



Tony Evers

Office of the Governor | State of Wisconsin

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Contact: GovPress@wisconsin.gov

Gov. Evers Delivers 2022 State of the State Address

MADISON — Gov. Tony Evers today delivered his 2022 State of the State address.

Below are Gov. Evers' remarks as prepared for delivery:

Good evening, Wisconsin!

Honorable Supreme Court Justices, Tribal Nation leaders, constitutional officers, Maj. Gen. Knapp, members of the Wisconsin National Guard and active and retired members of our armed forces, cabinet members, Sen. President Kapenga, Majority Leader LeMahieu, Minority Leader Bewley, Speaker Vos, and Minority Leader Neubauer, legislators, distinguished guests, and, most importantly, all of the folks tuning in from home, welcome, and thank you for joining us.

I'm Tony Evers, and I'm incredibly proud to be your governor—the 46th governor of this great state.

The rest of my kids are watching from home this evening, but my daughter Katie is with us tonight. And my forever junior prom date, Kathy, is also up in the gallery. We'll be celebrating our 50th anniversary later this year. Kathleen Frances, I'm just as crazy about you as I was 50 years ago—thanks for your support, your wisdom, your patience, and your wit. I love you so much.

As I deliver my fourth State of the State address to you tonight, I recognize there are those who would've said it was unlikely I'd ever become governor. I was a scrawny kid with big glasses who grew up in Plymouth—that's the Cheese Capital of the World, by the way. I raised hell and played bass guitar in a rock band in high school. I worked in a cheese factory scraping mold off of cheese. I took my kindergarten classmate to junior prom and ended up spending the rest of my life with her.

I didn't plan my career just so I could be standing up here tonight. I didn't spend years pining to run for this office. And I'd much rather spend time listening to others than talking about myself—which, I've found out, isn't something I have in common with most politicians.

I guess, in many ways, maybe it was unlikely. But you might not know just how close I was to ending up on a much different path. So, tonight, for the first time, I want to begin by telling a story I haven't shared before.

I grew up in a house of healthcare workers. My mom was a nurse, and my dad was a doctor who took care

of tuberculosis patients at a sanatorium in Sheboygan County. And I'd grown up always wanting to be like them—I wanted to help people just like they did.

In 1974, I was doing just that and trying to follow in their footsteps. I was in my first year of medical school in Austria when Kathy and I found out that we were expecting our first kid. Well, as you can imagine, spending years going to medical school wasn't exactly ideal for raising a newborn—I needed to figure out a better way to help support our family, and I needed to do it pretty quickly. So, Kathy and I packed up our things, and we headed back to good old Plymouth. We found an apartment. And I applied and got a job at the Kohler Company.

Well, there I was the night before I was supposed to start my job at Kohler. My mom—who'd collected mail for us while we were away—said, "Oh, by the way, I've got a stack of mail here for you," and she handed me a stack of a year's worth of mail.

Well, in that stack of mail was a letter. It was from the University of Wisconsin-Madison. And I opened that letter that night. It said "congratulations" because I'd been accepted into their master's program for education.

That moment changed my life. That letter changed my entire trajectory. Because of that letter, I went on to become a science teacher. Because of that letter, I went on to become a principal and state superintendent. And there is no doubt that it is because of that letter that I'm standing here today as your governor.

And I tell you that story tonight, in part, to state the obvious—things don't always go the way we plan. In fact, for these past few years, that's sort of been one constant. If we'd had our way, we would not have faced the worst pandemic in a century or the worst economic crisis since the Great Recession. If we'd had our way, we would've expanded BadgerCare and access to affordable healthcare for tens of thousands of Wisconsinites. We would've met two-thirds funding for the first time in two decades *and* we would've done it by fully funding our public schools. We would've passed meaningful legislation to address PFAS and lead and justice reform. If we'd had our way, 11,637 Wisconsinites would still be here with us today—they'd be at our dinner tables, they'd be in our classrooms, our hospitals, our churches, our farms, and our factories, and they'd still be here celebrating more birthdays, more holidays, and more milestones with us.

But I also tell you that story because this work has always been a responsibility and an obligation I've met without regret or reservation—to do what needed to be done, to do what I must with what I was given, and to always try to do what is right. Not because it was perfect. Not because it was always easy. But because, however different things could have ended up for me, I have never doubted that I'm right where I needed to be because I welcome the duty of doing the right thing when it matters most.

Tonight, I am proud to be able to report that the state of our state is stronger and better than it was a year ago, or two years ago, or even three years ago.

We've worked hard to ensure our workers had jobs to return to after this pandemic. Through federal pandemic aid to our state, we've invested \$1 billion into supporting our small businesses, farmers, and tourism, lodging, and entertainment industries. To date, we've supported more than 100,000 small businesses, and nearly 3,000 of those small businesses have opened up new storefronts on Main Streets across our state.

Throughout the pandemic, we were also able to keep all 375 transportation projects during the 2020 construction season on track. And because we did, we secured \$105 million reallocated from other states to

invest back into our infrastructure. We've also improved more than 1,770 miles of highways and more than 1,250 bridges—and if you laid out all the highways we've fixed end to end, you could just about drive from Platteville to Denver and back.

I also directed \$100 million to support Wisconsin farmers through our Farm Support Program. In one round alone, we were able to help more than 20,000 farmers, and in more than half of Wisconsin's 72 counties, our support for farmers through this program exceeded \$1 million.

I've also directed more than \$100 million through federal pandemic aid to expand access to reliable, affordable, high-speed internet across our state. These funds alone—which included the largest single round of broadband funding in state history—are projected to give new or improved broadband access to more than 110,000 Wisconsinites in nearly 50,000 homes as well as almost 2,200 businesses. During my time as governor, we will have invested almost 15 times more into expanding high-speed internet than the prior four years combined. All told, our investments since 2019 are providing more than 300,000 homes and businesses with high-quality, high-speed broadband.

These efforts have been critical for our economic recovery, and we've worked hard to get support out the door quickly to folks who need it. An analysis from November showed Wisconsin ranked second in the Midwest for getting our federal aid allocated. And I'm proud to report that, as a share of the federal aid our state has received, Wisconsin ranked second in the country for aid we've directed to economic development, and we ranked first in the country in aid we've allocated to businesses.

And Wisconsinites are working hard. In January of 2019, our unemployment rate was 3.1 percent. Today, our unemployment rate has not only returned to pre-pandemic unemployment levels, it's better. At 2.8 percent, we now have the lowest unemployment rate and the fewest number of people unemployed ever in state history.

But with so many Wisconsinites already working, I know employers struggle with the same challenges they've faced for a decade trying to find new workers to fill jobs. We've gotten to work trying to find innovative, long-term solutions to the workforce challenges we face. We've also recognized that different parts of our state have different needs, whether it's making childcare more affordable and accessible, training more high-skilled workers, or more apprenticeship opportunities for high schoolers. So, we've invested nearly \$60 million into 12 regionally-based programs to meet the unique needs of different communities. And, after workers lost their jobs during the pandemic, we invested \$20 million into helping thousands of workers get new skills and training to find new jobs.

We've also been working hard to keep more money in Wisconsinites' pockets. Last year, we provided \$480 million in tax relief for Wisconsin businesses and families affected by the pandemic. Republicans and Democrats also found common ground, and I was glad to deliver on my promise to cut taxes for middle-class families by 15 percent by signing one of the largest tax cuts in state history. Through all of the tax cuts I've signed into law, 86 percent of Wisconsin taxpayers will see a 15 percent income tax cut.

At the same time, while the economy has reopened and demand has surged, some corporations have taken advantage—they've squeezed consumers for every extra penny, raising everyday costs for folks in Wisconsin and across our country. A report released last week showed national inflation is the highest it's been in four decades. And now, small businesses and working Wisconsinites and families are concerned about the rising costs at gas pumps and in grocery store aisles. And businesses face challenges getting supplies and resources.

So, I directed new changes that took effect in the new year to ensure Wisconsinites had extra money each month to help make ends meet. With these changes, coupled with the tax cuts I've signed into law, if you and your spouse each make \$50,000, you'll see over \$1,200 more for your household in your paychecks this year.

But I also know we must do more. And it's our responsibility to do more. We had 'unprecedented' revenue projections last year, and we closed out fiscal year 2021 with the highest-ever positive GAAP balance in state history at more than \$1.1 billion. Last month, after receiving the great news about our low unemployment rate, we received even more good news. A new report showed Wisconsin is projected to have a \$3.8 billion surplus—that's billion with a B—in our state's checking account at the end of this biennium. And that's not even including the more than \$1.7 billion sitting in our 'rainy day' fund, which is the highest it's ever been in Wisconsin state history.

So, I announced my plan to use our surplus to help address rising costs and gas prices, to reduce barriers to work, and to invest in education at every level. We'd start by sending every Wisconsin resident a \$150 surplus refund. So, under my plan, if you're a family of four, you would receive \$600 to help provide a little more wiggle room and hopefully a little less stress about making ends meet.

My plan also works to reduce barriers to work so we can help fill job openings across our state. Having access to quality, affordable childcare and caregiving continue to be a barrier for folks who want to join our workforce. We'd invest more than \$130 million into providing tax relief through child and caregiver tax credits. Our tax credit for childcare would provide tax relief to an estimated 107,000 Wisconsinites who'd receive about \$274 per filer, and through our caregiver tax credit, most caregivers will receive up to \$500.

And, finally, as I said last July, the budget that was sent to my desk failed to meaningfully invest in our public schools, possibly jeopardizing more than \$2 billion in federal aid for our kids. So, we'd also invest \$750 million into improving our schools and outcomes for students to ensure everyone has access to a high-quality public education. And that includes more than \$180 million to hold the line on property taxes across our state.

And, folks, the great news is we can do all of this and *still* not spend our entire projected surplus—under my plan, we'll still have more than \$2 billion left over. I've already heard there are some who want to wait to get this done until the next budget. That's \$3.8 billion that would just be sitting in Madison until then. Well, that's not going to help Wisconsinites buy groceries today. It won't help Wisconsinites pay for gas today. It won't help Wisconsinites pay for childcare, heat their homes, or put food on their table today. Wisconsinites can't wait.

Indifference in this building is getting expensive, folks. And let me be frank: the people who will bear the burden of inaction are almost certainly not the people sitting in this chamber tonight.

So, don't sit here in a white, marble building with state coffers that are full and tell Wisconsinites who are working hard every day that we can't afford to do more. That's baloney.

Tomorrow, I will sign an executive order calling a special session of this Legislature to take up my surplus plan. Let's help address rising costs, let's help make sure folks can afford to join our workforce, and let's do what's best for our kids. This is the people's money. Let's get it back to them.

Look, Republicans and Democrats in this building don't agree all the time. But this isn't one of those times. And here's how I know that—because I received a letter last December that read, in part, "There are supply

shortages and soaring inflation rates, causing families to have to pay significantly more on items such as food and gasoline. Real people are struggling with these pocketbook issues.”

Well, Mr. President and Mr. Speaker, that letter was from you. And I think it sounds like we agree on something.

There’s no reason we can’t do this, and the rising costs Wisconsinites are seeing every day are every reason that we should. So, let’s find common ground, let’s pass this plan, and let’s get this done. It’s just the right thing to do, folks.

And it’s the right thing to do because Wisconsinites are the reason for our state’s and our economy’s success. From healthcare workers to first responders, educators and childcare workers, local public health officers, Tribal Nation partners, grocery store workers, farmers, small business owners, and so many others. But I also want to say tonight that we would not be here as a state without the extraordinary efforts of the Wisconsin National Guard. Period.

Under the longest Guard activation in Wisconsin state history, the Guard’s work began almost on Day One of COVID-19 landing in Wisconsin and continues even still today. As fear was spreading across the globe about a new virus, 30 Wisconsinites were stranded aboard a cruise ship for weeks. Our administration, together with Sen. Tammy Baldwin, worked to bring them to Wisconsin. And it was the men and women of our Wisconsin National Guard who greeted these Wisconsinites and welcomed them home.

The Guard has also played a key role in our efforts to distribute more than 80 million pieces of personal protective equipment and sanitizing supplies to schools, healthcare workers, first responders, and local law enforcement. They’ve helped administer tests and support testing sites you likely visited in your community. Additionally, we ranked among the best in the country for getting available COVID-19 vaccine shots in arms, and it’s in no small part due to the Guard. They helped distribute more than 1.2 million of the vaccine doses we’ve administered as a state, and they’ve administered more than 230,000 of those vaccines themselves.

They’ve also been on the frontlines of defending our country and our democracy in more ways than one. When Wisconsinites were exercising their right to vote, the Wisconsin National Guard was there, too. Our Guard members joined our exceptional clerks, election administrators, and poll workers to help make sure you could cast your ballot and do so safely. Even now, some Guard members are being trained as certified nursing assistants through our partnership with Madison College to help support our overwhelmed healthcare workers and systems.

Well, tonight, we are joined by Wisconsin’s Adjutant General, Maj. Gen. Paul Knapp, as well as members from our Wisconsin National Guard, who are up in the gallery tonight. Please join me in recognizing these exceptional folks and their service.

These folks have stepped up to serve our state time and time again during one of the direst periods in our state’s history. And their service has not come without cost—emotionally, physically, and mentally. Our effort to invest more than \$3 million into expanding the Guard’s wellness program was gutted from my biennial budget. It would have increased access to important mental health and wellness support to more than 9,000 Guard members.

Well, tonight, I’m announcing I’m going to do it anyway. We’re going to invest \$5 million to expand access to the Guard’s comprehensive wellness office and their services to every single member of the Wisconsin

National Guard. This program will provide counseling, resiliency training, and crisis intervention and stress reduction programming, to help reduce burnout, take care of mental health needs, prevent suicide, and treat substance use disorders for our service members. And I'll tell you right now this program will have ongoing funding in the budget I'll propose next year. And I call on this Legislature tonight to join me by ensuring this program receives long-term, sustainable funding.

But at the end of the day, we also know the effects of this pandemic will exist whether this virus is here or not. Troops came home at a time of increased isolation and uncertainty, including some who've returned and taken their own lives. We need long-term solutions to support our veterans and the challenges they face—both those that existed before this pandemic and others that worsened because of it.

We've worked to proactively address some of the challenges facing our veterans, and the Legislature even agreed with me on several provisions in the last budget. In fact, folks on both sides of the aisle even called this "a really good budget for veterans." I agree. But our work cannot end there. So, in the coming days, I'll sign an executive order creating a Blue Ribbon Commission on Veteran Opportunity to develop new, innovative initiatives to support the more than 300,000 veterans who live in our state.

We can help reduce barriers to higher education, employment, and job training, and streamline the licensure process for veterans who want to join our workforce. We can help make sure we have sustainable, ongoing funding for programs that support these folks by ensuring our Veterans Trust Fund remains solvent. And yes, we can help invest in housing security, more mental health supports, and more substance use treatment. And this Blue Ribbon Commission is going to make recommendations for me to do just that in my next budget.

And support for our veterans isn't the only area where we can do more to help. This pandemic exposed serious concerns about our healthcare infrastructure and capacity, especially in our rural areas and communities. We've expanded access to telehealth services, protected healthcare for Wisconsinites who have pre-existing conditions, and worked to reduce the costs of prescription drug prices. But we also know that there is great need for emergency services and responders in our rural communities.

In Wisconsin, we rely on nearly 800 emergency medical service providers—more than half are either operated exclusively by volunteers or through a combination of volunteers and paid staff. These folks are doing outstanding work, but many have been doing it for years, and it's sometimes difficult finding new volunteers to step into these important roles.

It also hasn't helped that, for a decade, local governments have been asked to do more with less. Since 2011, state aid to communities has gone down even as costs have gone up. Help from the state was cut by more than nine percent, while public safety costs have increased more than 16 percent. Between these rising costs and lack of available staffing, some have even gone without ambulance services, left with no other option but to hope and rely upon neighboring providers.

Well, no one should be calling for an ambulance and have to wonder whether help will come. So, tonight, I'm announcing we're investing nearly \$30 million into supporting emergency medical service providers and services across our state.

\$20 million of this investment will be going to folks in our rural areas for whatever help they need the most, whether it's increasing staffing support, getting first responders more training, purchasing an ambulance, medical equipment or supplies. Every emergency medical service and emergency medical response provider will qualify for funding. Additionally, as part of this investment, we're going to increase

reimbursement rates for these providers to help ensure they don't have to cut back on critically important services.

This pandemic didn't just expose the need for us to expand access to rural healthcare. It also highlighted that our kids need more mental health support in our schools, and this pandemic only made those needs more urgent.

I came into office after years of disinvestment in our kids, our educators, and our schools. So, we've worked to make historic investments in education at every level. We've increased special education funding for the first time in a decade, made the largest investment in general aid in a decade, and invested more than \$900 million into providing local property tax relief. Now, our schools have returned to being top 10 in the country—our K-12 schools rank eighth best in the nation after ranking 17th just five years ago.

The pandemic hit in the spring of 2020. States across our nation closed schools for the rest of the semester, Wisconsin included. Parents are the first and best teachers our kids have. But I also know turning kitchen tables into classrooms wasn't easy. I'm very concerned about how this pandemic affected our kids, and I know parents are, too.

That's why we've trusted school districts, parents, and teachers to work together to do what's best for our kids. We've trusted them to make the best decisions at the local level based on their kids' and their classroom needs. Many schools across our state returned to in-person learning in the fall of 2020. So, we doubled down on our efforts to get resources and support to our kids and our schools to keep our kids safe, healthy, and in the classroom.

We've distributed almost eight million pieces of PPE and sanitizing supplies to schools to help keep our kids and educators safe in our classrooms. I also delivered on my promise to invest \$110 million in new, additional funding to every school district in the state. Schools could use those funds to hire educators and staff, provide more after-school programming, or buy art supplies or computers—whatever our kids needed.

But that's just one part of the equation for ensuring our kids' success. We know this pandemic has affected our kids in more ways than one, including their mental health. And a kid who's in crisis isn't going to be able to pay attention at school, finish their homework, or engage with their friends or teachers. If the folks in this room want to have real conversations about our kids' success and achievement, then start by fully funding our schools and making sure our kids can bring their full and best selves to the classroom and to their studies. If that's not where we're starting this conversation, then all you're talking about is our kids barely getting by when we should be making sure kids can get ahead.

So, tonight, I'm announcing our new "Get Kids Ahead" initiative to invest \$15 million into additional mental health services in our schools. Every public school district can opt in to receive these funds—no matter how big or small. With this investment, kids in every corner of our state will have increased access to mental health support through their schools, on top of the investments we've made in our budgets. Schools will be able to use these funds to provide direct mental health care, hire and support mental health navigators, provide mental health first aid and trauma-based care training, or provide family assistance programs—whatever our kids need.

And students in our higher education institutions need our help, too. Students have had to adapt, keep up with their coursework, and juggle work, family, and keeping themselves and their classmates safe. And it's been tough. UW President Tommy Thompson talked about this a lot. Based on a national health survey, during the Spring 2021 semester alone, 75 percent of UW students screened positive for moderate or severe

psychological distress. And, frankly, this was a trend we saw even before the pandemic. Between 2009 and 2019, the use of counseling services on our UW campuses increased 55 percent. So, we're also investing \$5 million into our UW System to provide more mental health services through telehealth counseling and additional mental health staff support on our campuses.

And, clearly, our students at our higher education institutions already have enough to worry about—they're under a significant amount of pressure and stress as it is, and rising costs at the grocery store and the gas pump affect them, too. They sure shouldn't have to worry about the price tag on their education going any higher. So, tonight, I'm also announcing I am providing a \$25 million investment in our University of Wisconsin System so that they can use these dollars to fund the tuition freeze through the end of the biennium. With these additional funds, the UW System and Board of Regents can ensure that tuition prices for our in-state students will not go up for the next two years, giving our students and their families one less thing to worry about.

Finally, as I conclude my fourth State of the State address, I want to acknowledge that it is a privilege for us to be here together tonight—and on Election Day, no less—to participate in an enduring but profound function of our democracy. One that's much like the peaceful and respectful transfer of power or like the fundamental right to cast a ballot. Functions that, especially today, we must not take for granted.

As some work to undermine these basic tenets, we must recognize that what makes this state and this country exceptional is not that these profound functions exist—it's that they are derived from our collective ability to will them to continue. We are also reminded of this: democracy is not a prophecy; it is self-actuating. We must choose every day to continue this grand experiment. We must choose every day to accept the duty our forebears entrusted to us. We must choose every day to affirm the certainty of this legacy for future generations.

In the summer of 1783, as the future of the United States and its independence remained uncertain, George Washington wrote a letter to governors, a "Circular Letter to the States." In it, he described four things essential not just for the well-being of the United States of America but for the very *existence* of it.

And on that list of four things was this: "The prevalence of that pacific and friendly disposition among the people of the United States, which will induce them to forget their local prejudices and policies, to make those mutual concessions which are requisite to the general prosperity, and in some instances to sacrifice their individual advantages to the interest of the community."

We are reminded tonight of the spirit of our service—to forget our own prejudices, to make concessions where the greater good demands, and to find common ground wherever and as often as we can. I still believe, as I said three years ago, that there is more that unites us than divides us, chief among them our responsibility to do what's right when it matters most.

We've accomplished so much together. And tomorrow, our work continues. So, let's get to work, folks.

For Wisconsin, always. May god bless our state. May God bless our democracy. And may God bless these United States of America.

Thank you, and On, Wisconsin!

Office of the Governor • 115 East Capitol, Madison, WI 53702

Press Office Email: GovPress@wisconsin.gov



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