

Good evening, Wisconsinites!

Honorable Supreme Court Justices, Tribal Nation leaders, constitutional officers, members of the Wisconsin National Guard and active and retired members of our armed forces, cabinet members, Senate President Kapenga, Majority Leader LeMahieu, Minority Leader Hesselbein, Speaker Vos, and Minority Leader Neubauer, legislators, distinguished guests, and Wisconsinites joining us here and from afar, thank you for being with us here tonight.

I'm Tony Evers, and I'm proud to be here tonight as the 46th governor of the great state of Wisconsin to deliver my 2024 State of the State address.

My daughter, Katie, and my grandson, Keyton, are here with us. And if you'll bear with me for a minute, I'd like to give a special shoutout to my better half, Kathy, who's here as well. Kathy was named a 2023 Caregiver Hero by Lutheran Social Services, which is awarded in honor of our good friend, former Governor Marty Schreiber. Kathy was recognized for her advocacy around Alzheimer's and other dementias, including making the Executive Residence a dementia-friendly location. Kathleen Frances, I am so proud of you, and I love you so much—please join me in recognizing Kathy up in the gallery.

Wisconsin, it's been one heck of a year. And I have much to report.

When I delivered my 2023 State of the State address a year ago, we were kicking off Wisconsin's 175th birthday and celebrating the fact that, in 175 years of statehood, Wisconsin had never been in a better fiscal position.

Wisconsin, I begin tonight with even better news. As we enter 2024, our state has never been in a better fiscal position than we are today—better than last year, better than when I took office, and better than any year in Wisconsin's 176 years of statehood.

We began this biennium in the best fiscal position in our state's history. We set out to prepare a breakthrough budget—a rare opportunity to define our posterity. And together we did. We needed to take responsibility for some of our state's most important obligations. But we still couldn't afford to be careless or reckless. We needed to make investments in priorities long neglected. But we still had to save where we could. We needed to stay prudent and well within our means while still marching forward toward the future we're working hard to build together.

Our bipartisan efforts on housing are a good example. I completed my fourth 72-county tour of Wisconsin this past December. I've been to every county at least four times, some many more. And no matter who I'm talking to or where I go—our largest communities or our smallest towns and villages—Wisconsinites tell me, "We need more affordable housing." And I agree.

Building affordable housing in every corner of our state is critical to making sure that Wisconsin is prepared to meet the needs of a 21st-century workforce in a 21st-century economy. Since I took office, we've invested in building nearly 15,000 affordable housing units—nearly 2,500 last year alone—and more than 24,000 housing units total. And we're not stopping there. This past year, we worked together to invest more than \$500 million in workforce housing—one of the largest investments in our state's history.

We're working every day to make sure our workforce, economy, and infrastructure are ready to meet the needs of the 21st century. Part of that is making sure kids, families, workers, farmers, and manufacturers have the infrastructure they need to get from Point A to Point B safely.

When I took office, years of disinvestment had caused our roads and bridges to crumble into disrepair. So, you're darn right we've been fixing the darn roads. Since 2019, we've improved over 7,424 miles of road and 1,780 bridges, including over 900 miles of road and over 200 bridges last year alone.

We've also worked with our Minnesota and federal partners to secure over \$1 billion in federal funding to support our effort to replace the Blatnik Bridge in Superior. It's a critical economic driver for our state and supports the largest port on the Great Lakes. And I'll tell you this: we got this done because there is no one—no one—who's been fighting harder in Washington to bring this investment back home than Wisconsin's senator, Tammy Baldwin.

When I was here four years ago, I announced a three-pronged plan to address our state's dairy crisis. I later proudly signed a bipartisan bill creating the Wisconsin Initiative for Agricultural Exports. We're working to meet our ambitious goal of increasing the value of Wisconsin's agricultural exports by at least 25 percent by mid-2026. So, we worked together last year to invest \$2 million to help promote Wisconsin milk and dairy, meat, crop, and other products around the world.

I'm also proud that our administration worked with the Great Lakes Indian Fish and Wildlife Commission and the Menominee and the Lac Courte Oreilles Tribal Nations last year on a new effort to preserve and restore wild rice in Wisconsin. Wild rice has been harvested here for thousands of years, but it's threatened by the effects of changing climate and water quality. We secured nearly \$2 million to support researching and developing strategies to help conserve this important cultural resource for future generations.

Conserving and protecting our natural resources and land continues to be a top priority for my administration. I'm also excited to announce tonight I'm approving the largest forest conservation effort in state history. In partnership with the Biden Administration and the Conservation Fund, we've approved the conservation easement for the Pelican River Forest's remaining acres to protect the forest for generations of future Wisconsinites to use and enjoy. This is a big deal, folks.

Wisconsinites, this is the future we're building. And no matter where you live, you can see the results of our efforts.

In Wisconsin today, a kid got ready for school and put on their favorite Milwaukee Brewers shirt. Because we worked together last year to keep Major League Baseball in Wisconsin through 2050, that kid can grow up, graduate, and start a family in Wisconsin, and they will be able to take their kids out to the ball game where the Milwaukee Brewers will still be the home team.

Today, a Wisconsinite tuning in from their TV at home is using electricity that is 100 percent solar-powered and carbon-free because we've approved enough solar projects across our state—4,000 megawatts' worth—to power more than 750,000 Wisconsin homes with average electricity usage for 365 days straight.

In Wisconsin today, volunteer EMS and fire providers in Delavan are receiving increased stipends; Barron County has hired two new public safety officers; Peshtigo is purchasing new EMS equipment; and residents on the south side of Milwaukee will have quicker emergency response times.

This progress is possible because we worked together to provide an historic increase in shared revenue, state support that goes directly back to our local communities. Our bipartisan effort included a 20-percent increase in support to most municipalities statewide. After a generation of our state asking local partners to do more with less, today, we are working to deliver on our promise of making sure our communities can meet basic and unique needs alike.

Today in Wisconsin, a veteran—one of our nation’s heroes—has joined our workforce after transitioning from service back to civilian life. They went to work today in a good-paying, family-supporting job right here at home in Wisconsin, where I’m proud to announce we now rank 4th in the country for successfully helping veterans find employment.

Wisconsinites, this is the state of our state. This is the future we’ve spent years working hard to build together.

But let me be clear: these results and our accomplishments don’t mean our work is finished. If anything, our progress demands our efforts continue. There is, as always, more we can do. And that work begins in earnest here tonight.

Let’s start with PFAS. PFAS are a real threat to our kids, families, and communities. These human-made chemicals can be toxic to humans and wildlife—and they’ve been used in everyday products for more than half a century.

In Wisconsin, where we hunt, fish, and want to trust the water coming from our tap, and where our economies rely upon water resources for livestock, crops, and outdoor recreation, PFAS are a threat to our way of life and our economy. It’s why I directed \$10 million into a new statewide program to help get contaminants like PFAS out of our water supplies. And I’m proud to report this program has helped replace or abandon nearly 500 contaminated water wells across Wisconsin.

And after five years of calling for legislative action, we saw the first real and meaningful state investment to specifically address PFAS in our state’s history last year. The Legislature and I both approved a \$125 million investment to start tackling PFAs across our state.

Yes, that is great news. But here’s the rub. I signed the budget last July. Today is January 23rd. It’s been over 200 days, and Republicans have not released one cent of that investment. A \$125 million investment to fight PFAS statewide is sitting in Madison because Republicans refuse to release it. That’s breathtaking.

Republicans, please release this funding so we can get it out to the families, child care facilities, schools, businesses, and communities across our state who need it.

Another area where we must work together to do more and quickly: let’s talk mental health.

I said here last year that I feared the state of mental health in Wisconsin was a quiet, burgeoning crisis—

one I still believe will have cascading effects for generations if it goes unaddressed. So, I declared 2023 the Year of Mental Health in Wisconsin. And, yes, we accomplished some important work together.

I fought hard to secure another \$30 million in this biennial budget to build upon our successful “Get Kids Ahead” initiative to provide school-based mental health services statewide in every school district in Wisconsin.

But I don’t need to remind this Legislature that I requested more than \$500 million last year to help expand access to mental and behavioral health services statewide, only a fraction of which was approved. One year after declaring the Year of Mental Health, I’ll tell you tonight, as governor and as a grandfather, my concerns have not changed, and my fears have not waned. Much work remains.

The data have not improved. According to the latest report from the Office of Children’s Mental Health, kids continue to report highly concerning levels of anxiety, depression, self-harm, and suicidal thoughts. That’s still especially true for teen girls, students of color, and LGBTQ kids. One-third of high school kids still experience feelings of sadness and hopelessness nearly every day. About one in ten teens has attempted suicide, and nearly half of LGBTQ youth seriously considered suicide. Today, one in six kids experienced a serious episode of depression in 2023—it used to be one in seven.

My administration and I are not going to let up on our work on this issue in 2024. We’re going to double our efforts and take a whole-of-government approach.

Tonight, I’m announcing I’m creating an Interagency Council on Mental Health and directing Wisconsin state agencies to work together to reduce barriers and address gaps in mental health services. We’re going to develop a statewide Mental Health Action Plan to address the root causes of our mental health crisis, increase awareness and reduce stigma, and build capacity for us to expand access to mental health services statewide.

Our state’s mental health challenges are significant. Let’s do more—and urgently—to make a difference on this issue in 2024. We have to. And I’m optimistic we will because our kids are leading the way.

Students in Merrill are doing amazing work through a student-led program called “Raise Your Voice.” It’s part of an effort led by NAMI Wisconsin to educate, support, and empower youth to talk openly about mental health.

The program at Merrill High School began with just eight students. And then it grew. And these students have helped expand the program to other middle schools and high schools across the region with more than 200 members. Merrill High’s Raise Your Voice advisors and founding students are here in the gallery tonight. Please join me in recognizing them, and let’s resolve tonight to do the work to support our kids.

Now, as we continue looking toward the important work we have before us in 2024, there are also good things on the horizon. We have important elections coming up this year, including one in November. I’ve been clear that I believe we should be making it easier, not harder, for every eligible Wisconsinite to cast their ballot. And, yes, I’ll continue to veto any effort by politicians to abuse their power to interfere with our elections, just as I always have.

In the coming weeks, I'll also be announcing new steps I'm directing my administration to take to help ensure every eligible Wisconsinite has the opportunity to participate in the most precious and fundamental function of our democracy—the right to vote.

And there's more good news. I have promised from the beginning I would never stop fighting for fair maps. And as I stand here tonight, I have never been more hopeful that when Wisconsinites head to the ballot box later this year, they will be voting under legislative maps that are fair, responsive, and finally reflect the will of the people of this state.

And I want folks at home to understand why fair maps are important: because when elected officials gerrymander themselves into safe seats, they can comfortably ignore the overwhelming majority of Wisconsinites who support commonsense policies like BadgerCare expansion, red-flag laws, and expanding paid family leave. And that's wrong.

What has happened on the issue of reproductive freedom in Wisconsin over the last two years is another good example of why we need fair maps.

For a decade now, 60 percent of Wisconsinites, on average, have consistently said they support abortion being legal in all or most cases. And yet, each time I've asked Republicans to restore Wisconsinites' reproductive freedom to what it was the day before the U.S. Supreme Court overturned Roe, they said, "No." And because of that, Wisconsin women spent over a year experiencing firsthand what it's like to live in a state that bans nearly all abortions, even in cases of rape or incest.

Today, thanks to the lawsuit Democrats filed days after the Supreme Court's decision, Wisconsinites now have the same reproductive freedom in Wisconsin that they did on June 23, 2022, before Roe was overturned.

But make no mistake: the freedoms Wisconsinites just got back are already under attack. Republicans are advancing a bill that would ask Wisconsinites to strip themselves of some of the basic reproductive freedoms that were just recently restored to them. It provides no exceptions in cases of rape or incest.

Folks, Wisconsinites have been abundantly clear. As another example, Republicans' last candidate for governor wanted to take those same freedoms—and more—away. You'll notice he's not here delivering the State of the State address tonight.

So, I want to speak directly to women in Wisconsin tonight: I will veto any bill that takes away your reproductive freedom or makes reproductive healthcare any less accessible in Wisconsin than it is today. Period.

Every Wisconsinite should be able to access the healthcare they need when they need it. And, yes, that includes contraception.

Last summer, the Food and Drug Administration approved the first daily oral contraceptive pill for use without a prescription, which is expected to be available in stores and online later this year. And that's great news. BadgerCare Plus currently covers over-the-counter emergency contraception and daily contraception with a prescription from a provider. Tonight, I'm announcing I'm directing the Department

of Health Services to issue a standing order for BadgerCare Plus to serve as that prescription to cover over-the-counter contraception, including emergency contraception.

Here's how it'll work. Once this contraception is out on the shelves, an individual on BadgerCare Plus will be able to go to any pharmacy and pick up the contraception they need. The pharmacy will use DHS' standing order to process their insurance coverage. That individual will be able to leave the pharmacy with the medication they need at no out-of-pocket cost.

There's also work we can do together to support healthy moms, babies, and families across Wisconsin, especially as we celebrate Maternal Health Awareness Day. Pregnant women in Wisconsin up to certain income levels are eligible for BadgerCare Plus for the term of their pregnancy and up to 60 days after they give birth. But, as most people know, recovery time from a pregnancy often lasts longer than 60 days.

Today, a bipartisan bill, Senate Bill 110, introduced by Senators Ballweg and Felzkowski, would enable Wisconsin to join 43 other states that already extend coverage to pregnant women for up to 365 days after they give birth. Tonight, I'm urging Republicans and Democrats to work together to get this bill across the finish line this session and to send it to my desk. We have to get this done.

This past year has shown there's much we can accomplish when we work together. Today, there are pressing issues that demand our work bridging partisan divides continues.

I, again, am calling on this Legislature to address what I believe are the two greatest challenges facing our state: the first, our decade-long struggle to retain, attract, and train talented workers to address our state's workforce shortages; and the second, the Republican majority's disinterest in working toward a meaningful, bipartisan plan to do something about it.

Folks, "no" isn't a workforce plan. Asking more kids to work isn't a workforce plan. Giving more big breaks to millionaires and billionaires isn't a workforce plan. These are not serious proposals to address generational, statewide issues.

In April last year, our state unemployment rate hit a record-low of 2.4 percent. Last year, Wisconsin had the all-time lowest number of unemployed workers ever in modern history. And our state's labor force participation rate also consistently remained above the national average throughout the year.

So, it's also time to retire the well-worn political talking point that Wisconsinites aren't working or working hard—Wisconsinites work hard, and they are working.

From my vantage point, three things are key to addressing our state's workforce challenges: first, we must find a long-term solution to our state's looming child care crisis; second, we must expand paid family leave; and third, we must invest in public education at every level, from early childhood to our technical colleges and universities.

Wisconsin faces a looming child care crisis—costs to working families are skyrocketing, we don't have enough child care providers, and the providers we have are struggling to keep the lights on. And the effects are intuitive—if a kid no longer has child care or a parent can't afford it, someone's going to have to stay home with them. Folks, lack of accessible, affordable child care is a statewide workforce issue.

Without continued investments in Child Care Counts, our workforce will suffer mightily: 2,110 child care programs are projected to close. 87,000 kids could be without child care. We could lose over 4,880 child care jobs. That's about a half a billion dollar economic impact on our state.

I introduced a comprehensive workforce plan to stabilize our child care industry and prevent its collapse. Republicans rejected it. So, last fall, I directed \$170 million in emergency funding to keep our child care industry afloat.

I want to be clear: I directed the funding that I could, but it wasn't enough. Wisconsin child care providers will soon receive their final payment from the federally-funded portion of Child Care Counts. So, the emergency \$170 million I directed last fall as a stopgap measure now kicks in. Republicans are officially on the clock to make the meaningful investments necessary to prevent the collapse of an industry that's essential for maintaining our current levels of workforce participation.

Wisconsin, we also need to expand paid family leave.

I've proposed investing \$240 million to jumpstart a program that would provide most private-sector workers 12 weeks of paid leave. Republicans rejected my proposal. Twice. Paid leave is the right thing to do for kids and families, and it's also what we need to do to compete for and keep talented workers.

And, yes, 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. So, yes, we must invest in public education at every level, from early childhood to our technical colleges and universities.

I will never expect Republicans and Democrats in this building to agree with each other—or me, for that matter—on the merits of every policy 100 percent of the time. That's democracy. But there is no excuse for not being willing to work together on what everyone agrees is the most pressing issue facing our state.

I've introduced a comprehensive workforce plan. Twice. If anyone on either side of this aisle has a better plan than mine that not only prevents the collapse of our state's child care industry but also helps us compete against our neighboring states for talent and invests in public education at every level to prepare our kids for the future, let's hear it. I will work with any legislator, any partner, any stakeholder who's willing to engage in meaningful conversations on these issues to do the right thing for Wisconsin.

In the meantime, my administration will continue to pursue every pathway and seek every avenue to address our workforce challenges without legislative action, just as we have for five years. And we continue that work here tonight.

Making sure our workforce is prepared to meet the needs of a 21st-century economy is a top priority for me. And my administration is going to lead by example. It's why, tonight, I'm declaring 2024 the Year of the Worker in Wisconsin.

We are working in earnest to reduce barriers to employment so we can try to make sure every available worker can join our workforce. I directed over \$150 million to find innovative, long-term solutions to our workforce challenges, subsidize employment and skills training with local employers, and support

Wisconsinites working to re-engage in our workforce. Because of that investment, we've been able to deliver workforce training and support services to more than 33,000 Wisconsinites across our state.

I joined the Wisconsin Laborers about a year ago to announce Wisconsin had the highest participation in our Registered Apprenticeship program in two decades. In November, I celebrated National Apprenticeship Week and announced Wisconsin reached the all-time record-high number of participants in the Registered Apprenticeship program's 112-year history.

There are also high-need areas of our workforce we need to bolster and support. According to the Department of Workforce Development, Wisconsin faces a potential deficit of 20,000 nurses by 2040. Between 2020 and 2030, Wisconsin's healthcare industry will see nearly 32,000 annual openings across occupations. So, last year, my administration launched one of the country's first-ever Registered Nurse apprenticeship pathways to help address the demand for nurses. And we launched a new initiative to train over 10,000 certified direct care professionals to address our state's shortage of caregivers.

But there's more we have to do to address our healthcare industry's chronic challenges. Next week, I'll sign an executive order creating a new Healthcare Workforce Task Force focused on finding long-term solutions to our state's healthcare industry challenges and make recommendations for me to consider in my next biennial budget.

We also know we must work to retain and recruit talented educators who work every day to do what's best for our kids. Recent estimates show only 67 percent of new educators in Wisconsin make it past five years. So, through the Department of Workforce Development, our administration is launching a new teacher apprenticeship pilot program with the Department of Public Instruction to provide more mentorship and support for new educators.

Finally, as one of the largest employers in the state, my administration is also going to make sure the State of Wisconsin is leading the way and by example with new efforts to recruit and retain talented workers for our state workforce. I'm also announcing tonight I'm creating a new Office of State Employee Engagement and Retention to improve retention, mentorship, and engagement of our state workers across all of our state agencies.

Wisconsin, we've proven this past year that we can do big things when we're willing to do them together. I know we can build upon these efforts in 2024, and together we will.

Let's get back at it, and let's get to work.

Thank you, and On, Wisconsin!

UW Marching Band, take it away!