



ALBANY COUNTY STATE OF THE COUNTY

Daniel P. McCoy, Albany County Executive

Thursday, February 13, 2020

In his iconic 1963 speech, Dr. Martin Luther King urged us "to make real the promise of democracy." His hopes and his dreams continue to be our struggle. It has inspired our pursuit of an Equity Agenda and our fight for justice.

Good evening and welcome to my 9th State of the County message and the first of a new term, the first of a new decade, and the first of a new chapter for our great County.

I was asked earlier if I am as excited tonight as I was eight years ago, and truthfully, I'm even more excited, because of how far we have come, how much we have achieved and how much more I know we can accomplish by continuing to work together.

In my first state of the County address, the excitement I felt being a new County Executive was matched by my anxiety over the challenges we faced. Our nation and our state were entangled in a financial downturn that effected our County in ways large and small. Almost all of the County's departmental budgets had been slashed and many essential programs had been cut. Our reserves were being depleted, and we were resorting to cash flow borrowings.

Our nursing home was losing a million dollars a month and critically necessary improvements were being deferred. And even more concerning, patient care was suffering.

Additionally, we were increasing the tax burden on real property owners and decreasing the County's role as a force for economic development and innovation.

So in that first state of the County message, realizing all those challenges, I asked for your support. And in return, I promised that working together, through partnerships and through a new standard of inclusive government, we would put Albany County on a pathway to stability, growth and success.

Tonight, I am pleased and honored to tell you that pathway has led to this moment, one where I can say with assurance and with tangible evidence that the State of our County is strong and that our future is bright.

We have stabilized our finances, built our reserves to historic highs, stayed under the state mandated tax cap for the 7th straight year and most importantly we have expanded programs essential to our core mission as a County government.

A mission to serve those in need and to create better opportunities, economic and otherwise, for all of our residents, so as to improve the quality of life of our community and to create a better future for our children.

We have achieved all of this in significant part because of the dedication and effort of our County workforce and the commitment to excellence embedded in the culture of all of our County's departments and agencies.

That commitment to excellence is the motivating force that drove our County's Department of Health to go through a two year process to receive National Public Health Accreditation status, an honor that was given to the Department in 2019 and that is shared by only 6 other County Health Departments in New York State.

And, during the past year, the Department's "Healthy Connections" initiative received a Best Practice Award by the National Association of County & City Health Officials, just one of several best practice recognitions the department received last year in its efforts to

promote health equity to residents and communities throughout our County.

As part of that effort, the department along with my office, led a collaborative taskforce to develop and implement strategies to decrease infant prematurity and mortality rates in the County.

The Department also worked with numerous community partners to advance comprehensive strategies to address the opioid crisis and the crisis of health and environmental imbalance facing our communities.

As many of you recall in 2014 I signed an Executive Order directing the County's Health Commissioner to issue a moratorium on Global Partner's proposed plans to expand its facilities at the Port of Albany. I issued this order because of my concerns over the effect of that expansion on air quality in the South End, particularly its effect on the residents of Ezra Prentice homes.

That directive and moratorium led DEC to revoke authorization that would have permitted Global's proposed expansion. I am grateful

to all who supported our effort at that time and who are continuing to push for more action to address continuing air quality issues in our South End community and in our County.

Over the last several weeks, a new health concern means changes when people return to the United States from China after the outbreak of the Coronavirus.

New federal guidelines are in place and our health department now has an even larger role with monitoring individuals entering the county who are determined to need home quarantine, and ensuring appropriate setting, monitoring and support of these individuals.

Our County health department is working with the state health department as this situation continues to evolve.

I want to thank Dr. Whalen and her staff and congratulate them on their extraordinary achievements in advancing the health and welfare of the residents of our County.

Of course, the overall health of a community cannot be accurately measured without addressing the emotional and mental wellbeing of

its residents. The everyday, behavioral health challenges facing the residents of communities across the state and nation, serve as a barometer of overall community health. Albany County's Department of Mental Health is facing the reality of these challenges through a variety of innovative programming and community partnerships.

For the past 5 years the department has been engaged in a project to transform clinical services with the goal of ensuring that individuals living with mental illness and addiction receive rapid access to the care they need, and last year the department's outpatient clinic served over 2000 patients. Additionally, the department's mobile crisis team expanded its hours of operation and returned to round the clock mobile response capability to better serve County residents.

The department also launched new initiatives in response to the opioid epidemic to increase outreach and engagement services to populations that have historically been difficult to engage.

The department is also committed to offering individuals living with mental illness every opportunity to minimize or avoid unnecessary

involvement with the criminal justice system and by reducing unnecessary incarceration whenever possible. And after years of effort, the Department's goal of establishing a mental health court for Albany County – an initiative I proposed nearly 5 years ago, will become a reality this year.

For their tireless efforts to serve those individuals in our community experiencing mental health challenges, I want to thank Dr. Giordano and his department for the quality of services they provide and the remarkable success they have achieved.

Tonight I am asking Dr. Giordano to chair a new taskforce that along with our Departments of Health, Aging & Veteran Services will take up the challenge of social isolation in our community. Medical research has shown that social isolation is more lethal than smoking 15 cigarettes a day or even obesity. In fact, research has shown that social isolation leads to heart disease, dementia, and higher death rates. We've already seen the success of our Department for Aging's congregate senior dining initiatives to combat loneliness and isolation

with older residents. They can serve as a model of what we can and will do in Albany County to lead on this important mental health issue.

There is an issue that presents a challenge to Albany County and the state and that is the rising cost of Medicaid. Governor Cuomo highlighted it in his State of the State message and it is an area of concern.

Counties are bound by federal and state guidelines to enroll those who are eligible and provide services to them. We have to follow those guidelines and have no control over that.

But like everything else, costs continue to go up and we have had help from the state for the last several years as it put a cap on how much counties would have to pay and New York State paid the increase.

However, with the state deficit, the Governor is proposing to change that. I look forward to working with him to come up with ways that help all of us control costs and also not place a heavier burden on our property taxpayers.

I am proud that Albany County has led the nation on so many important issues, particularly in our effort to combat the opioid crisis in our community and in our nation.

Albany County was one of the earliest plaintiffs in the federal litigation against the pharmaceutical industry. That litigation, is now the largest and the most complex lawsuit in American legal history. In fact, it is the first time ever that a class action has been certified for negotiating purposes, and Albany County has been given a lead role as a class representative.

The presiding judge in the case, Judge Polster, has made it clear, that the objective of this litigation is to act quickly and to hold those responsible for the opioid crisis accountable so as to address the consequences of the crisis and to abate opioid abuse going forward.

I have made this cause the primary focus of my tenure as President of County Executives of America and as President of the Executive Committee of NYSAC.

I believe that almost nothing we do is more critical than our efforts to stop this crisis and to get help to those individuals and families suffering from the ravages of addiction. **And almost nothing that we do will be more consequential than ensuring that no one, particularly our children will be further endangered by the reckless conduct of the pharmaceutical industry.**

Tonight, I want to thank all of you for supporting our efforts in this battle and in particular our outstanding legal team led by Motley Rice working with our own County department of Law and my office.

I also want to extend my appreciation to the Hearst Corporation and to all of the Community Stakeholders including our Health Department and Mental Health Department for their efforts in the Prescription for Progress initiative.

For the past two years they have helped raise awareness of the crisis and have developed data based strategies to assist us in our common efforts. You have my pledge that Albany County's voice will

be heard at the negotiating table and in the courtroom to ensure that those responsible for this crisis are held accountable.

Tragically, one of the groups that has been impacted the hardest by the opioid crisis is our veterans. An average of 17 Veterans die each day by suicide, and suicide rates are highest among Veterans with opioid use disorders. And just a few weeks ago a new study confirmed that opioid and heroin use was substantially higher among Veterans who were exposed to combat than those who were deployed but who didn't see combat.

This study's goal was to call attention to the enormous impact opioid abuse has had on our Veteran community and the need to develop more effective strategies to better assist our veterans dealing with pain management and mental health care.

To do our part, I have directed our Veterans Service Bureau and our Mental Health Department to develop a plan to better address this issue in our own County. Partnering with other community resources, we will now provide Veteran counseling and related services as part of

our Mobile Crisis Team at Veteran Centers throughout our County. This will be a peer driven approach, expanding on a mental health initiative we introduced last year called project GROW – Getting Recovery Options Working.

Veterans, including combat Veterans who have successfully dealt with overcoming addiction, as part of Project Grow for Veterans, will be trained to provide counseling and peer support to addicted Veterans and their families. Our Veterans deserve the best services we can provide, and we are grateful to our Veterans Service Bureau and Director Secor for all of their efforts toward that goal and for expanding services and outreach to Veterans who are elderly, disabled or who live in areas of the County where services are difficult to get to. Please join me in recognizing their efforts and the remarkable Veterans who have served our Nation.

During the past year, our County's Department for Aging also significantly increased outreach efforts to underserved senior communities in our County to ensure services to refugees, to

individuals with low income, to those with health disparities and those isolated in rural settings.

Just last month, I declared 2020 the Year of the Senior in Albany County and the launch of a new program called “The Doctor is In.”

Thank you Commissioner Riitano and the entire staff of your department for ensuring that Albany County is truly an Age Friendly Community.

The Department is also working with our Recreation Department to offer health and recreation programs for seniors and families on our Rail Trail as well as other County venues.

Additionally, our Recreation Department continues to expand its outreach. The Department offers programming in skating, hockey, track and field, baseball, lacrosse, flag football, karate and basketball to literally thousands of County youth.

These programs offer our youth opportunities to not only develop and enjoy their athletic skills and talents, but to also develop life skills central to their development as young adults. In just a few short years,

these programs have grown to become one of our County's signature initiatives. And tonight I commit that going forward we will do even more to help kids grow, to lift kids out of poverty and to help kids realize their full potential. I have said before that nothing, nothing we do is more important in fulfilling our mission. So tonight, please join with me in thanking our Department of Recreation Commissioner John D'Antonio and his staff for their outstanding efforts and their commitment to this mission.

During the past year I had the honor of being the first County Executive in the nation to be named a Hunt Kean Fellow.

The primary focus of the fellowship, whose directors include former governors, senators, and cabinet officials, is to develop best practices in education and youth development, to ensure that our children will have the greatest opportunities for success.

In meetings that I attended this year in Washington, Texas, and Louisiana, we focused on the reality that achievement gaps between students don't just happen spontaneously. Factors such as poverty,

violence and the health of a pregnant mother shape how a child's brain develops.

The need to address pre-natal care; the need to provide support to new mothers and the need to ensure that children have preschool educational opportunities, are all essential to successful outcomes and to healthy families.

Toward that end, our Department for Children, Youth and Families, has in the past year assisted in connecting over 1,600 women and their infant children to available community based support programs to empower families and to help them create a safe, nurturing and supportive environment in which children can grow, thrive and reach their full potential.

Also during the past year, the Department's Special Needs Division, its Children's Mental Health Clinic, and its Youth Bureau have touched the lives of thousands of children and their families.

Earlier this year The New York Times reported on the alarming number of teenagers and young adults who are dying by suicide. The

article noted that it's the second leading cause of death among young people at a time when the rate of teen depression has gone up by 63%. This is clearly a mental health crisis and what is so concerning about this crisis is that we know how to treat those suffering from depression and most at risk from suicide. We need to do more affective outreach and provide adequate resources to address this mental health crisis.

So tonight, I am asking that our Department of Children, Youth and Families with our Mental Health Department, our Health Department, our Probation Department and Recreation Department to develop a plan that will raise awareness of this crisis in our own County and help us chart a plan to deal with this crisis.

I want to thank our Department for Children, Youth and Families and our Commissioner until tomorrow, Gail Geohagen-Pratt, for the remarkable efforts she and her staff make every day in advocating for and protecting the children and their families in our County.

Gail, we wish you well in your new role and we thank you for your service.

Last year I announced our Zero Youth Detention initiative to insure that we are taking a public health approach to at risk youth in our community.

I asked our Departments of Health, Mental Health, Children Youth and Families and our Department of Probation to work collaboratively to develop a road map toward this goal. I also invited Dr. Alice Green to chair this effort and I am grateful for her involvement and for working with us to ensure that this approach is embedded in all of our departments.

As part of that effort, our Probation Department has developed nationally recognized, award winning programs focused on reducing racial and ethnic disparities in the juvenile justice system. The department has been recognized by both Georgetown and Harvard Universities for cutting edge programs that are aimed at giving our youth a better chance at a positive adulthood.

This year, mandated juvenile justice reforms like Raise the Age and Bail Reform will place even greater responsibilities on the

Probation Department and, as always, Probation is ready for the challenge.

It is often a challenge for those on probation to find work and our Probation Department just hosted its first job fair which drew over 100 probationers. I'd call that very successful.

For their commitment and professionalism, please join me in thanking Director Bill Connors and the entire staff of our Probation Department for their extraordinary services.

Last year, I also announced Albany County's commitment to the development and implementation of an Equity Agenda for our County. All of our departments worked collaboratively with SUNY's Center for Human Services to develop and prioritize goals and objectives.

Tonight, I am pleased to say we are working to implement our vision of ensuring a diverse, healthy and caring community. A community that promotes equity, social justice and diversity so that everyone is included and has access to the same opportunities for success.

This Equity Agenda provides a blueprint for our County to build upon as we continue to strive to incorporate equity into our mission and into our decision-making process.

Just last month, we cut the ribbon on our beautifully renovated nursing home, Shaker Place, and we have integrated our Equity Agenda into its core mission. That mission is to provide a nurturing atmosphere, staffed by qualified and compassionate individuals who are able to offer excellent care with respect and empathy and equity for all residents.

It is important to note that not only have we transformed a facility that cost the County millions in subsidized revenues annually, to one that no longer places a financial burden on County taxpayers, but more importantly we have focused on transforming the quality of care so that it is now a true home worthy of its residents.

Tonight, I want to again thank all involved in supporting our investment in and our commitment to that effort. Particularly Director Larry Slatky and our entire nursing home staff, as well as all of the firms

and workers involved in the design and construction of the facility and, of course, the Albany County Legislature. Your work will be an enduring legacy for our County.

I began the battle to transform our nursing home at the start of my first term as County Executive. The battle was not an easy one, but the status quo was not acceptable.

At the start of my second term as County Executive, we began the battle to gain additional funding for the defense of indigent defendants. Again, the battle is not an easy one but, the status quo, the failure of our justice system to insure that indigent individuals charged with crimes receive adequate legal representation, was also not acceptable.

So, in 2015 my office submitted proposed State legislation that was ultimately signed by Governor Cuomo that has dramatically increased State funding for indigent defense.

As a result of that legislation, our County over the next four years will receive over \$26 million dollars toward the cost of additional attorneys, staff and support for indigent defense in our Public Defender

and Alternate Public Defender offices as well as for 18-B counsel. In counties statewide over the same time period will receive over 250 million dollars in additional funding for public defense.

Our advocacy for increased public defense funding also resulted in our highly successful effort to establish our office of Immigration Assistance. I recently appointed Evelyn Kinnah as its new Director.

Working with New York State's office of Indigent legal services, in 2015 we began training attorneys, bar associations, and even judges throughout a fourteen county region on immigration laws and issues. We also began providing counseling and support to literally hundreds of immigrants in need of legal assistance.

I want to thank all those who have been involved in these initiatives, particularly members of my staff, as well as our Public Defenders office, our Alternate Public Defenders office, our Office of Immigration Services, and our Department of Law for their commitment to justice and social justice under the law.

All of these initiatives also demonstrate Albany County's commitment to insuring fairness throughout our community.

Tonight, I am pleased to announce that during the coming year we will continue to work with SUNY to develop performance metrics to measure our progress toward our Equity Agenda.

In addition to, the Departments I have already acknowledged, our County Social Services Department, our County Human Resources Department, our Department of Civil Service, our Department of Public Works our County Department of General Services, our Department of Information Services, and our County's Water Purification District are all working with my staff and SUNY toward that end. So as to ensure that all those who interact with County government and all those who serve it understand and experience Albany County's commitment to be a national leader in equity and social justice.

I believe this plan will allow Albany County to be even more vital and responsive in helping us address the root causes of inconsistency and in helping us achieve greater opportunities for all of our residents.

One important way we will achieve this goal is by increasing the County's role in the economic growth and prosperity of the region. Toward that end, I convened the Albany County Business Advisory Board which is made up of a group of private business leaders which has been working with my office and our nationally known consultants Camoin Associates and the Burgman Group over the past year to develop a Strategic Plan for economic growth for our County.

We began the planning process with three intentions. First, to create a collective understanding of the current challenge and opportunities for future growth in our County. Second, to evaluate what we have and then to pin-point missing elements in the County's current economic development environment. And third, to create and then support actions that will get life-changing results.

I am pleased to announce the report is done and has been unanimously endorsed by the Albany County Business Advisory Board. The report is organized around future achievable goals that have been

designed to enhance quality of life and accelerate economic growth throughout the County.

The first goal focuses on addressing gaps in the delivery of services and resources in the County's economic development structure.

It calls for resources that allow for better use of existing relationships and initiatives and put Albany County on a level playing field with the surrounding counties' economic development programs.

The second goal focuses on the need for a comprehensive county economic development plan that will generate economic development projects.

The third goal focuses on the need to develop strategies to build a workforce development pipeline made up of Albany County residents for jobs in key growth sectors like cybersecurity, clean energy and advanced transportation and logistics.

And, the final goal focuses on establishing and marketing Albany County's image as a place that is business friendly, vibrant and inclusive for investment capital, companies, workers and residents to locate.

My office will be working with Albany County's key stakeholders to come up with a plan that will fulfill these goals and improve the county's economy.

We have what it takes for success, a highly trained and educated workforce; world class institutions of higher education; a vibrant cultural scene; great history and unmatched natural beauty; as well as a thriving Port and one of busiest and best run airports in the Country. We now have to agree on a way to leverage these assets for the benefit of the County's residents which I am confident we can do.

We have also shown that County leadership can effect transformative change – just look at the success of our County Landbank. In just a few short years the Landbank has put dozens of properties and millions of dollars back on the Counties tax rolls.

Stabilizing and revitalizing neighborhoods and making the Landbank one of the most successful in the nation.

And just look at the success of the very building we are in tonight
In just the past 3 years we've taken a building that was essentially at its useful life and we've transformed it into a vital community resource
And a catalyst for downtown revitalization.

Last year was the Times Union Center's 2nd most profitable year ever, with net income exceeding 60% over the prior year. And in partnership with our Albany Capital Center, we have become a regional destination attracting national events like next month NCAA basketball tournament with all games already sold out.

We're ready to show the NCAA and the nation that there's no better place to be than here in Albany County!

With these successes as examples of what we can accomplish working together, I have no doubt that we will achieve the goals set forth in the Camoin report and that effort starts tonight. My thanks to

our consultants, to my advisory committee and to the members of my staff for their yearlong effort in producing this report.

There's a line in the play Hamilton, that asks "who tells your story". The initiatives I've outlined tonight in this state of the county tell our story. The lives those initiatives have touched, tell our story. Each of you tell our story. And, over the course of the next several weeks an important way for all of us to tell our story will be by ensuring that Albany County is fully counted in the US Census. A complete count is so important for insuring we receive our share of state and federal funding. And beyond that a complete count helps businesses, health professionals, educators, and the like make critical data based decisions that will affect our region for the coming decade. So to help us insure a complete count, I've allocated funding in our 2020 budget to work in partnership with state and local leaders to make sure everyone in Albany County counts and is counted and that we tell our story.

Ten days before his inauguration, Abraham Lincoln gave a speech recalling a book he had read as a child, memories of which he said had

motivated him throughout his life. The book was a collection of stories dealing with the struggle of Washington's men on the battlefield as they fought for independence. Even though he was just a boy Lincoln said, he came to a belief that those men were fighting for something more than even freedom. The "original idea for which the struggle was made," he said was the "promise to all the people of the world for all time to come" that this nation could be a place of equality and opportunity for all.

That "original idea", as Lincoln called it was not only Lincoln's inspiration, but it was the fundamental basis of Dr. Martin Luther King's dream for this nation. In his iconic 1963 speech, delivered at the base of the Lincoln memorial, Dr. King urged us "to make real the promise of democracy." The very same promise that inspired those patriots who struggled on the battlefield alongside Washington.

Their hopes and their dreams continue to be our struggle. It has inspired our pursuit of an Equity Agenda and our fight for justice for indigent defendants.

It has inspired our efforts to expand programs for those struggling with homelessness, and addiction, and poverty and mental illness. It has inspired us to invest millions into a landbank to revitalize neighborhoods and stabilize communities throughout our county. It has inspired us to fight big oil in pursuit of environmental justice. It has inspired us to provide counseling, comfort and hope to hundreds of immigrants seeking assistance. And it has inspired us to make Albany County a place where our children have every opportunity to succeed and to fulfill their dreams.

In these polarized times, when our nation is so fractured, it is as important as anytime in our nation's history to remember that "original idea for which the struggle was made." To remember the hopes and dreams that inspired Washington's men, and that inspired Lincoln and Dr. King and for which they gave their lives.

Thank you all for supporting our efforts over the last 8 years to make Albany County a place where that "Original Idea" still gives us hope and inspiration. And thank you again for joining me tonight and

for being such an important part of our story. May God bless all of you
and may God bless our great County of Albany, and this great Nation.