



# ALBANY COUNTY STATE OF THE COUNTY

Daniel P. McCoy, Albany County Executive

Monday, March 6, 2017

“The most fundamental obligation of government is the promise to care for all of its citizens.”

*“In Albany County, I assure you, we take that promise very seriously. From City Hall in Albany to City Hall in Green Island; from Buckingham Pond to Lawson Lake; from Arbor Hill to the hills of Altamont and Berne and Rensselaerville, this land is your land. This government is your government. And those of us who serve and administer it, must as Franklin Roosevelt once said, treat the privilege of doing so as a ‘gift’ to be used wisely and on behalf of all.”*



Members of the Albany County Legislature, honored guests and my fellow citizens of Albany County, I thank you for joining me for my State of the County address.

We recall our achievements, it is said, to remind ourselves how much we still have to accomplish.

So tonight, in this State of the County, I am pleased and proud to review the significant achievements we have made in pursuing the critical mission of County government and to outline the work still to be done in moving that mission forward.

As a starting point, it is important to remember what that mission is all about – it is about serving those most at need in our community – our children, our seniors, our veterans, 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.

To fulfill this mission, we have put into place efficiencies and reforms in every County department and we have streamlined operations to more effectively deliver County services. These efficiencies and reforms, I believe, are what have enabled us to dramatically turn the corner on County finances.

For five straight years, my administration has presented structurally balanced budgets without the use of County reserves or gimmicks like budgetary one shots. Additionally, we have significantly grown our fund balance to over 50 million dollars, the highest amount in modern history.

At the same time, and what I take particular pride in, is that we've achieved this financial turnaround without cutting County services, and in many departments, we've actually increased existing services or added new services for County residents.

We've done all this despite the significant burden of federal and state mandates and the fact that in so many areas – like health insurance and retirement benefits, costs and increases have been largely beyond our control.

Yet, for the past four years we have not only stayed within the State's real property tax cap mandate, but we've also held the line on no effective real property tax increases, making Albany County one of the Counties in New York State with the lowest real property tax rate.

I strongly believe that our real property owners can no longer afford increased property taxes, and that to attract new residents and businesses, we must send a message that in Albany County, good management, not higher taxes is the order of business.

Keeping property taxes low; encouraging economic development; focusing on quality of life issues contribute to an environment that encourages further growth and development. It also contributes to a sense of place that encourages individuals to want to be here to live, work and raise a family.

It is why, I believe U.S. News and World Report just ranked the Albany metro area 30<sup>th</sup> of the 100 Best Places to Live in the U.S.

My commitment is to not only keep Albany County in this high ranking category but to move us to number one.

And that is why over the course of this year, I will continue to meet with municipal leaders in the County to find more opportunities for us to work together, consolidate services and reduce the cost of government to our residents. Good management requires creative thinking and an openness to change business as usual.

You need to look no further than at what is happening at our County Nursing Home, to see the results of the good management I am talking about.

When I took office, the County was subsidizing the nursing home by over one million dollars each month. We've not only reduced that by half, but with improvements to care; medical billing reimbursement; more efficient use of personnel and with the cooperation of our unionized employees, we are well on our way to the elimination of any County subsidy of nursing home operations. Truly remarkable.

Furthermore, along with improvements to our bottom line, we have focused on what is most important, the need to provide a higher quality of life for our nursing home residents.

To achieve this, our staff has participated in advanced training initiatives and improved overall quality performance. We've also invested in improving our facility and plan renovations that upon State approval will result in a complete modernization of our nursing home with a 60 million dollar investment. Along with the upgrades to the facility and a single floor addition, the tower building will have a new use. A number of county departments will create a healthcare complex at the nursing home which will include a 911 dispatch presence from the Sheriff's Department.

To all involved in this transformational project, thank you for helping us make our nursing home a true success story.

Speaking of success and transformational projects – just look at what is happening at our Times Union Center.

There, we are well underway with over 20 million dollars in improvements that will add a new enclosed atrium that will compliment what is happening in our City's downtown with the opening of a new convention center. These improvements are a critical part of our economic development strategy and will enable us to attract even more patrons and more visitors to our Capital Region.

So tonight, let's congratulate all of those involved with the construction of the new convention center and in the work going on at our Times Union Center. These two projects demonstrate the power of partnerships to make a difference.

The same can be said for the success of our Albany County Land Bank.

You may recall that just three years ago, we established the Land Bank to help end neighborhood blight and its devastating effects on communities throughout the County.

We initially pledged over 1 million dollars over two years to help leverage a 2.8 million dollar grant from the New York State Attorney General. Since that time, we have committed an additional \$750,000 and have turned over hundreds of

County properties to the Land Bank, which has now acquired over 320 vacant and abandoned properties.

To date, the Land Bank has invested more than 2 million dollars into stabilizing neighborhoods and spurring an additional 2 million dollars in private investments.

This has enabled the return of well over 1 million dollars of assessed value back to the tax rolls, making Albany County's Land Bank arguably the most successful in the nation.

We're proud of its success and committed to its future. So join me in congratulating the staff and board of directors and community advisors who have made this success story possible.

In addition to investing in the revitalization of our most at-risk neighborhoods, we've also continued our efforts to fight on behalf of communities like Ezra Prentice Homes – that have been placed at greater risk because of the dramatic growth of crude oil transport into Albany County and because of the proposal by Global Oil to expand its facilities near the Port of Albany.

The moratorium we imposed in 2014 remains in place, and we believe that largely as a result of our efforts and the recommendations of the Expert Advisory Committee I appointed, our State Department of Environmental Conservation rescinded the Negative Declaration it had previously issued and required a full environmental impact review.

Moreover, with the assistance of Earthjustice, we have filed suit against Global for what we believe are violations of the Clean Air Act. This is a battle we will not relent on and this is a battle we will continue to win.

Albany County has been working hard to become the greenest county in New York State.

I am proud that we have been recognized by NYSERDA as the first municipality in the Capital District to earn the Clean Energy Community designation. The designation was earned by completing four NYSERDA-approved clean energy actions, including establishing a Property Assessed Clean Energy or PACE

financing program and adopting an energy benchmarking policy for County buildings.

These actions demonstrate our commitment to reducing energy costs and promoting clean energy in our community. By earning the Clean Energy Community designation, Albany County is eligible to apply for up to \$250,000 in additional state funding for energy efficiency or clean energy projects, with no local match required. Saving green and being green means a healthier Albany County.

Our County Health Department has been instrumental in the effort to safeguard our citizens and our environment. The Department has received national recognition for its efforts to protect and promote the health and welfare of individuals and families in communities across the county.

Through a variety of innovative programs, initiatives and partnerships, the department advances its critical mission to prevent communicable and chronic diseases; protect against environmental hazards; promote the health and wellness of our citizens and prepare for and respond to public emergencies.

During the past year, the department worked with local hospitals, insurers and community partners to implement strategies related to a Community Health Improvement Plan.

Additionally, the Department took on a leadership role and is working extensively with local school districts around the county on the implementation of new state legislation mandating testing of water for lead in local schools.

And the department collaborated with our Department of Mental Health to address strategies related to Opioid and Heroin abuse in Albany County – an issue that has been a priority for my administration. Our Health Department remains a certified Opioid Overdose Prevention Center and continues outreach to local pharmacies to implement its standing order for Naloxone for those at risk in our community.

In the next several weeks, both our Health Department and Mental Health Department will lead a community effort to identify and implement effective strategies to confront the national opioid crisis as it affects residents of our County.

We will do this with the creation of a broad based County Task Force focused on this mission. In the days ahead, we will announce the members of the task force and dates for community forums on this topic.

Too many of our County residents have suffered because major pharmaceutical companies have misled doctors and their patients into the false notion that highly addictive prescription painkillers were safe and non-addictive. This is simply not the case. And the failure by pharmaceutical companies to adequately warn and instruct of the dangers have caused enormous loss, pain and suffering in our County.

So today I have instructed our County Attorney to begin the process of joining with other counties in our state in litigation aimed at holding pharmaceutical companies accountable for the loss, pain and suffering they have caused.

This too is a battle we will not give up on and this too is a battle that we must win, and we will win it by working together.

Our Mental Health Department is also collaborating with the County's Department for Children, Youth and Families and the Health Department to promote efforts related to suicide prevention in populations at risk in Albany County.

The vital work of our Mental Health Department cannot be overstated. Mental illness will touch one in five people over the course of a lifetime.

And, we know that with treatment and support, improvement and even recovery is possible. This possibility is what keeps our Department focused and engaged through the direct provision of services at our clinic, in the community and at our Correctional Facility.

During the past year, the Department launched the first integrated outpatient clinic in New York State, combining outpatient services for mental health and substance use, serving over 900 county residents.

The Department also provided critical crisis intervention training to local law enforcement agencies to increase the competence of those agencies in regard to their interaction with citizens living with behavioral health challenges.

Working with Judge Breslin and with the Office of Court Administration, the department will also continue an important initiative we have been working on since my State of the County last year – the development of a Mental Health Court that will increase opportunities for eligible individuals living with mental health challenges.

The establishment of a Mental Health Court would provide a therapeutic pathway through the criminal justice system for eligible individuals living with serious mental illness, so that they can get the treatment they need without unnecessary incarceration.

Albany County has been instrumental in pre-trial diversion efforts like LEAD, a program involving our County Departments of Mental Health, Law, Probation, Crime Victims, the Public Defender’s Office and the Alternate Public Defender. In fact, these departments have been key to providing the community-based treatment and support services that have made diversion efforts successful in our County.

On point, I’m delighted to share with you tonight the announcement from Harvard University that our County Probation Department’s Juvenile Community Accountability Program has been recognized as a “Bright Idea” by the University.

The award recognizes programs that represent cutting edge government policies, initiatives and best practices.

Our program provides a diversion option for juveniles charged with misdemeanor or low level felony offenses. And, it provides the victim, the community and the juvenile a healing experience without needlessly expending correctional resources.

Citizen volunteers are trained to work with juveniles to help them learn about the impact of the offense and to find ways to avoid re-offending. In making this award, Harvard expressed its excitement at helping to bring this innovative approach to a wider national audience. We in Albany County are so proud that this initiative started here and we congratulate all involved!

As all of you know, for the past two years I have made the cause of reforming our system of indigent defense a priority mission.

I'm proud of the fact that the bill I proposed on this issue unanimously passed both houses of the state legislature. Had it been signed into law, the bill would have required New York State to accept and assume its constitutional responsibility to ensure effective legal representation of indigent defendants.

While the governor vetoed the bill citing concerns over the financial burden to the State, I remain convinced that given the bipartisan support this legislation received, we can and will prevail.

There cannot be two systems of justice; one for the rich and one for the poor. This is wrong and it must stop. So therefore the battle to insure the promise of Gideon, the right to effective assistance of counsel for indigent defendants, must and will continue. And, it too is a battle we must and we will win.

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

At the time the office was created, I don't think anyone of us could have predicted the important role it would play, given what is occurring now on a national level. The office has been a vital tool providing assistance, training and support to indigent defense attorneys representing non-citizen clients over a fourteen county region between Albany County and Northern New York.

In addition to providing training sessions for the defender community, we also have provided training for judges to help them understand the collateral immigration consequences that may occur in cases involving a non-citizen party.

Already, we have provided direct assistance in over 115 cases involving non-citizens and have assisted attorneys in efforts to help their clients avoid the harsh consequences of deportation.

Most recently, when the President's travel ban was hastily announced by Executive Order and amid the confusion and chaos that resulted prior to the judicial stay our attorneys were actively assisting non-citizens who feared the consequences of the travel ban.

Recognizing the importance of this office, particularly at this moment in our nation, we have partnered with the United States Committee on Refugees and

Immigrants, with the International Student Office at UAlbany, with the Legal Project, with Albany Law School and with the Capital Region Immigration Collaborative to confront and overcome the challenges that non-citizens face in our community.

In the months ahead, we will continue to broaden our partnerships with Citizen Action and others to develop programs for new immigrants in an effort to ease their transition into our community.

In Albany County, we recognize and value the promise of America and what it has meant to generations of immigrants, who in turn have so enriched our nation and our own community. So here, in this County, we will fight to keep that promise.

A few weeks ago, speaking at a European conference, Senator John McCain expressed his alarm at the hardening resentment we see toward immigrants and refugees and minority groups, especially Muslims.

It was because of such a concern, that for the past year, I have held a series of forums across the County entitled “Healing Moments” for the purpose of discussing as a community the issues that are dividing us, particularly as they pertain to race, religion and sexual orientation.

I want to thank all of the extraordinary panel members, moderators, hosts, students and community members who took part in these amazing sessions. The discussions were sometimes uncomfortable, but always candid and respectful. And, I believe they helped to foster greater understanding and trust in our community.

I am also proud and honored that one of the community conversations held in partnership with Excelsior College has been selected by the Stakeholders Foundation as a 2017 Community Impact Award winner, receiving the Community Partnership Award. I am pleased the community has recognized the value and service these conversations provide.

We intend in the months ahead to continue these important forums and to involve even more students in the process, because now more than ever, there is a need to build stronger relationships with our minority communities, and to speak out against anti-immigrant, anti-Muslim and anti-Semitic attitudes and actions. Please

support me in these efforts and be part of the discussion and more importantly, in any way you can, be part of the solution.

In addition to our Healing Moments initiative, last year we began the Albany County Cares campaign to reinforce the message that our County government is dedicated to serving those most at need.

No department in our county fulfills that mission more directly than our Department for Children, Youth and Families. The department serves families to create safe, nurturing environments in which children can grow, think and reach their true potential.

During this past year, the Department served and assisted hundreds of children in need of foster care; or who were abused or sexually exploited; or who faced behavioral or health issues or challenges involving poverty or juvenile justice.

Additionally, the department oversees the County's Youth Bureau. The Bureau, along with a number of important community partners, provides services to over 25,000 youth in our county.

And my administration has made doing more for our youth a priority.

That is why last year we created a new Department of Recreation. The department has formed a first of its kind in the nation partnership with the Amateur Athletic Union.

The AAU whose motto is sports for all forever, and our Recreation Department are focusing on providing opportunities for youth from the ages of five to 17 in a variety of sports programming including karate, lacrosse, flag football, basketball and learn to skate or play hockey. This year we will be expanding programming to include volleyball, baseball and track and field among other activities.

Additionally, the department continues to expand programming at Lawson Lake, which in the past four years has been transformed into a recreation destination for families and for youth of all ages. The programs at the lake include summer camp for hundreds of youngsters, as well as seasonal activities including, hiking, kayaking and cross country skiing.

Last year, nearly 2,000 youth took part in these programs and for 2017 we are looking to double that number. While these numbers demonstrate the success of this initiative, the smiles I see on the faces of the young kids who take part in the activities prove it!

We're teaching kids not only how to play team sports; we're teaching them life skills and values and almost nothing we do is more important than that. So congratulations and thank you to all who have taken part in this effort; we appreciate your commitment.

During the year ahead we intend to expand recreation activities on our Rail Trail which has been an enormous success, with literally thousands taking advantage of a trail that when complete in the next several months will extend from the Port of Albany through Delmar all the way to Voorheesville.

We also intend to broaden recreation activities for our seniors. As many of you know, last year Albany County was designated an "Age Friendly Community" by the World Health Organization and AARP. We are proud to be one of only 100 municipalities that have received this designation and I want to thank Michael Burgess, the former Director of the New York State Office for Aging and Dr. Patricia Binzer, a nationally recognized expert on aging services for accepting my invitation to chair this initiative that will focus on improving the quality of life of our older residents in the areas of housing, transportation and health and wellness among other areas.

Last year, the Department's programs served or delivered nearly 200,000 meals; provided nearly 50,000 hours of in-home services; over 30,000 hours of adult day services; and nearly 45,000 rides to County seniors.

The Department's objective is to provide our seniors with the highest quality services in the most effective manner possible to help our seniors maintain their independence in the community. Our programs and services have been award winning and deservedly so, and we are committed to the designation of "Age Friendly Albany County." To all those who have made this designation possible, thank you.

Our County Department of Social Services has been a key partner in the effort to arrange services and support so that our seniors are able to remain in their homes for as long as possible. One of the programs the department administers, the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program or SNAP supplements the food budgets of 35,000 individuals.

Additionally, during the past year, the Department processed Medicaid eligibility for nearly 30,000 individuals and provided Home Energy Assistance funding to over 31,000 households. These are significant numbers to be sure. But the stories behind the numbers are what motivates the department, day in and day out to act as a lifeline to so many in our community who are dealing with the challenges of unemployment, poverty, homelessness, unpaid child support and those in need of adult services.

The Department also works closely with our Veterans Service Bureau to ensure that our veterans receive all the benefits to which they are so justly entitled and the recognition they deserve for their service to our nation. And my administration continues to move forward to establish a campus-like setting for veterans to call home on the site of the former Ann Lee Home in Colonie and in partnership with Soldier On. In the past year, we have made significant progress in obtaining required approvals from the town of Colonie and in completing the State Environmental Quality Review process.

Our Social Services Department and our Veterans Service Bureau, including all of our caseworkers, support staff and administrators are dedicated to serving all in need of assistance with compassion and dignity, and I thank them for all they have done to improve the lives of Albany County residents.

Last year, I noted that while our social and human services programs are among the best in the nation, significant portions of our community are still being left behind, particularly if looked at by race, ethnicity, income and neighborhood.

For that reason, I announced a new initiative in concert with the Center for Human Services Research at the University at Albany, to assess how we can, through the prism of an equity agenda, improve our policies and programs to broaden access and opportunity for all County residents.

So over the past year, the Center has assessed our major departments to gauge performance and understanding of our mission. That report is now complete and will be a foundational blueprint for the development of an Equity Strategic Plan of action for Albany County in dealing with issues of poverty, inequality, racism, discrimination and social and environmental justice.

I want to thank UAlbany Provost Dr. Darrell Wheeler and Dean Lynn Warner for their commitment to this initiative.

In developing our Equity Plan, we have consulted with King County in the state of Washington. They have been a national leader in ensuring that an equity and social justice agenda is embedded as a core element of county government and I want to thank King County officials for their support of our effort.

One of the important observations in the Center for Human Services report is a concern we have addressed from the beginning, that access to services for rural residents is an issue. To mitigate, our social services agencies as well as our health and mental health agencies have invested time and resources in providing services in communities that are traditionally difficult to reach. Additionally, our new Recreation Department and our Aging Department have focused on expanding services to our rural communities and we are committed to doing even more.

One of the significant barriers to access has been a lack of internet services in these communities. In so many ways, connectivity is critical to moving forward in a digital age.

Tonight, I am pleased to announce an important step to eliminate that particular barrier. We have successfully negotiated an arrangement that will provide broadband services to Berne and Knox, areas that until now have been left behind because of the expense of digital connectivity to rural communities. This is an exciting development and is a tangible example of what can be accomplished when stakeholders are committed to achieving social equity.

Our Crime Victim and Sexual Violence Center has been at the forefront of using the methodologies of social equity to deliver services to community residents. Using performance measurements, the department has most recently received a 93% satisfaction rate on client satisfaction surveys.

During the past year, the department has worked collaboratively with the National Center for Missing and Exploited Children, with Albany Law School, with SUNY's School of Criminal Justice, with the County's Family Courts and with a number of local law enforcement agencies on critical issues related to crime victims and their families.

And, in the coming year, the Department intends to increase its ongoing efforts in elementary schools, middle schools, high schools and colleges. The services the department provides are critical to an equity agenda.

Research has shown that communities that pay attention to such issues and that connect equity to policy solutions create greater opportunities and grow stronger and that is what I want for our County and with your support and working together, that is what we will achieve.

So tonight I am announcing my support for a statewide effort to provide an adequate shelter allowance to those seeking public assistance. This effort, spearheaded by Assemblyman Andrew Hevesi, will raise the allowance without any financial burden to the county.

It will reduce our costs through prevention and reduction of homelessness. Presently, the assistance levels to families with dependent children do not meet the statutory standard and this must change!

You may have noticed that on more than a few occasions tonight I've talked in terms of battles- battles we've fought on behalf of our residents to combat poverty, injustice and inequality; to end the curse of opioid addiction, the heart break of mental illness and the threat to our environment and to our citizens posed by the dangers of crude oil transport. We've made progress to be sure, but these are battles that must go on and that we're committed to fighting.

As Charles Blow recently put it "We are in a culture war in which truth is the weapon, righteousness the flag and passion the fuel." Victory, as Blow says, "is the only acceptable outcome when freedom, equality and inclusion are at stake."

You see, I'm still very much a soldier. And I'm very much a passionate, progressive who believes that concepts and programs and policies advancing social

justice and opportunity for all should be protected and need to be fought for. Good government can do no less.

I recently read an article in the Washington Post about Woody Guthrie's iconic song, "This Land is Your Land." Most of us love it as a song celebrating patriotism and the ideals of hope and freedom that define our nation. But it is also an anthem for the concept of equity – this land is made for you and me.

Guthrie wrote the song after having traveled through the nation during the dark days of the 1930's. He was deeply troubled by the poverty, racism and despair he witnessed. He wrote the song in part to remind us that this great nation belongs to all of us – that rich and poor alike have the same rights to the promise of America.

Interestingly, two verses of the original version of Guthrie's song that were not included in the original recording expressed his belief that government was failing to keep its promise to take care of those citizens who were unable because of circumstances to take care of themselves. The record executives didn't feel those two verses were patriotic enough.

But, Guthrie understood that the most fundamental obligation of government was the promise to care for all of its citizens. Quite simply, that is the underlying meaning of those iconic words, this land is your land, this land was made for you and me.

In Albany County, I assure you, we take that promise very seriously. From City Hall in Albany to City Hall in Green Island; from Buckingham Pond to Lawson Lake; from Arbor Hill to the hills of Altamont and Berne and Rensselaerville, this land is your land. This government is your government. And those of us who serve and administer it, must as Franklin Roosevelt once said, treat the privilege of doing so as a "gift" to be used wisely and on behalf of all.

So tonight, let me end by thanking all of those who have supported me in the effort of trying to use that gift wisely. The many successes we have achieved and that have been discussed in this address would not have been possible without the commitment of our extraordinary County workforce. They are second to none and I thank them for all they do.

Additionally, I want to point out that our achievements would not have been possible without the support and partnerships I have built with our County Legislature; our Legislative leaders; our Sheriff; our County Clerk and our State and Municipal leaders.

Most of all, those achievements would not have been possible without the continued support and inspiration of our County residents. To all of you and because of you, let me end by assuring you that THE STATE OF OUR COUNTY IS STRONG AND THAT OUR FUTURE IS BRIGHT!

Thank you again. God bless Albany County and God bless our great Nation.