

SENATE No. 2

The Commonwealth of Massachusetts



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To the Honorable Senate and House of Representatives,

Madame President. Mr. Speaker. Leaders Tarr & Jones. Members of the House and Senate. Members of Congress. Fellow Constitutional Officers. Members of the Governor's Council.

Chief Justice Budd and Members of the Judiciary. Members of the Cabinet and our Administration.

Mayor Wu. Secretary Walsh. Sheriffs. District Attorneys. Mayors. Local Officials. Reverend Clergy. Distinguished Guests.

Thanks so much for being with us as I deliver my eighth and final State of the Commonwealth Address.

To Lieutenant Governor Karyn Polito - you are one of the finest public servants and finest people I have ever had the opportunity to work with.

Your work with local governments has forever changed the way people in public life think about the responsibilities of the Lieutenant Governor.

There's a reason a lot of people are running to serve as the next Lieutenant Governor. They've seen the way she's done the job, and they believe that they can follow in her very large footsteps. They can try, but they'll be wrong. She broke the mold and the new one belongs to her.

To Lauren Baker, my wife of 34 years, and the vision behind the now spectacular Wonderfund. You are simply My Everything.

You gave me a chance to run and serve these past seven years. And you and your team of 4 made the Wonderfund the one place foster families, social workers and kids can go where the answer is always YES.

To prepare for this, I did something I'm sure no one else has done. I went back and read all seven of my previous State of the Commonwealth speeches. They were...brilliant.

They were all different, given the times and the work to be done.

But they were positive and optimistic. They touted the special qualities of our people, our communities, and our institutions. They marveled at our success as a Commonwealth. They spoke about our challenges and our setbacks.

But mostly, they focused on our opportunities to be better, to do better, together.

Each one asked us to find the courage to compromise. To engage. To seek what John F. Kennedy once called, "The Right Answer --- Not the Republican answer or the Democratic answer."

And for the most part, we've done just that.

Led by the Lt. Governor, we brought last mile broadband service to the people of 53 Western Mass communities.

We brought care and compassion to Bridgewater State Hospital after decades of national embarrassment.

We created the first Section 35 treatment beds for women in state history and became a national leader in the fight against opioid addiction.

We eliminated the widespread use of hotels and motels to shelter homeless families.

We fixed a very broken Health Connector and made it a national model.

We made deep water offshore wind a booming, affordable reality in America.

We created the first municipal vulnerability planning program in the country and over 95 percent of our communities have participated.

We modernized local government by updating 50 years' worth of mostly useless statutory busywork. There were so many happy local officials with us when we signed that bill into law.

We enacted long overdue changes to our exclusionary zoning laws to unleash much needed housing production.

We rescued a bankrupt, unaccountable public transportation system. Created an oversight board and invested over \$6 billion to modernize its operations and infrastructure.

We delivered the Green Line Extension into Somerville, and finally, after 30 years of broken promises, we funded and began building commuter rail service between Fall River and New Bedford, and Boston, which will begin operations in 2023.

We increased public school spending by \$1.6 billion, and fully funded the game changing Student Opportunity Act.

We invested over \$100 million in modernizing equipment at our vocational and technical programs, bringing opportunities to thousands of students and young adults.

We dramatically expanded STEM programming, and we helped thousands of high school students from Gateway Cities earn college credits free through our Early College programs.

We enacted criminal justice reform legislation that emphasized rehabilitation, treatment and reintegration and we enacted a forward looking, comprehensive and balanced police reform law.

In 2015, we inherited a billion-dollar budget deficit and a depleted Rainy Day Fund.

Over the next seven years, we never spent more than we took in. Increased local aid to schools and communities. Cut taxes for working families. Invested hundreds of millions of dollars alongside billions of dollars of private sector investments in housing, downtown development, waterfront and port operations, and job creating business expansions.

And that Rainy Day Fund grew from \$1 billion to \$5 billion among the largest fiscal safety nets in the country.

As we rolled into calendar year 2020, we had the highest number of people working in state history, wage gains at every level of the economy, and hundreds of thousands of new jobs. It felt like the world belonged to us.

And then came Covid.

We all know the past 22 months have been tough. We've all suffered some degree of loss, disruption, confusion, anger and isolation.

But the people of Massachusetts did what they always do. They collaborated, created, reimagined, and made the unbearable bearable.

On so many issues, Massachusetts led the way.

We had the largest small business grant program in the country.

Constructed with the state legislature, this program funneled \$700 million to over 15,000 small businesses. The vast majority were owner operated. Half were owned by women and almost half were owned by people of color.

Our eviction diversion program, which began before the feds stepped in, has pumped almost \$500 million into rental and mortgage assistance programs, making it one of the largest in the country. Eviction hearings are down dramatically and so is demand for emergency shelter and temporary housing.

Our food insecurity programs served millions of residents across the Commonwealth and brought together partners and providers, ranging from foundations to farmers markets to food banks. The knowledge gained has created new, permanent investments and better approaches to supplying and distributing food to those who need it.

To stop the spread of COVID, we worked with local labs and dozens of community partners to create one of the most expansive free COVID testing programs in the country.

To keep kids and adults safe and in school, we partnered with colleges and universities, K-12 schools and child-care providers to create a first in the nation COVID testing program.

We invented Shared Streets to help cities and towns transform their downtowns into beehives of outdoor activities. Dining. Shopping. Street theater. Farmer's markets. Walking. Biking. Pop Up Stores. You name it.

And the people of Massachusetts got vaccinated.

Over 80% of our eligible population is fully vaccinated, and those over the age of 65 approach 100 percent. 5.2 million people are fully vaccinated, and about half of them have already received a booster shot. We are a national leader.

Throughout this pandemic, there's been no shortage of things we just don't know, and it's easy to get lost in that.

But we should also remember what we do know. Vaccines and all the other resources we have now work. The chance of suffering serious illness if someone is vaccinated is very, very small.

Special shout out to the vaccinators from across the Commonwealth who stepped up to support their fellow residents.

Thousands of people got this done and made it possible for Massachusetts to be a national leader in this critical effort. It's the most reliable and fastest path toward normal.

I asked former East Boston Neighborhood Health Center CEO Manny Lopes and Gladys Vega Executive Director of La Collaborativa in Chelsea, to join us tonight.

Their partnership, and the trust they've earned over many years in Chelsea, Revere and Everett, made a major difference there. Vaccination rates in all three communities, despite some early challenges, now come close to or exceed our statewide averages.

We're so grateful for all the work your teams have done to keep people safe. Thank you.

There's an old expression about what you learn about people when they are truly tested.

Well – for the past two years, the people, institutions and communities of this Commonwealth have most definitely been tested. Time and time again you have adjusted, and you have responded.

Together, we set the course for a comeback– and it's working.

Our unemployment rate is below 4% for the first time since March of 2020, and we've gained back over half a million jobs.

And because of all you've done, and all we've done together, I can stand here tonight and say the State of our Commonwealth remains strong.

As we enter the new year, there are many important opportunities to build on the collaborative work we've done over the past seven.

Two of those opportunities are closing loopholes that threaten public safety.

The first loophole allows those charged with violent crimes, who may also have lengthy criminal records, to walk free before trial.

And the second leaves residents, many of them women, with little recourse when an ex-partner attempts to violate them and destroy their lives.

We've filed bills to deal with these issues three times, to no avail. The time to do something about this is long past.

The Lieutenant Governor and I recently listened to several women tell us their survival stories. It was one of the most difficult conversations we've ever been part of.

One after another, these women described, in graphic detail, how they survived multiple physical and psychological assaults, and how these loopholes actually protected the men who were terrorizing them.

It was awful.

Current law is clearly not working. These women were bothered, battered, bruised and beaten time and time again by their abusers and nothing changed. We felt their desperation.

It would be impossible to listen to their stories and walk away believing the Commonwealth is serious about protecting these women.

Another woman came forward to detail how an ex-partner, unbeknownst to her, had taken dozens of lewd pictures of her and posted them on the internet.

And if it couldn't get any more awful, she then saw the note from him on the website: "video coming soon."

A lifetime of relationships, a small business she owned, a basic sense of privacy we all take for granted, were shattered by one man's despicable actions.

Massachusetts is one of only two states that doesn't treat this as a crime. 48 other states treat this as a crime. Because it is a crime.

These women had the courage to come forward and publicly tell their stories. They deserve to be heard. And they and the women they speak for deserve a vote on these two pieces of legislation.

As we come out of the pandemic, we know we have a mental health crisis.

Like many things, it was there before Covid arrived. But the anxiety, disruption and the isolation that came with Covid has made it worse and more visible.

Before the pandemic, we filed a health care reform bill that would improve access to mental health services.

Some pieces of it, like telehealth, became important parts of our effort to expand access to care during the pandemic. Since that time, the legislature has written telehealth into state law. But many other parts of that 2019 proposal have not been addressed.

The message remains the same: the healthcare system doesn't value behavioral health services, primary care and geriatric services. As a result, there are enormous staff and clinician shortages in exactly the areas of care that we need most.

We know the legislature cares deeply about this issue, and we look forward to working with you to finish this work during this legislative session.

We also appreciated the chance to testify recently before the Joint Committee on Telecommunications, Utilities & Energy on our fourth climate proposal. This one builds on our very successful offshore wind agenda and includes the creation of a \$750 million Clean Energy Innovation Fund.

There are big ideas looking for a chance to test themselves in our academic institutions and our cutting-edge research organizations. This fund can create the ground-breaking solutions we need to get to net zero.

We're also working to put the ARPA funds appropriated by the legislature and signed into law about 6 weeks ago to work across the Commonwealth.

Housing. Health care. Skills training. Cultural investments. Small business support. Water and sewer improvements. Port development and a host of other investments, all to help us adjust to the changing nature of life and work in a post-pandemic Commonwealth. We know there is much to do, and we need to move quickly.

In addition, we'll soon file a transportation bond bill to ensure we get the full benefit of the federal Bipartisan Infrastructure Law.

As you know, accessing these federal dollars requires state government to authorize the funds that will pay for our share of federally approved projects.

Smart, disciplined fiscal management has made it possible for us to maximize federal participation in dozens of projects. There's a long list of opportunities here but a big piece of these funds will be awarded through a competitive process.

We need to move quickly to secure these dollars.

Fiscal discipline also makes it possible for us to make strategic decisions about tax fairness and our competitive position.

The pandemic has proven that we now live in a new world where people have more flexibility about where they live and work.

To encourage our citizens to continue to call Massachusetts home and to help those struggling to make ends meet because of rising inflation, we'll file several tax breaks in our budget proposal later this week.

First, let's support parents.

The past two years have been very difficult ones for families. Our budget doubles the tax break for children and dependents because every Massachusetts family deserves a break.

We'll also ask lawmakers to eliminate income taxes for the lowest paid 230,000 taxpayers here in the Commonwealth. Instead of paying income taxes, these people should be able to use their earnings to pay for necessities, like food, housing and transportation.

Rents are also rising while wages remain relatively flat. It's time to give renters a bigger tax break on their monthly payments.

It's also been a tough two years for seniors. We'll ask the legislature to give them a break on their property taxes and make our estate tax more competitive with the rest of the country.

We've asked the people of Massachusetts to do a lot these past few years.

It's time for us to invest in Massachusetts families. To give them back some of the tax revenue they created through their hard work.

Before I close out my remarks tonight, I want to thank a few more people.

It's been a very long two years for everyone, but it's been an especially difficult period for anyone who has to "go to work."

Many people have been able to work from home and continue to get the job done.

But our friends and neighbors in health care, senior care, education, retail, hospitality, emergency response, public works, public safety, restaurant, food service, grocery, transportation, and a huge number of other fields had to show up. And they did every single day.

Their work and commitment, their patience and their grace, throughout all this has been extraordinary. Can we give all those folks the round of applause they so richly deserve?

Thank you.

As most people know, we've been calling on the National Guard since our first month in office. Whether it was Snowmagedon, bomb cyclones, tornadoes, hurricanes, ice storms, natural gas explosions or forest fires, the Guard has been an amazing partner.

But they became a godsend during the Covid pandemic. They did it all.

Transporting medical gear. Testing residents and staff at long term care and other congregate care facilities. Vaccinating people at locations big and small, including here at the Hynes, where I got vaccinated. Driving school buses so kids could return to in person learning.

Filling in for absent workers across almost every kind of health care institution. Helping us right the ship at the Holyoke Soldiers' Home. And protecting our nation's capital in the aftermath of January 6th.

All that, and they continue to deploy to hot spots all over the Globe.

General Gary Keefe, on behalf of the people of Massachusetts, I want to thank you, your team, and all members of the Guard for your service. You make us so much better than we would be without you.

Earlier tonight, several members of our Gold Star Family community led us in the Pledge of Allegiance.

We've gotten to know these families quite well over the past seven years. You represent yourselves and the cause you stand for with grace and dignity and you honor us with your presence here tonight.

Five months ago, we were horrified when we heard the news that a suicide bomber had attacked a checkpoint outside the airport in Kabul, Afghanistan. Over 200 Afghan civilians were killed in the explosions, along with 13 members of the U.S. military.

One of those lost that day was Massachusetts' own Marine Corps Sergeant Johanny Rosario Pichardo.

She volunteered for that mission. She was there because she wanted to be there to evacuate women and children from the increasingly dangerous streets of Kabul. And she paid for it with her life.

Lieutenant Governor Polito and I spent time with her family when she returned home. They are kind and decent people. Proud to be from Lawrence, proud of Johanny, and heartbroken that she's gone.

I'd ask for a moment of silence tonight to honor those we've lost and the Gold Star Families they've left behind. They are the very best among us.

Thank you.

Let me close with this.

In the fall of 2018, we were rocked by a natural gas explosion that shut down Lawrence, North Andover and Andover.

18 year-old Leonel Rondon, tragically died that day, and many others were severely injured. Everything in most of Andover, Lawrence and North Andover ground to a halt.

Many members of our team practically lived in makeshift command centers alongside hundreds of emergency response and construction personnel for several months as we worked feverishly to repair the damage.

It was an avalanche of issues, problems and decisions that didn't stop for weeks, but we worked through it.

To this day, I think a big part of our success was due to the relationships we already had with most of the key leaders who were involved.

The Lieutenant Governor and I knew the local officials and the state legislators. We knew the utility companies. We knew the contractors. And they all knew us.

We trusted each other. And that trust made much of what we got done over the next three months possible.

There's no collaboration without trust.

If we've tried to do anything over the past seven years, we've tried to build trust. Others can debate whether we've succeeded or not. I believe we have. And I believe it shows in the work we've done during good times and difficult ones over the past seven years.

Today, it's clearly more difficult to build trust, to collaborate in public life than it once was.

The explosion of social media, the arrival of hundreds of news channels and information distribution platforms. And the ongoing churn of information have made it almost impossible for anyone in public life who wants to collaborate to build trust.

Facts are often fungible and curated. Missteps play out in real time and can go viral in the most bizarre and unusual ways. Context is non-existent. And in many cases, history and current events get twisted to support whatever point of view someone is advocating for.

But the answer to the swirl and chaos of modern life is not more of the same poisonous brew.

The answer is to stand up and accept the responsibility that comes with the work. To understand that trust is earned and collaboration is how difficult things get done.

Many of the projects we've worked on with our colleagues in local government would never have happened without trust. Many of the most important pieces of legislation we've enacted over the past seven years would not have happened without trust.

Trust is where possibility in public life comes from.

If you can't tell someone you work with, partner with, or collaborate with, what you really think it's very hard to do small things. Much less big ones.

Here in Massachusetts, we've done big things and small ones.

At a time when so much of our public dialogue is designed to destroy trust, to manipulate facts, and to pull people apart. We've partnered with one another, and shared success and blame along the way.

We should continue to focus on building and maintaining positive, collaborative relationships. Because they work for the people we serve and it's what most voters expect from us.

They want us to work hard and collaborate the same way they do. To listen to them as if they were our neighbors, because they are. To appreciate their life stories the same way we expect them to appreciate ours.

They want us to knock off the noise and focus on building better, stronger communities from one end of the Bay State to the other.

Me too.

And honestly, when I think about what I'll miss most come this time next year, it will be that opportunity to continue to partner with so many of the great people in this room. And with the great people across this amazing state. Who want nothing more than to leave it better than they found it for those who come after them.

But before that time comes, we have a responsibility do just that for the next twelve months.

Let's get to work.

God Bless the Commonwealth of Massachusetts.

And God Bless the United States of America.

Respectfully submitted,

Charles D. Baker,
Governor