protection promised by the Gideon decision.

State law now authorizes the State Office of Indigent Legal Services to set standards on the presence of counsel at first appearance and reasonable limits on caseloads for public defenders. It also addresses training, supervision, and resources for attorneys to ensure effective representation.

While counties are still largely responsible for funding public defense, when the law is fully phased in by 2023, New York State will spend an additional \$250 million annually on public defense.

As the ACLU and the New York Civil Liberties Union have noted, this is a significant and long overdue achievement that will dramatically reform the public defense system statewide.

I am proud of Albany County's leadership role in this reform and I am committed to continuing our efforts to make sure New York State fulfills its constitutional obligation to public defense.

The cause of effective assistance of counsel was also the reason behind our initiative to establish the Office of Immigration Assistance.

As I noted last year I don't believe any of us could have predicted when that office was created the important role it would play given what has happened on a national level.

The office continues to provide training and support to defense attorneys representing non-citizens over a 14 county region. With the dramatic federal increase in ICE enforcement, our office has worked to link individuals with resources that can assist immigrants and refugees and their families.

Due to the Trump Administration's failure to protect DACA, we have established a hotline to identify individuals who may still be eligible to extend their DACA status or to identify other legal options that may be available to them.

Each day in our nation 120 young undocumented "dreamers" lose their temporary protection from deportation and over 800,000 dreamers are at risk if

Congress fails to act by March 5<sup>th</sup> to restore deportation protections and work permits. We cannot let that happen and here in Albany County, we will continue to give voice to those who want to be heard on immigration and who seek a pathway to citizenship.

During the coming year we will continue to work closely with the Legal Project, with Albany Law School and with Legal Aid to assist those vulnerable individuals who are now unacceptably being confronted with uncertainty and with fear for their future.

Unfortunately, many undocumented immigrants and refugees are all too often targets for crime and human trafficking and our Crime Victims and Sexual Violence Center has collaborated with the US Committee on Refugees and Immigrants as a resource for services.

The Center has also been an important resource for victims of domestic violence and sexual assault. In fact, the Center is a pioneer in training and raising community awareness, and in providing victims and their families comfort, support and empowerment.

The Center's mission, in this ME TOO moment has perhaps never been more important and I want to thank all involved for the important service you provide to our entire community.

Earlier today, I signed an Executive Order directing that it is the policy of this Administration that no settlement agreement entered into by the County of Albany in employment related cases involving harassment or discrimination will contain a nondisclosure provision. While we will protect victims who wish to maintain their privacy, employees, no matter how senior, should not and will not be protected by such agreements. I have also directed our County Attorney to submit draft legislation to our Legislature, banning such agreements County-wide and I look forward to action on this important issue.

Also earlier today, I submitted draft legislation to ensure that all workers in Albany County have the right to earned sick leave. Approximately 40% of workers in our county lack even a single paid sick day. This lack of access is even higher among low-income and part-time workers. Studies show that access to paid sick days promotes safer and healthier work environments by reducing the spread of illness and workplace injuries; it reduces healthcare costs and supports children and families by helping parents fulfill their caregiving responsibilities.

This legislation will result in healthier workplaces, improved child and family well-being and reduced healthcare costs. It will also result in more productive workers and will benefit employees by ultimately increasing their bottom line. I look forward to the Legislature joining me in support of this important initiative.

Protecting workers health and safety is also consistent with the County's equity agenda. You will recall last year that the Center for Human Service Research at the University of Albany studied the operations of six of our major Human Services departments to begin the process of ensuring that all departments and all employees within those departments understood and developed strategies to deliver essential services through the prism of an equity agenda. An agenda that ensures all individuals within our community have equal access to services and support.

In the coming year, we will continue to work with the Center for Human Services Research to follow up on the recommendations contained in their report, including the important recommendation to increase community outreach and to increase awareness of available county services.

Toward that end, during the past year, our Veterans Department increased outreach to veterans in the hill towns of the county, and to veterans in supportive living facilities to ensure that all veterans are receiving the services and benefits they are entitled to receive and the honors that they deserve. Additionally, we continue to move forward with Soldier On, a nationally recognized program for homeless veterans, to develop a \$30 million campus at the site of our Ann Lee Home that will provide housing and needed services to our region's veteran population. It is a project that will define our County and how we care for our

veterans. To all of those who have served our nation, thank you and please know that here in Albany County, we will always honor that service.

Last year, we opened a new office called Access Hilltowns at the Helderberg Senior Services Center in Berne. Now multiple County Departments are providing on site information and services such as Medicaid, SNAP, HEAP, Legal Services, Veteran Services, Aging Services and many more. Additionally, the Employment Unit of our Department of Social Services has developed community satellite sites throughout the County to better engage and be more accessible to clients in need of employment services.

During 2018, the Department of Social Services will begin a new initiative, one based on our equity agenda called, Bridges out of Poverty that will address the effects of poverty at the individual, institutional and community level and that will enforce opportunities to improve the quality of life of all County residents.

Also during the coming year, our Department for Aging will continue its successful Age Friendly Community Initiative that has its focus on reaching underserved populations within our community, including immigrants, refugees, minorities and low-income seniors. At the same time, the department has expanded its outreach to younger, healthier seniors to encourage recreational and lifestyle choices that support their efforts to remain active and to age in place.

I am pleased to announce that our senior housing rehabilitation program has been such a success that we have submitted an application to New York State for additional funding for another year. To all involved in these initiatives in Social Services, in Veterans Affairs and in our Aging Department, we thank you for your dedication and for your success in furthering our vital county mission.

There are so many more departments and employees to thank, including the hard working men and women at our Public Works Department who keep our roads and bridges clean and safe; the dedicated staff of our Department of General Services who take care of our County buildings and who handle everything from purchasing to engineering; and our phenomenal Department of Human Resources that does so much to make sure employee and personnel issues are addressed professionally.

I have always said our employees are among the most dedicated workforce anywhere and that the successes we have achieved in County government are because of their commitment.

Last month, in a ceremony in this building, I was presented with a national award that named me County Leader of the Year. In receiving that wonderful honor, I made it clear- that it was received because of our incredible workforce and because of the effective partnerships we have established with our national and

state leaders, including Governor Cuomo; with the other local elected officials throughout the county and of course with our County Legislature.

Because of you and because of your efforts, tonight I can say, without reservation, that The State of Our County Is Strong and that working together we will make it even stronger, more inclusive and more equitable. It is our mission and it is my commitment. The commitment to make a positive difference in the lives of residents of Albany County.

In a few days, we'll begin celebrating Black History Month and just a few days ago, we celebrated the birthday of Dr. Martin Luther King. In ceremonies across the nation, we recalled his leadership, his courage and his inspiration. Notably, we recalled Dr. King's soaring I have a dream speech delivered on the steps of the Lincoln Memorial that was a defining moment in our nation's history. A moment so different than what is happening in our nation today. So different than the divisive tone and message coming from today's White House.

On the day Dr. King was assassinated Bobby Kennedy was campaigning for the presidency and was on his way to a rally in Indianapolis. His aides urged him not to go, fearing he might be endangering his own life. But Bobby insisted on going. He understood the significance of that moment and the need to speak to a shocked and divided nation. And when he got there, he stood on the back of a flatbed truck and this is what he said:

“In this difficult time for the United States, it is perhaps well to ask what kind of nation we are and what direction we want to move in. What we need in the United States is not division; what we need in the United States is not hatred; what we need in the United States is not violence, but love and wisdom and compassion toward one another and a feeling of injustice towards those who still suffer within our country... We’ve had difficult times in the past. We will have difficult times in the future... But the vast majority of people in the country want to live together, want to improve the quality of our life and want justice for all human beings... Let us dedicate ourselves to that and say a prayer for our Country and for our people.”

I want to end tonight with those thoughts. That as difficult as times may seem, the vast majority of us want the same things. We want to live together, we want to improve the quality of our lives and we want to improve our community. So let’s dedicate ourselves to that mission and let’s say a prayer for our nation and our people, because this too is a defining moment for all of us. And I’m confident, that with your prayers and with God’s grace, we’ll know the truth of Dr. King’s message that light will always defeat the darkness and love will always conquer hate.

May God bless our great nation and our great County and may God bless all of you.