

Gov. Evers: Delivers 2023-25 biennial budget message

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MADISON — Gov. Tony Evers tonight delivered his 2023-25 Biennial Budget Message. The governor's address is available to on his [YouTube channel](#) and [Facebook page](#).

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

Good evening, Wisconsin!

Honorable Supreme Court Justices, Tribal Nation leaders, constitutional officers, members of the Wisconsin National Guard, active and retired members of our armed forces, cabinet members, Senate President Kapenga, Majority Leader LeMahieu, Minority Leader Agard, Speaker Vos, and Minority Leader Neubauer, legislators, distinguished guests, and all the folks tuning in at home, thank you for being here tonight.

I'm Tony Evers, and I'm proud to deliver my third biennial budget message tonight as the 46th governor of the great state of Wisconsin.

After accidentally suggesting when I was here last time that she's been married twice, I'm happy to report that Kathy and I are still married—and she's up in the gallery tonight. Kathy, I'm glad it was just one wedding, and I'm still jazzed it was with me. I love you so much.

Wisconsin, as I share our agenda for our next two years together, we begin this biennium in the best fiscal position we've ever been in our 175-year statehood. This is a breakthrough budget, one that has rarely—if ever—come along in our state's history. And with this opportunity comes responsibility—today, we carry the weight of posterity.

While we must find ways to save where we can, we have a duty to invest in needs that have long been neglected. While we cannot afford to be careless or reckless, we have a duty to protect the future we've worked hard to build together. While we must continue to stay well within our means, we have a duty to create prosperity that will define our state for generations.

Tonight, I'm proud to report that our 2023-25 biennial budget balances these important obligations.

My plan to cut your taxes is a good example. I promised cutting taxes would be part of our agenda to help working families afford rising costs—and it is. And I'm proposing we do it responsibly by targeting relief to working Wisconsinites who need help affording rising costs.

So, I'm delivering on my promise of a 10-percent, middle-class tax cut and providing \$1.2 billion in tax relief for working families. Under my plan, if you're a single filer making less than \$100,000 or a married joint filer making less than \$150,000, the cornerstone of my tax plan will cut your taxes by 10 percent. That's real, sustainable relief that will keep income taxes low now and into the future without causing devastating cuts to priorities like public schools and public safety.

And here's who else we can help if we can get this done: seniors living on fixed incomes that haven't kept up with rising costs; working families with kids to help afford child care and reduce child poverty; families providing care and assistance to an aging relative; and veterans and surviving spouses paying rent. My plan provides tax relief to help you, too.

Giving working families a little extra breathing room is just one key part of our plan to bolster the middle class, maintain our economy's momentum, reduce barriers to work, and address our state's workforce challenges. But we have a lot of work to do together to keep building our economy from the ground up.

Let's start with making sure our infrastructure is prepared to support a workforce and economy of the 21st Century. No administration in state history has done more to expand access to high-speed internet than we have. We've allocated more than \$340 million to ensure more than 390,000 homes and businesses will have new or improved, reliable, high-speed internet. That's a big deal, folks.

But in this century, nearly everything about our economy, our workforce, and our

way of life depends on access to reliable high-speed internet. And the longer it takes to get everyone connected, the more costly it becomes for our state to catch up. We can't afford not to keep our same pace. In fact, we need to double our efforts.

So, I'm again proposing to make the largest investment in high-speed internet in our state's history. I'm asking the Legislature to join me in supporting a \$750 million investment into Broadband Expansion Grants, so the state is doing our part to meet our goal of getting every Wisconsinite, every home, and every business connected to reliable, affordable, high-speed internet by the end of 2025. We have to do it, folks. And together we will.

Part of ensuring our infrastructure is ready for a 21st Century workforce and economy is building upon our work over the last four years to improve over 5,800 miles of roads and nearly 1,600 bridges. I'm also proposing the highest level of funding ever into aid that goes directly toward helping local counties and communities repair and maintain our roads to do just that.

We're also investing in key projects across the state, from the Ray Nitschke Memorial Bridge in Green Bay to the Blatnik Bridge in Superior. And we're expanding transportation alternatives in our small communities, building out our electric vehicle charging infrastructure, and re-engineering roads to improve safety and help prevent reckless driving.

These investments will be critical for bringing our infrastructure into this century. At the same time, we're still balancing these investments with prudent decisions to prepare for future economic uncertainty. So, we're going to use a portion of our state's surplus not to create more ongoing expenses but to reduce them. We're going to pay down \$380 million in state debt in transportation revenue bonds. That means we'll spend less of your hard-earned tax dollars in the future paying on debt and interest so we can stay focused on fixing the darn roads.

Investing in 21st Century transportation and infrastructure is essential to prepare our workforce and our economy for the future, and we have to start right away. But infrastructure is only one part of the work ahead of us to keep our talented workforce here and bring more talent to Wisconsin.

We have to continue harnessing local innovators and ingenuity to maintain our economic momentum and retain and recruit talented workers to build a workforce

for the future. And building an economy from the ground up starts with investing in our Main Streets, our communities, and our local partners.

So, I announced last month we're continuing our successful Main Street Bounceback program—and that's great news. This program has already helped revitalize our Main Streets and move more than 8,500 businesses into vacant storefronts across our state.

But I also recognize that, when it comes to bolstering our workforce, no two communities' needs are alike. There's no one-size-fits-all solution to our state's workforce challenges. We trust our local innovators, communities, business, and economic development partners to know best what they need to support a strong, successful workforce and bring new workers to their area. They might need more high-quality child care providers, they might need more clinics and accessible healthcare, or to expand job training in high-demand industries—we must meet those unique needs, whatever they may be.

It's why one of the most significant investments we make in this budget is to invest nearly \$500 million into programs designed to support local and regionally-based projects in communities and regions to help expand the state's workforce, invest in healthcare infrastructure, and other capital projects in communities across our state.

These innovative investments will ensure communities have what they need for local workers to live here, work here, and raise a family here based on local needs—and that's critically important. It's also only one part of the equation: we need to make sure Wisconsin workers and families—and the talent we hope to recruit—have housing in our communities, too.

Lack of access to affordable housing will hold our workforce and our economy back. So, we're going to take a multi-pronged approach to make sure we have safe, reliable, and affordable housing across our state. We're creating a new Affordable Workforce Housing program with a \$150 million investment into local communities to maintain and develop workforce housing across our state.

We also know we can expand housing options in our communities by renovating and restoring housing that's already available. So, we're investing \$200 million into renovating and restoring existing residential properties, including providing low-interest and forgivable loans to help working families update and remediate lead in

their current homes.

Our local partners have always played a critical role in our work to build an economy and workforce for the future. But let's be frank: work at the local level over the last decade hasn't been helped by the fact our local partners have been asked to do more with less. Whether it's expanding affordable housing, repairing streets, ensuring clean parks and water, safety services like EMS, police, and fire, or supporting local libraries and public health, so much of the hard work in this state happens at the local level. And it's time for the state to do its part.

Last month, I pledged my support for a budget provision to send 20 percent of the state's sales tax revenue back to our local communities for shared revenue. And I'm excited to share that our budget includes that proposal, providing more than half a billion dollars more per year in new resources to invest in key priorities like public safety. We have to get this done, folks.

And we're not just going to fund our local governments—we're also going to invest in key programs at the state level to help local partners do important work in our communities.

One of the investments into local public health I'm excited to announce tonight is a new pilot program to help make sure our kids can safely participate in youth athletics. To explain why this initiative is so important, I have to start by telling you the story of Kai Lermer.

Kai was a junior at Waukesha North High School and a three-sport athlete—he played varsity football, basketball, and was a long jumper on the track team. On March 25, 2019, Kai was playing pick-up basketball with friends when he went into cardiac arrest. As his parents later learned, Kai had an undiagnosed heart condition called Wolff-Parkinson-White Syndrome—a condition no one knew he had. Youth physicals required to participate in high school athletics typically don't include an EKG—a test that might've diagnosed Kai sooner. Only days after going into sudden cardiac arrest, on April 3, 2019, Kai passed away. He was 16.

As Kai's family will tell you, "To know Kai was to love Kai." While I was never fortunate enough to meet Kai myself, I'm humbled tonight to be able to honor him. And it is my privilege to welcome Kai's loved ones, including his mom, Patricia, and his godfather, Paul, who are up in the gallery with us tonight. Please join me in welcoming Team Lermer.

Last year, I joined Kai's family and friends when I signed the "Kai 11" bill at Waukesha North High School—a bipartisan bill that passed thanks to Kai's parents, godparents, loved ones, and friends and their relentless dedication and advocacy. The "Kai 11" bill was critical for raising awareness, and helping ensure coaches, student-athletes, and parents know the risks of sudden cardiac arrest.

Tonight, I'm announcing we're building upon "Kai 11" by investing more than \$4 million into a pilot program through local public health departments to implement an EKG screening program for kids participating in youth athletics.

This pilot will screen for conditions like Kai's to help prevent cardiac-related health incidents in youth athletes. It'll ensure kids and their parents can make the best decisions for participating in athletics safely and identify key strategies for potentially expanding the screening program statewide in the future. Folks, this investment into local public health will save kids' lives just like Kai's. Let's get this done.

I'm also excited about another investment tonight that will help ensure our local partners can do their important work. We're going to make an unprecedented investment into supporting every level of our state's justice workforce. Without providing new resources to recruit, retain, and compensate qualified and experienced professionals who are essential to ensuring our justice system functions well, our state—and our partners at the local level—will continue to face a constitutional crisis. We're going to tackle this issue head-on in this budget. We're investing nearly \$36 million into bolstering our justice workforce, including assistant district attorneys and public defenders, among other key positions.

Investments in our budget like these are critical. The state has to start being a partner in—not an obstacle to—our local communities' success. The way we've been funding our local governments isn't sustainable. We need to change that.

I'm also here to tell you that the way we're funding our schools isn't sustainable, either. We need to change that, too. Budgets reflect our priorities, which is why every budget I've ever built began with doing what's best for our kids. This one is no different.

Now, let's remember where we started. Four years ago, we hadn't seen the largest per pupil revenue limit adjustment or the largest nominal increase in general aid in a decade; in 10 years, not one additional cent had been invested in special

education aid; and if I hadn't been here as governor to use my veto pen and take unilateral action, per pupil aid wouldn't have increased by more than \$300 per student.

So, we've accomplished a lot. And I'm proud of our work. But I've also spent four years asking some people in this building to do more. And I've heard those same people suggest time and again that because of our previous budgets and federal pandemic aid, our kids and our schools have already received enough. I'd like to respond to that tonight.

On Monday this week, the CDC released its Youth Risk Behavior Survey report. Here's what the data show: in 2021, more than 40 percent of high school students felt so sad or hopeless nearly every day for at least two weeks in a row that they stopped doing their usual activities. One in 10 students attempted suicide. One in five students seriously considered attempting suicide.

And the statistics are especially bleak for teen girls and LGBTQ students. Nearly 60 percent of teen girls felt persistently sad or hopeless—double the rate for teen boys. Nearly a third of teen girls seriously considered attempting suicide—think about that, that's one in three teen girls. And about 70 percent of LGBTQ students experienced persistent feelings of sadness or hopelessness. More than 20 percent of LGBTQ students attempted suicide.

No one who has the privilege of working in this building can read these statistics and say with a straight face that we're already doing enough. Folks, 'enough' will be enough when these are not the statistics we're reading about our kids in the news. It's time to get serious.

As a governor who's also a grandfather, tonight I am calling on the Legislature to join me in doing what's best for our kids by approving the largest increase in K-12 schools and education in state history.

I've said before, and I'll say again tonight: our kids can only achieve their full and best potential when they can bring their full and best selves to the classroom. If we want to have a chance at improving our kids' outcomes, then we have to shorten the odds.

We can start by addressing the statistics I just read to you. Let's make sure every kid in Wisconsin has access to school-based mental health services through our

“Get Kids Ahead” initiative. It’s the Year of Mental Health, folks. I know we can get this done.

Here’s another easy step we can take: let’s make sure kids aren’t hungry—yes, ever, but especially at school. My plan is simple: fully fund universal school breakfasts and lunches so that every kid can be focused on their schoolwork and not when or whether they’ll eat next.

These are basic steps we can take to help improve outcomes for our kids so they can come to class coursework-ready. Coupled with our investments and initiatives to bolster our educator pipeline to keep class sizes small and improve financial literacy, math, and reading outcomes across our state, we’re going to make sure our kids are ready for success.

And we’re also going to make sure our kids have the skills and tools they need to join the 21st Century workforce we’re working to build together. So, I’m going to deliver on my pledge to improve access to computer science education in Wisconsin with a \$10 million investment to bolster computer science education across our state, including requiring high schools to provide this critical instruction.

The best measure of the opportunity we have to offer is whether we’re willing to invest in the future of our kids and our families. So, high-quality education has to start early. Our budget expands access to quality, affordable child care for Wisconsin’s kids through our successful Child Care Counts initiative that helped stabilize our child care industry during the pandemic.

And we’re going to invest more than \$22 million to keep working to support partnerships between businesses and child care providers who want to do their part to help make sure child care is more affordable and accessible for their workers.

But after I announced one of our budget’s top priorities would be expanding access to affordable child care, Brittany, who’s a nurse in Milwaukee, wrote to me saying that we should also work to make parental leave more affordable: “Let’s start from the beginning,” she said.

Folks, Brittany’s right—parents are the first and best teachers our kids have. So, we have to start from the beginning. And tonight, I offer a plan to do just that.

We have a plan to bolster our state’s workforce, maintain our momentum, and build

an economy for our future from the ground up—that plan includes making sure parents can put their kids and families first. So, we're taking a comprehensive approach to paid family leave for workers and employers across our state. Because doing what's best for our kids is what's best for our state—and it's what's best for our families and our workforce, too.

The weeks after welcoming a new child are critical for families to have time together and for kids' future development. Tonight, I'm announcing that we're going to create a statewide program that will provide most private-sector workers in Wisconsin paid family and medical leave for 12 weeks, and we are going to invest more than \$240 million in state funds to get that program started.

And new parents aren't the only ones who can benefit from a paid family leave program that truly meets the needs of our workforce. Too often, folks are also unable to receive family or medical leave support based on their unique circumstances or situation. So, we're also going to expand eligibility so workers have the flexibility to respond to their personal, family members', or their kids' needs.

We're expanding eligible uses for family and medical leave to include caring for a new child, the unforeseen or unexpected closure of a child care facility, aftermath of domestic violence and sexual assault, having a serious health condition such as medical quarantine, caring for family members with serious health conditions, and military deployment for service members and their spouses, kids, and parents. My plan takes care of these folks, too.

Listen, I know the people in this building might not agree with me on the periphery of every policy all of the time—that's democracy. But I also believe we should be able to pass common-sense proposals that already have broad, bipartisan support—especially those we know will help us retain and recruit a talented workforce. And here's what else I know: we cannot afford to stand still while other states are willing to take bold, urgent action to compete for new workers, and that includes competing for Wisconsin's own homegrown talent.

I wish we could all agree that expanding affordable healthcare will help our families, our farmers, our rural communities, our small businesses and Main Streets, and our state's biggest employers alike. So, yes, I'm again proposing to expand BadgerCare because access to quality, affordable healthcare is workforce and economic development. And, with the help of the lieutenant governor, we'll continue fighting

to expand BadgerCare just as we have for four years.

And, yes, I wish we could agree that each day women in this state are treated like second-class citizens because of a law enacted before they had the right to vote—one that strips them of their reproductive rights—that is bad for freedom, it's bad for families, and it's bad for recruiting new workers, too. We cannot expect more people to move here if they have to give up basic freedoms when they do. Period.

I also think we should be able to agree that, in America's Dairyland, immigrants are an essential part of our communities, our churches, our schools, our workforce, and our economy. So let's finally answer the call of businesses, farmers and agricultural industries, and law enforcement, among others—let's make sure everyone can access driver's licenses, regardless of their citizenship status, so our workers can get from Point A to Point B, and we can keep our roads safer, too.

As we begin the budget discussion—and I have no doubt the conversation will be lively!—tonight, let's dispose of the notion that the priorities in this budget are somehow extreme or far-fetched.

I promise you this: in this budget, there's more that unites us than divides us. These aren't Republican or Democratic priorities—they're Wisconsin priorities, areas where we should be able to find common ground.

This is a budget about solutions, not wish lists. This is a budget about pragmatism, not politics. This is a budget about getting back to basics and doing the right thing.

Expanding high-speed internet. Improving healthcare access. Reducing child care costs. Keeping communities safe. Building more housing. Addressing PFAS and water contaminants. Funding our schools. Improving mental health. Fixing roads and bridges. Bolstering our current and future workforce. Maintaining our economy's momentum.

We're not flirting with fringe ideas here, folks—the priorities I just listed should be easy. These concepts aren't controversial, at least not to the folks who spend more of their time outside of the Capitol building than inside of it.

So, as we shoulder the weight of posterity, let's not allow our work together to be hindered by partisanship. As you consider this breakthrough budget, let's not just

dismiss ideas because they're proposed by a person or a party you dislike. And as we balance this historic opportunity with our historic responsibility, let's give these priorities deliberation and debate that's worthy of the traditions and the people of this state.

We have so much work to do and so much we can accomplish if we're willing to work together. Together we will.

Let's get to work, folks.

Thank you, and On, Wisconsin! An online version of this release is available [here](#).