

Milwaukee County Exec. Crowley: 2022 State of the County Address

Posted on Wednesday, Feb 23, 2022

>> **WisPolitics is now on the State Affairs network. Get custom keyword notifications, bill tracking and all WisPolitics content. [Get the app or access via desktop.](#)**

Remarks as Written

MILWAUKEE, WI - The following are the full, written remarks of County Executive David Crowley's 2022 State of the County Address:

Residents of Milwaukee County, County Supervisors, Elected Officials, and others watching - it is an honor to present the 2022 State of the County Address.

Once again, I am thrilled to speak on the future of Milwaukee County and celebrate the victories in equity we've achieved together so far.

Welcome, and thank you for tuning in this afternoon.

I'd like to begin by respectfully acknowledging where we reside here at the Milwaukee County Courthouse: on traditional Potawatomi, Ho-Chunk, and Menominee homeland right on the southwest shore of Michigami.

Yesterday was the annual State of the Tribes address delivered by Shannon Holsey of the Stockbridge-Munsee Band of the Mohican Nation. She spoke of the many health and economic disparities still present among our Native residents throughout Wisconsin.

Those disparities are the result of generations of our Native residents having been left out of the picture when we think about progress and moving our state forward.

Unfortunately, Milwaukee County's history is no exception, but it is my hope that through our vision for Milwaukee County we can repair the relationship with our Native residents, help tell the true story of our Native communities, and help

produce prosperity for future generations.

Today I'm proud to deliver the State of the County address because thanks to a strong vision for the future and a sound strategic plan to guide our work the state of the county is stronger than any of us could have predicted when I was sworn-in.

Our team got to work just two months into a pandemic that threatened to have major and irreparable effects on our finances and ability to deliver quality services.

Thanks to the hard work from County employees, our partners throughout the community, and leaders at both the state and federal level we avoided those threats and kept Milwaukee County strong through several changes to the pandemic landscape.

One of the major changes to the landscape was the emergence of life-saving vaccines.

Thanks to the help of the Office of Emergency Management the County was able to administer vaccines out of Kosciusko Community Center and successfully got over 17 thousand shots into the arms of County residents. And we were able to prioritize the most vulnerable residents by building on our nationally recognized COVID-19 Dashboard by developing the Evaluating Vulnerability and Equity model, or EVE model, to dig deeper into the intersections of social vulnerability as indicators such as vaccination rates.

One idea that grew out of the EVE Model and Esri's technology was the zip code program.

In 2021, thanks to cooperation from our partners at the state and municipal level we opened up vaccine eligibility early to anyone 16 and older who resided in the 10 most vulnerable zip codes.

The EVE model also allowed us to launch a free at-home vaccination program called Healthy Homes which put more than 450 doses into the arms of residents in over 300 homes.

Milwaukee County employees also did their part to stop the spread by getting vaccinated. More than 96 percent of employees subject to the vaccination requirement have submitted proof of vaccination.

Thank you to the entire workforce of more than 4,000 Milwaukee County employees for your tireless service helping to navigate in these unprecedented times and keeping the public safe.

Another change to the landscape that caught us all off guard across the nation was the emergence of the delta and omicron variants last fall.

In response, the Department of Health and Human Services and Office of Emergency Management has delivered nearly half a million masks to municipalities, community organizations, and members of the public.

The metrics on our nationally recognized COVID-19 dashboard indicate that thanks to vaccines and masking, we have moved past the delta surge and are experiencing the decline of the omicron wave locally.

While we hope this is a true turning point in our battle against COVID-19, we know that all along we've been fighting not one, but two pandemics.

By now we are all familiar with the dramatic disparities highlighted by the pandemic—whether it was early data showing disproportionate cases and deaths or the difficulty people of color initially had accessing vaccines nationwide.

Racial health disparities and barriers to preventative healthcare existed for people of color long before the pandemic.

We have seen two destructive forces, COVID-19 and institutional racism, wreak havoc on our community each day of the pandemic.

That's why Milwaukee County has spent the last two years implementing our strategic plan to address the structural factors that allow racial health disparities to exist. We're addressing our policies and practices that have prioritized who gets what resources for generations.

We've created seven internal strategy teams to help advance work in the three strategic focus areas of our strategic plan: Creating Intentional Inclusion, Bridging the Gap, and Investing in Equity.

The Diversity and Inclusion team and Equitable Contracting team have done crucial work to help make sure County government reflects Milwaukee's full diversity at every level.

The Service Alignment team is bridging the gap on health disparities by determining what, where, and how services are delivered to advance equity. Those team members also inform decisions on where to make investments that tackle the root causes of health disparities.

The Integration team is working to maximize access to, and quality of services offered by the County by breaking down silos that have existed in government for too long. And, the Racial Equity Lens team is ensuring we apply a racial equity lens to all decisions we make.

The Fiscal Health team is working to enhance the County's fiscal health and sustainability so we can continue to make investments in equity in the future.

And the Inclusive Communities team is finding ways to dismantle barriers to diverse and inclusive communities that have made our community one of the most segregated in the nation.

In addition, this year, we reorganized the County budget office to include the County's strategy director. It only makes sense that the County staff charged with passing responsible budgets is integrated with staff tasked with creating long-lasting change that dismantles inequitable systems and establishes new systems that meet the needs of all our residents.

The new department will ensure we prioritize our strategic vision when making decisions at Milwaukee County and that our strategy serves as a guide for everything we do. This full integration of the strategic plan into how county government operates is a major step forward in our effort to move resources upstream and bridge the gaps in health disparities that currently make Milwaukee one of the least healthy counties in the state.

Although we may be turning the corner on COVID, we're just getting started on addressing the problems that have come generations before us. Because we know that without addressing those structural issues now, we will continue to see widening racial health disparities long after the pandemic is behind us.

Housing security is a critical social determinant of health and I am no stranger to the negative life impacts that eviction can place on a family. Growing up, my family faced both evictions and housing insecurity long before the pandemic; Black residents are more likely to face housing insecurity than their white counterparts.

We've led the charge nationally in getting rental and mortgage assistance out to vulnerable households. In the last two years, we've invested more than \$47 million dollars into eviction prevention and mortgage assistance. Black residents made up more than 80 percent of those receiving assistance, highlighting the deep disparities that existed in housing security even before the pandemic.

Earlier this month, we announced receiving an additional \$50 million in funds through the U.S. Treasury's Emergency Rental Assistance Program. Thanks to champions like Senator Baldwin and Congresswoman Moore advocating for Milwaukee County families, we are prepared to continue our rental assistance program that is making a difference in people's lives each day.

We expanded on this work with the creation of the Right to Counsel Program established last year. Right to Counsel provides free legal counsel to low-income families facing eviction and it plays a critical role in keeping families in their homes.

In addition, the County's work with our partners to increase housing security led to a record low in Milwaukee Continuum of Care's Point in Time count, an annual census of all those experiencing homelessness who are in sheltered or unsheltered settings.

Our team works each day on outreach with people experiencing homelessness. They know that these aren't just numbers, they're real people who deserve a real shot at success.

One of my favorite housing success stories is one of a Milwaukee man in his sixties who was on the streets for two years in a row. He initially was hesitant to accept services from our outreach team, so our team checked-in with him multiple times a week for close to a year. They kept in contact, built rapport, and earned his trust. The determination, consistency, and creativity from our outreach services team allowed us to eventually work with him and aid him through the housing process.

Today, after two years on the streets, he is approaching the one-year anniversary of staying in his new apartment. Because of the housing first approach, coupled with housing-focused street outreach, he found stability and is permanently housed.

It is because of the tenacity and determination of County staff, coupled with a strong emphasis on housing-focused homeless outreach, that the unsheltered population in Milwaukee County has decreased 90% since 2016, from 207 to 17.

Additionally, we've seen a 46% decrease in overall homelessness from 2015 to now.

Housing First, as a philosophy, has also allowed our community to embrace the understanding of how important housing is to one's health and stability.

Increases in homeless outreach, eviction prevention, and permanent housing resources over the last few years, have led to more housing and service opportunities for those experiencing homelessness in our community.

When it comes to creating a healthy community, the importance of providing access to reliable, quality public transportation built on sound infrastructure can't be understated.

In 2018, the Milwaukee County Transit System started working on MCTS Next, a new approach to improve the rider experience and meet the community's modern needs. MCTS completed all three phases of MCTS Next last year in order to improve the rider experience and meet the community's modern needs. The result is faster routes, more connections, and an easier system to navigate.

In addition to improving the system, we're working to address the gaps in public transit that are preventing good, capable Milwaukee workers from accessing well-paying jobs in other parts of Milwaukee County.

Earlier this year, SEWRPC and UWM launched the FlexRide pilot program to break down the last-mile transportation barrier for residents living on the North and Northwest sides of Milwaukee. FlexRide's goal is to use technology to close Milwaukee's first- and last-mile transit gaps. Closing transit gaps can expand access to transportation for local workers, ultimately fostering opportunities for economic mobility.

This is a convenient and affordable transportation service that connects Milwaukee neighborhoods with businesses in the Menomonee Falls/Butler area. Pick-up points are connected near five MCTS bus stops.

Residents can sign up for the service by visiting [Flexridemke.com](https://flexridemke.com), downloading the FlexRide Milwaukee app from their mobile app store, or call 414-667-7433 to get started and book rides.

We also look forward to continued progress on the nine-mile East-West Bus Rapid Transit line. The BRT will better connect major employment, education and

recreation destinations through downtown Milwaukee, Marquette University, Milwaukee's Near West Side, Wauwatosa, and the Milwaukee Regional Medical Center.

A more connected county is also key for our immediate economic recovery. It makes it easier for some to spend dollars in every part of the county, and for others, it improves access to jobs, training, and education opportunities.

When I took office, I made it a goal to move Milwaukee off the list of the most segregated communities in America. We can't force our way off that list, but expanding mobility throughout the County, and connecting people with the job opportunities that exist beyond their own neighborhood, is how we begin to reverse the history of segregated neighborhoods.

The Bipartisan Infrastructure Bill passed last year supports the County's strategic plan by investing an historic amount in communities that have traditionally been underserved and left behind.

There are a host of opportunities in the bill that the Milwaukee County Department of Transportation is exploring to reconnect communities divided by the physical barriers erected by racist transportation policies of the past. In addition, we know that getting drivers to slow down and drive safely on our roads is a challenge. The infrastructure bill provides opportunities to partner with municipalities on remedies to slow traffic, reduce risky driving, and improve safety on our streets.

Federal aid has helped further strengthen the Milwaukee County Transit System, but without more federal aid in the near future, MCTS faces a \$40 million deficit that will need to be closed as soon as 2025. This means that difficult decisions lie ahead if more federal aid doesn't find its way to Milwaukee County. And, with a service as important as this one - we must put every option on the table to keep this key service running for residents.

I'm a staunch believer and advocate for being aggressive in getting every single federal or state grant dollar that we can secure to fund ideas that improves access to, and the quality of, services for county residents.

In my first budget, we created the Grants and Special Projects Division to do just that. So far, we've seen a major return on our investment with the division's staff of three having secured 11 awards totaling nearly \$18 million, with 20 projects

pending notice of award. In 2022, the division aims to secure at least \$15 million more in competitive grant revenue to advance Milwaukee County's vision.

However, the new division cannot be expected to solve our fiscal issues on its own. The financial challenges facing our communities are critical and have an adverse impact on our ability to invest in local priorities and restrain property tax growth.

Over the last decade, due to a series of difficult state budgets and competing priorities, state aid to local government has decreased, while the costs of state mandated services have grown.

The funding imbalance means we've had to realize tremendous efficiencies, streamlined services, and made government leaner, including through \$30 million in annual budget cuts. Between 2010 and 2022, Milwaukee County closed its structural gap through nearly \$400 million in expenditure reductions.

But, without a long-term solution to our funding challenges, by 2027 we'll be unable to continue the current non-mandated services we do offer like parks, bus routes, emergency services, arts, senior services, public safety, disability services, and youth services.

Solving this problem by cutting is not possible nor is it sustainable. We've cut to the bone and we need to raise revenue if we're going to avoid a fiscal cliff in 2027 where we'll have no local funding for local services, including transit, meaning all of our money will go to state mandated services.

One sustainable, long-term way to make an impact on our budget problems is to implement a local option sales tax increase. This increase would be used to both decrease property taxes and fund local priorities.

More than 30 percent of the state's economic output comes from metro Milwaukee. If we want to ensure Milwaukee County continues driving the economy of the region, and to continue being a globally competitive region, we need the necessary tools to support investments that will provide high-value jobs and offer a vibrant quality of life for all.

A local option sales tax would capture the benefits of our own economic performance to invest in local priorities, while providing property tax relief.

Still, we are doing the most we can with the resources we have to best meet the

needs of County residents.

Overdoses, both fatal and nonfatal, climbed in the wake of the stressors of the pandemic. The number of overdose deaths rose 30% from 2019 to 2020 and so far there are more than 600 confirmed overdose deaths just last year.

Milwaukee County, through the Medical Examiner's Office, was awarded a three-year, \$1.2 million grant from the U.S. Department of Justice to create a multi-agency Overdose Public Health and Safety Team to examine near real-time data in an effort to develop and implement strategies for reducing the likelihood of future overdoses. In addition, grant funds have increased toxicology capacity at the Medical Examiner's Office and added two social workers.

In an effort to inform the public about the impact of overdoses, we have launched the Milwaukee County Overdose Dashboard. The dashboard serves as a resource for community members, organizations, and researchers working to reduce overdoses within the county, including the Milwaukee County Overdose Public Health and Safety Team. Understanding trends and differences between demographic groups across overdose events can aid in the development of data-driven intervention and prevention strategies to reduce overdoses.

Of the residents who died from drug overdoses last year, fentanyl, either alone or in combination with other drugs, resulted in 79 percent of drug overdose deaths.

Earlier this year the state Assembly and Senate passed a bill decriminalizing fentanyl testing strips. As Governor Evers signs the bill into law, Milwaukee County stands ready to distribute fentanyl testing strips and save lives.

Mental health is a major concern for households all over the County and I'm proud to say that a new community resource is slated to open later year in the form of the Mental Health Emergency Center.

The new Mental Health Emergency Center is a significant milestone in the work to address the mental health needs of the community. It will serve to bring health resources to parts of our community that have been traditionally underserved or excluded.

Often, one of the largest barriers to receiving support is knowing where to go for help, which is why providing a center that offers easily accessible, mental-health-

specific services right in our community is so important.

I know first-hand what it feels like to see someone you love go through a hard time and exhibit signs of crisis. I wish I had known the signs of crisis or had a resource nearby where I could get help.

When I see the tragic headlines on the news of young lives being taken too soon, it is often accompanied with a description of unusual or inexplicable behaviors. In those moments, I can't help but think that they would still be with us today if someone close to them had the tools to identify a crisis or had the resources in their neighborhood to turn to for help.

The new Emergency Center's location, 1525 N. 12th Street, puts it near neighborhoods where more than 70 percent of the patients currently served by Behavioral Health Services already live.

For nearly a decade, our Behavioral Health Services has been transforming to become a best practice model of care, in partnership with advocates and consumers, health systems, community health centers, and other community-based organizations.

Our goal is to vastly improve crisis services, work to de-stigmatize mental health care, and offer easily accessible community-based services.

I'm happy to report that progress continues on the overall Psychiatric Crisis Redesign to a system that is patient-centered, focused on recovery and community.

One of the County's newest programs, the Crisis Assessment Response Team or

CART, couples a trained clinician and law enforcement to respond to emergency calls involving individuals experiencing a mental health crisis. Working side by side over the last year, they've helped connect people in crisis with the resources needed to remain in the community.

A wonderful example of why CART was formed is in a story from December of last year. One of our OEM dispatchers, Brenda, took a call from a woman in distress at the Lakefront intending to take her own life by jumping in the lake. To make matters worse, she had her young daughter with her. Brenda spoke briefly with the mother, but the woman soon stopped talking and gave the phone to her 6-year-old daughter. Brenda was able to help obtain the necessary information to locate the caller while at the same time comforting the terrified child.

Brenda's compassion, empathy, and patience led to CART teams locating the woman and ensuring her daughter's safety.

Success stories like this one is what our entire psychiatric crisis redesign is all about.

To build on this success the Department of Health and Human Services is taking a Coggs Center Community Survey, as we begin to reimagine the human services campus on West Vliet St. We know that households know best what problems they face each day and what relief they need to overcome those challenges. We want the community to have a voice in how human services are delivered and received.

I believe our collective health and wellness is of the utmost importance as we navigate out of the pandemic. That's why I am inviting all Milwaukee County residents – kids, parents, grandparents – to join our Healthy County initiative.

Kicking off this spring, on Saturday, April 2, the initiative will bring Milwaukee County residents outside and into our parks, trails, nature areas, beaches, and countless other outdoor spaces to foster their physical and mental well-being.

I will personally lace up my sneakers, hiking boots or cycling shoes and host you at scheduled events in Milwaukee County Parks.

Milwaukee County has established its vision that by achieving racial equity we will become the healthiest County in Wisconsin. One way we are addressing these inequities is by ensuring equitable access to parks, trails, and outdoor spaces that support healthy lifestyles and athletic activities like running, walking, and cycling – throughout the county with a focused on improving access in underserved areas.

Let's bring the Vision to life and fill our parks with activity starting this spring.

–

I cannot address the state of Milwaukee County without addressing the very real problem of the violence on our streets. It is no secret that this is a difficult time for our community. In the first two months of the year, we've seen too much violence, and too many of our children dying in our streets.

This violence didn't happen overnight; this is the result of generations of disinvestment in communities of color. This is why we believe reversing that trend and investing in Black and Brown neighborhoods is vital for the health of Milwaukee County moving forward.

Last summer, we launched the Credible Messengers program to pair justice-involved youth with adults with similar experiences. These adults serve as mentors for youth and are available to their mentees 24 hours a day. They check in regularly and provide support where it's needed by connecting kids with resources or helping mediate disputes before they turn dangerous. The mentors come from five community organizations and programs: 414Life, Running Rebels, Milwaukee Christian Center, the Youth Advocate Program and WestCare Wisconsin.

An incredible story from September of last year illustrates how important this program is for our young people. Tensions were high between two groups of youth after the shooting deaths of two young men in 2020. The tension had the potential

for violent retaliation between the two groups.

414 Life's violence interrupters were able to connect with both groups and prevent a retaliation shooting following the deaths. With multiple members of both groups either incarcerated or passed away, violence interrupters were successful in convincing these kids to take another path.

Now, the plan with 414Life in collaboration with other partners in the city is to help these young people to find housing, jobs, and counseling. Mentors check-in with these kids daily to ensure they don't choose violence as a solution to their problems.

There is a long road to go for these young people, but we've made the first critical steps in stopping day-to-day violence amongst these groups of teens. Even better is knowing that we're continuing to work with these young people and connect them to the resources they need lead long, successful lives.

I have spent my life fighting for resources, fighting for equity, and fighting for neighborhoods most in need. I believe we must come together, pull every single resource available to halt the violence and heal Milwaukee.

When I speak to residents around the County they tell me that our kids don't have the same opportunities we did when we were growing up. The recreational leagues and after-school programs aren't as abundant as they once were.

That is why I'm proud to announce Milwaukee County is working to change that and as we declare 2022 the "Year of the Youth". The Year of the Youth will be a unique partnership with Milwaukee Downtown BID #21 and the City of Milwaukee to lift up young people and provide a wide range of activities and opportunities. We will connect young people to jobs, encourage their creative passions, provide mentoring

and job shadowing opportunities, feature youth days at sporting events, and publicly highlight the best in our youth across the community.

The Year of the Youth programming will go a long way in setting the next generation up for success. However, the problem in our streets goes well beyond our young people.

There are many people in the County with unaddressed mental health issues and behavioral health issues that have been ignored. The result of those needs not being met is being played out on our streets.

Starting next month, I will be holding a series of Community Health & Healing conversations that focus on normalizing talk around mental wellness, increasing awareness of available resources, and eliminating barriers in connecting to services.

On March 10, I will be joined by Dr. Kweku Ramel Smith at the first of these community conversations at the Wisconsin Black Historical Museum. We will be visiting neighborhoods where violence occurs and neighborhoods where some of the most highly vulnerable residents reside.

We plan to bring our message and our resources right to the doorstep of the community.

In the last two years, we've done great work to change lives, change perspectives, and change attitudes. I'm proud of the changemakers who work here, and I am calling on the community to join us in our work.

If you are passionate about improving mental health. If you want to help those with behavioral health issues. Or, if you desire to work with youth and show them their unlimited potential, then visit the Milwaukee County employment opportunities on jobs.milwaukeecounty.org to learn more and get connected.

Even if you're not sure what you're want to do, we currently have a wide range of careers at all levels and in all departments—from Parks and the Zoo, to Clinician

Emergency Services, to the House of Correction and Sheriff's Office. There are many opportunities to be a changemaker at Milwaukee County.

People passionate about making change are a precious resource and in order to heal our community we need you here at Milwaukee County being the change.

We are a resilient community. Over the last two years of the pandemic, we've rolled up our sleeves and did the job necessary to keep residents safe from the spread of the disease. Those early months taught us many lessons including that the work is easiest when we share the load and come together to get through tough times.

The moment we find ourselves in today is no exception.

I'm optimistic that we can come together once again to face all challenges and improve both the health and safety of our neighborhoods.

Please be safe. Thank you and God Bless.