

SENATE No. 1

The Commonwealth of Massachusetts



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To the Honorable Senate and House of Representatives,

Good evening. And thank you for joining me for a very different State of the Commonwealth address.

In a normal year, I'd be delivering this speech in the House Chamber to members of the House and Senate, the Cabinet, the Governor's Council, and our friends and families.

But this is not a normal year. So, I'm sharing my thoughts with you from my office here in the State House.

Tonight's address is just one more example of a gathering – a ritual of coming together – that's been put on hold by the pandemic.

But better days are coming. And like you, Lieutenant Governor Polito and I are looking forward to being able to join with family, friends and colleagues. Because as we all know, there's so much joy in being together.

2020 was a year like no other. The pandemic changed everything. And it was much more than just the worst public health crisis of the last hundred years. It came with economic calamity. Severe job loss. Business closures. Anxiety. Fear. Civil unrest. Riots. Racial injustice. Isolation. Death. And Loss.

Covid turned everyone's life upside down. And did so in a way that oftentimes crippled our ability to share our fears and our loss with those we love.

Like many others who have family members in senior living, I went over 100 days last spring without being able to see my dad. It was awful. At the same time, my best friend lost his mom to Covid. That was so much worse.

Over the past year, thousands have lost their lives and thousands more have been hospitalized. And we all worry that our loved ones could be next – but because of Covid, we can't visit or hug them.

Back then, our mission was – and still is – clear and compelling. Do the best we can to protect the health and well-being of everyone, keep our economy as open as possible and keep our kids in school.

Last spring, with minimal help from the federal government and our front line health care workers running out of essentials like masks, gloves and gowns, we found a way to deliver 7 planeloads of PPE from all over the world to support them in a matter of weeks. The first came courtesy of the Kraft family and the New England Patriots. The others followed soon thereafter.

We also set up a program to help Massachusetts companies pivot their operations into mask and gown making mini-factories. Now we have a stockpile of masks, gloves and other protective gear to keep our frontline workers safe for years as they treat patients.

Back then we held daily press conferences for almost four months to keep everyone informed about what we knew – and just as important – what we didn't. To keep individuals and families informed, we built and maintain one of the most comprehensive daily dashboards available anywhere.

To keep people safe, we built and continue to operate one of the largest free Covid testing systems in the country. Over 13 million tests have been conducted so far, making the Commonwealth the second largest per capita tester in the continental U.S.

To make sure we understood the science of the virus, we recruited some of the best health care minds in the Commonwealth to provide us with guidance and advice.

We also responded to the devastating impact Covid had here and all over the world in senior care settings by investing over \$400 million in our long-term care facilities. We brought Covid testing programs directly to our long-term care residents and staff, and we recruited experts in infection control to work with the industry to keep our seniors as safe as possible.

These efforts combined to dramatically reduce infection rates, hospitalizations and the loss of life in senior care settings for the past 8 months.

And we continue to feed over a million people through our food security programs. Millions of private, federal and state dollars have combined with local efforts and private non-profits to support families across the Commonwealth.

Through it all, our aim has been to keep you factually informed, keep people safe, the economy going, and our schools open.

And as the federal vaccine distribution program kicks into high gear over the next few months, anyone who wants a vaccine will be able to get one at a site near them. And we can start to put this pandemic behind us.

As you know, our economy, and the jobs and purpose that come with it have been pounded throughout this pandemic. Last February, our economy was humming. But Covid hammered it. Led by Lieutenant Governor Polito, we worked with public health experts & business leaders across every sector of our economy to gradually reopen without rekindling the virus. Over the next few months, hundreds of thousands of residents went back to work.

Today, we are in much better shape economically than we were last spring. But far too many people still can't find a job. Our downtowns are hurting. And many of our small businesses have been crushed by the pandemic.

Our Small Business Relief Program – the largest of its kind in the country – has made a real difference. This program is putting over \$700 million into the hands of struggling small businesses, so they can get to the other side of this second surge. Thousands of small companies have already received over \$230 million in grants. And thousands more will benefit from this effort over the next several weeks.

Our Shared Streets Program came out of our weekly discussions with local officials, and has made it possible for municipalities to reimagine their downtowns – so that more people could eat outside, or safely ride a bike or walk to parks or schools. But there is much that remains to be done on this.

If there is a silver lining in all this, it's how organizations and individuals from every corner of Massachusetts stepped up to confront the pandemic and care for each other. These heroes are the most beautiful part of this most difficult experience.

Their resilience, creativity and commitment gives me hope. And because of who they are and what they do, I can say to you tonight that I know the state of our Commonwealth is strong.

The health care system in Massachusetts is the envy of the world. And they have reaffirmed that throughout the pandemic. Under equipped, overwhelmed, and struggling to learn how to fight back and beat down a brand-new virus, they have and continue to give this battle everything they have.

Fire, EMS, law enforcement, our first responders and the Massachusetts National Guard come whenever they're called, while risking infection and illness.

Grocery store workers and countless small businesses feed, assist and console their communities.

Caregivers, many of whom have never taken a day off, provide 24/7 attention to children with special needs and our most at-risk populations.

The Salvation Army, the Red Cross, YMCAs, food banks, pantries and hundreds of charitable organizations pivoted on a dime to feed, shelter and assist those in need.

The individual efforts, the ones we don't hear a lot of about, carry a big impact and are no less noteworthy.

Neighbors in Milton banded together to collect furniture, pots, pans and bedding to help a local pastor move a woman into a new apartment, after she ended up at his church with nowhere to go.

A young woman from Western Mass who refused to quit completed her ten-year journey from custodian to nurse practitioner at Bay State Medical Center – in the middle of a pandemic – so she could do more to take care of the sick.

A restaurant owner in Quincy opened his doors to feed needy families, only to be followed by what would normally be his competition down the street who did the same.

Wedding photographers, planners and a facility operator volunteered to put together a wedding for an Army sergeant from Chicopee and his fiancée after their plans were upended by Covid.

My wife Lauren, the First Lady, and several volunteers stood up the Massachusetts Covid-19 Relief Fund, and raised over \$32 million from 17,000 donors. This effort helped over 500 community organizations and hundreds of thousands of families with food, rent and other emergency assistance.

The Boston Bruins' National Anthem singer – a staff member at the Commonwealth's Probation Department – sang his heart out at food pantries and lifted up exhausted health care workers between their shifts.

I could literally go on for hours and still never thank all the organizations and people we owe a huge debt to for helping us get through this. They – and all those who find the strength and compassion to support their friends & neighbors – are heroes.

And while Covid returned this fall with a vengeance, here in Massachusetts, we are seeing our way through it. Our entire health care community, while stretched, has the gear it needs to take care of patients, and far more knowledge about what works and what doesn't than they did ten months ago. While we still have challenges, our testing infrastructure is far more

robust than it was in the spring. Our employers have adopted the guidance we issued to keep their employees and customers safe.

And schools remain open, despite the continued presence of Covid.

Study after study makes clear that kids need to be in school. Their educational and emotional development depends on it. And while in person learning is especially challenging during this time, many schools have found a way to get it done.

Relying on state guidance, as well as federal and state funding, many special education programs, early education providers and some school districts have been able to make in person education work safely since the fall.

The Commonwealth's parochial schools – many of which serve primarily black and brown children and their families in many high-risk communities – have been delivering mostly in person education to over 45,000 kids since mid-August.

Many teachers, parents and staff throughout Massachusetts are making it happen.

To encourage more public school districts to reopen their classrooms, we've been working with a number of lab partners to develop a weekly Covid testing program for kids, teachers and staff. The goal is to get as many kids as possible back in the classroom as soon as possible. This first-in-the-nation Covid testing program will help more school districts make the call to offer full time, in person instruction now.

On Beacon Hill, our colleagues in the Legislature overcame some very difficult operational challenges and managed to debate and enact critical legislation on a wide range of issues. Some of that legislation provided much needed short-term relief to our citizens, while other bills will position the Commonwealth for a bright post-pandemic future.

To provide immediate relief, tax filing and payment dates were extended on several occasions to give residents and employers more time to meet their obligations.

Without raising taxes or fees, together we funded essential state and local services, including education, social services, public health and public safety. We also included additional funds for small business supports, rental and food assistance.

With an eye toward the future, we worked with our colleagues in the Legislature to enact legislation on transportation, economic development, housing, health care and police reform.

The horrific murder of George Floyd in Minneapolis brought the issue of systemic racism to the forefront of our national dialogue. And it forced important conversations here in the Commonwealth.

Thankfully, we did more than just have a conversation. We acted and passed one of the most comprehensive police reform laws in the country.

The new law bans chokeholds, limits no-knock warrants, and creates a new independent state entity with the power to establish policing standards, certify law enforcement officers, investigate allegations of misconduct, and suspend or revoke certification.

I'm so proud to be able to say that these reforms were discussed, debated and passed here without the rancor – and in many cases, the lack of progress – that dominated this discussion in so many other places.

We have always been a national leader on health care. And the health care reform law enacted by the Legislature makes services like telehealth, which were a key part of our pandemic response, permanent. Telehealth visits – online or over the phone – were made possible by an emergency order we issued last spring. And patients and clinicians took full advantage. People who used to put off that clinician visit because they were busy flocked to service. Over a million visits in less than nine months. It was convenient and safe – and it kept people healthy and out of the emergency room. But it wasn't permanent. Now it is, and we will all benefit from the flexibility and availability of this critical service.

On transportation, the new law accelerates bridge reconstruction, so we can move faster to modernize every bridge that needs major repairs. It also provides the funding we need to complete the South Coast Rail expansion. Fall River and New Bedford have been waiting for over 30 years for this to get done. Now it will be available in 2023. This law also funds the final piece of the long-promised Green Line Extension into Somerville. These are big promises made and kept.

The \$600 million Economic Development bill arrived just in time to help us invest in our post-pandemic recovery plan.

Resources here will help small businesses, support investments in struggling downtowns, create housing people need and can afford, and put people to work.

I want to give a special shout out to the Legislature for including the Housing Choice legislation we filed several years ago. This will reform our exclusionary zoning rules, which have stymied housing production in the Commonwealth for decades. Communities can now move much more quickly to permit and build the housing that we all know we need.

On climate change, Massachusetts continues to be a national leader.

In the last several weeks alone, we put forth a science based roadmap to reach net zero emissions by 2050. And we've spearheaded a first of its kind, multi-state program to reduce carbon emissions in the transportation sector.

We've invested over \$935 million in climate change mitigation and adaptation since we took office. And we're on track to meet our commitment to invest \$1 billion in climate action by 2022.

Partnering with the Legislature, we secured historic clean energy procurements at the lowest price for rate payers. This set the table for an explosion in offshore wind development up and down the East Coast of this country.

There's no question more needs to be done – on environmental justice, transportation, resiliency, conservation and energy efficiency. And we look forward to working with our legislative colleagues to make this happen.

“As we come out of the pandemic, one issue we need to get right is the future of work.

“Many people have gotten used to working remotely and may not want to go back to office five days a week. Businesses big and small have learned how to attract new customers and support their existing ones without being physically with them. Virtual conferences have replaced in person ones. And many companies have found ways to recruit and train new employees all remotely. Everything from business travel, to training, recruiting and sales have undergone a massive transformation, and will continue to adapt and evolve.

These discoveries have big consequences for how people commute, where they live, where they work, and who they work for. This will impact commercial centers, downtowns, transportation and public spaces.

It's critical that we understand this – and lean into what this reset means – so that we create the community building, housing, economic development and transportation programs that align with these changes. Make no mistake, we have always lived by our wits. Figured out the future and got there first. This time will be no different.

Finally, I want to talk about the light at the end of this dark tunnel – vaccines.

Thankfully, the scientific community – many from right here in Massachusetts – came through and created highly effective, thoroughly tested, and safe vaccines. And people are now being vaccinated.

Vaccinating four million adults in Massachusetts as the doses are allocated by the federal government is not going to be easy. But be assured that we will make every effort to get this done as quickly and efficiently as possible.

Common sense says that we must prioritize the most vulnerable among us and those who keep our health care system operating. And we can only move as fast as the federal government delivers the vaccines.

Everyone has shown tremendous patience throughout this year long ordeal and many are justifiably running out of it.

I am, too.

That's why this cannot happen fast enough.

“By the end of this week, we will have 103 vaccination sites open to the public with the ability to administer about 240,000 doses each week.

And by mid-February, we will have 165 public sites, including seven mass vaccination sites, and all together, we will have the capacity to administer approximately 305,000 doses every week.

From large-scale facilities at stadiums to local sites at health clinics, we are working to reach vulnerable populations and get as many people protected as soon as doses are delivered to the Commonwealth.

Beginning tomorrow, people over the age of 75 can make an appointment to receive their first dose. Please visit [Mass.Gov/CovidVaccine](https://www.mass.gov/covidvaccine) to find out when you're eligible and to book an appointment when it's your turn.

I know that a great deal has been asked of you over the past 11 months. And I'm grateful for the endless sacrifices so many of you have made in order to keep your family, friends and neighbors safe.

The end is in sight – but for the next few months, we must continue to stay vigilant and take steps to stop the spread.

Know this – we will beat this virus. And life will begin to return to normal.

Before I close, I want to offer some thoughts on the mood of the nation and the events of the past year.

I can't recall in my brief time on earth, anything quite like this. I'm sure historians – with the benefit of time and hindsight – will have a lot more to say about it than whatever I might say tonight.

I know many of us watched a lot of TV over the past year. The pandemic drove us inside, and the streaming services and cable networks took full advantage of that.

The show that sticks with me is Ted Lasso. It's positive, charming, heartfelt and subtle. Big high fives to Saturday Night Live's Jason Sudeikis.

I won't bore you with the details – but there was a moment in that show when Ted turns down the volume in a tense encounter and quotes a Walt Whitman phrase he saw on a banner at his son's high school. All it said was, “Be curious – not judgmental.”

He goes on to talk about how curious people learn things they didn't know, while judgmental people learn...not much at all. And then he sticks the landing.

I've talked a lot over the past six years about collaboration and respect. About seeking common ground. About focusing on the issues, and not on the personalities. And I get that it's harder to collaborate, and it's harder to show respect in a time of high anxiety and trauma.

But I would suggest that it's more important during times like these to ask questions. To be curious. To show empathy – and to maintain an open mind – than it is to make brash statements and name call.

Social media – too many politicians and too many talking heads thrive on takedowns and judgments. It's become the source of so much anger and hatred in this world that I often wish I could just shut it all off for a month and see what happens. Over time, too much of our daily discourse has come to resemble it. Not curious. Just judgmental.

In the end, this makes it harder for us to understand one another. To learn from one another. And most importantly, to grow.

My interest in filing a police accountability bill came from conversations with people whose life experiences were different than mine. I listened, I learned and I grew.

Besides putting Covid in the rearview mirror once and for all, my biggest wish for 2021 is for all of us to take Walt Whitman's charge to heart. Be curious – not judgmental.

If we do, I believe we will all grow. And hopefully, we'll all learn a few things we didn't know before and be glad that we did. We'll also be happier and healthier – and can use our newfound knowledge and understanding to build a better, stronger Commonwealth as we come out of this awful pandemic.

Thanks for watching.

God Bless this Commonwealth and God Bless The United States of America.

Good night.”

Respectfully submitted,

Charles D. Baker,
Governor