

**GOVERNOR JARED POLIS 2021 STATE OF STATE
ADDRESS AS PREPARED FOR DELIVERY**

Good morning everyone.

Senate President Garcia,
Speaker Garnett,
Leader Holbert,
Leader McKean,
Members of the General Assembly from across the great state of Colorado,
Lieutenant Governor Primavera,
Treasurer Young
Education Commissioner Anthes
Chief Justice Boatright
Our dedicated First Gentleman Marlon Reis,

And joining us virtually, I want to acknowledge:
Attorney General Weiser,
Secretary of State Griswold,
Ute Mountain Ute Tribal Chairman Manuel Heart and Tribal Council Members,
Southern Ute Indian Tribal Chairman Melvin Baker and Tribal Council Members,
Members of the State Board of Education,
Justices of the Colorado Supreme Court,
Members of the Cabinet,

My Fellow Coloradans,

I'm mindful that as I speak to you this morning, many of you are facing some of the toughest times in your lives.

Too many of us have lost someone close to this terrible pandemic, battled illness ourselves or dealt with the anxiety of having a loved one in the hospital but not being able to be by their side. Many others have lost jobs that not only filled days with purpose, but kept a roof over your family's head. These truly have been difficult times for us all.

And as if the pandemic and resulting global recession was not enough, we have weathered record-breaking wildfires that destroyed homes and claimed lives.

We've witnessed brutality inflicted on Black Americans, and grappled with how to address systemic discrimination against communities of color.

And we watched in shock and horror as the foundation of our democracy itself came under attack by a violent mob intent on overturning the results of a free and fair election.

In short, this has been one of the most challenging years of our lifetimes.

But as Coloradans, we face down tough times with grit, and overcome them together. And when I became Governor, I knew that leading our state through good times and bad — but especially through darkness, whenever and however it came — would be my most important responsibility.

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Still, I never envisioned *this*...

I never imagined — I don't think any of us did — gathering in this room separated by plexiglass and wearing masks — or that our kids would go months without hugging their grandparents.

We've faced the unimaginable this year. And the state of our state, above all, is a reflection of our strength and our resilience.

We've worked together to protect our families and our communities, by staying apart. We've endured loneliness. We've put off joyous weddings, birthdays, and graduations.

We've worn our masks — to save lives and to keep our economy going.

We've given what we could, and together, we raised almost \$24 million for the Colorado COVID Relief Fund, supporting more than 1,000 organizations in all 64 counties of our state.

I want to acknowledge and thank some of the Coloradans whose sacrifices stand out, even among so many everyday acts of generosity and heroism:

Day after day, our brave health care workers put their own lives on hold and make incredible sacrifices to save countless souls.

People like Toni, a nurse at UC Health in Greeley who continued to show up for her patients while undergoing chemotherapy herself for Stage IV ovarian cancer.

And Doctor Greg Golden, the son of a Colorado nurse and army vet, and father to three beautiful children. He's spent many hours helping COVID patients in the intensive care unit at Banner Health hospitals in Greeley and Ft. Collins, and when Colorado's case rate started going down, he went to Arizona and then Wyoming to help patients in our neighboring states. Dr. Golden and his colleague Dr. John Cowden created a consistent process to care for COVID patients, saving many lives.

Nelly is an environmental services technician at UCHealth Medical Center of the Rockies in Loveland, who took extra precautions over the last year to ensure that rooms in the COVID ward were sanitized and safe. And now she is committed to getting this lifesaving vaccine to Latinos and as many people as possible. Gracias Nelly por todo tu trabajo! Thank you Nelly for all of your hard work!

I also want to thank our hospitals for your incredible service, from medical surge planning to vaccinations. Colorado's hospitals have been our partners in this pandemic and I want to thank them on behalf of the state for this strong collaboration and partnership.

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We are joined today by Toni, Dr. Golden, Dr. Cowden, Nelly and other health care workers from hospitals across Colorado who have been working around the clock to save lives. Please stand so we can recognize you and the gift of life you have given to so many of us.

But the heroes of this pandemic are not only in our hospitals, they're everywhere you look.

–The grocery store, agriculture, and food supply workers; the restaurant and retail workers; and the truck drivers who continue to do their jobs under the most trying of circumstances so that we can put food on the table;

–Our Colorado National Guard, law enforcement, and first responders who've put themselves on the line to protect the health and safety of our communities;

–Our census workers throughout the state who did everything they could to ensure an accurate count here in Colorado, because everyone counts;

–You, our legislators, who met urgently under challenging conditions during the special session to get needed help and relief to those who needed it;

And finally I want to personally thank all those on my team who have led us bravely across uncharted waters, with faith and persistence and very long hours.

Joining us today are Jill Hunsaker Ryan of the Colorado Department of Public Health and Environment; Stan Hilkey of the Colorado Department of Public Safety; as well as Lisa Kaufmann, my Chief of Staff, and Rick Palacio, Strategic Advisor. Over this last year, Jill, Stan, Lisa and Rick have led a coordinated pandemic response that prioritized data and scientific evidence.

I'm deeply thankful for our COVID Response team, our incident commanders Scott Bookman and Mike Willis, our epidemiologists, our emergency management professionals, our state employees at the Department of Public Health and Environment, our Public Information Officers, local elected officials, and folks who put their expertise to work because our community and our country needed them.

I must share a special debt of gratitude for our partners in local public health who are implementing the response on a day to day basis for their community — against all odds they have worked tirelessly to keep their communities safe.

Some of the members of Colorado's COVID response team and local public health are here today; please stand.

But tragically, as we know, not everyone has made it through. As of today, Colorado has lost 5,655 people to COVID-19. Each loss seared into the soul of our state.

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And today, as many Coloradans observe Ash Wednesday, let us reflect on the past and each of our sacrifices over the last year. As Ecclesiastes 3:20 reads - “all go to one place, all come from dust and all return to dust.”

In the words of the poet Hannah Senesh, quote: “There are stars whose light reaches the Earth only when they are gone and no more. And there are people whose sparkling memory illuminates the world when they themselves are no longer in our midst. These lights, which shine bright in the darkness of night, show us the lighted path.” –end quote.

I invite you all now to join me for a moment of silence to remember those we have lost to this horrific virus. May their memory be a blessing.

The greatest way to honor the immeasurable sacrifices of the last year is to do right by one another and prevent further devastation.

Our goals in Colorado have remained the same since the early days of this pandemic: avoid overwhelming our hospitals, save lives and ensure economic stability for Colorado’s families and small businesses until a cure or a vaccine is readily available.

Thankfully, as we speak, the vaccine is making its way into communities and into arms across our state. Today, Colorado has one of the highest vaccination rates and one of the lowest transmission rates in the country.

We have worked day and night to ensure reliable and equitable distribution of the safe and highly effective vaccine. And I’m ecstatic to announce that we are well on our way toward reaching our goals. We have now vaccinated 60% of all Coloradans 70 and older, which is a significant step toward cutting the COVID death rate in our state by more than 75%.

We will continue pursuing every possible opportunity and innovation to get the lifesaving vaccine to you and your loved ones as quickly as we can — no matter who you are, no matter where you live. We are determined to leave no one behind.

We can see the light at the end of the tunnel — but we’re still some months away from reaching it.

We have to keep doing everything we can to save lives, to preserve our health care capacity, and to sustain and grow the economy.

There’s an old proverb: when there’s food on the table, there can be many problems. But when there’s NO food on the table, there is only ONE problem.

Many Coloradans have experienced this global pandemic not as a public health crisis, but as an economic crisis.

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Together we've taken extraordinary measures to help Colorado families and businesses. We delivered critical housing assistance, food and utility assistance, tax relief, loans and grants for small businesses, and we've sent much-needed stimulus checks to hardworking Coloradans struggling to get by.

These bold measures have been made possible because of close, bipartisan collaboration. I want to thank the leaders of the General Assembly, this one and the last — Speakers Becker and Garnett, Leaders McKean and Neville, President Garcia and Leader Holbert, and all the members who came together last December to support a package of legislation that put Colorado families and Colorado businesses first.

We didn't let politics get in the way of action.

We should apply this spirit to all of our challenges — not just the unique ones we've faced this past year, but the ones we've been grappling with for decades.

When the immediate crisis ends — and it will end soon — we are not forced to go back exactly to how things were before. Here in Colorado, we have the boldness to imagine a better future and we have the ability to bring it to life.

Let's build a future where every child receives the education they deserve — no matter their zip code.

Let's build a future where our roads and highways meet the needs of our dynamic and growing population.

Let's build a future where each and every person in our state can access quality, affordable health care — not just now, but always.

Let's build a future in which the natural Colorado beauty that inspires us everyday is protected.

Let's make good on the promise of a Colorado where people from all walks of life don't just get by, but thrive.

It starts with investments that will create good jobs and give our economy a boost, helping us recover faster and stronger. From tax relief and loans for small businesses — to bolstering key industries like tourism and renewable energy — to investments in our main streets, the heart of our communities.

These are key proposals in my budget request that will jumpstart our economy, but we know we can't stop there. We have a once in a generation opportunity to not just build back stronger than where we were before the pandemic, but fundamentally reimagine Colorado's future. And to make that vision a reality, Colorado needs the best ideas from both parties, so that together, we can rise to meet the challenge before us. Nothing could be more important.

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My budget request moves forward vital projects, starting with much-needed repairs on roads across Colorado — from the Eisenhower Tunnel to the rural roads that our farmers and ranchers rely on. We're going to make it easier for Coloradans and visitors to travel our great state — accessing the ski resorts and public lands that we love — while reducing traffic and improving our vibrant, beloved main streets in the process.

We will invest in our rural communities, continue bringing broadband to every corner of our state so that students and small business owners from Fort Morgan to Fruita can seize opportunity.

And we must work to protect the natural splendor of our state, and the animals with whom we share it, by maintaining our public lands and continuing to invest in wildlife crossings and migration corridors.

These shovel-ready projects are tried-and-true measures to boost the economy in tough times — creating good jobs for hardworking Coloradans while improving the quality of life for all of us.

Looking ahead, we see transportation changing before our very eyes: more deliveries, car shares and ride shares. I look forward to working with you to accelerate electrification, expand multimodal transit options, save commuters money on gas, reduce emissions, and improve air quality.

As our transportation habits change, so should the way we support our transportation system. We should reduce vehicle registration fees to save people money and support the recovery, while modernizing the way we fund our transportation system. I want to thank **Senator Fenberg, Senator Winter, Speaker Garnett, and Representative Gray** for their leadership on this important and challenging issue and their work to bring together the business community, local governments, and environmental advocates around the important need to reduce traffic.

And as Coloradans face tough times, we need to help folks get back on their feet and make life more affordable in our state — from job training, to more affordable housing, to reducing the tax burden on middle-class families.

From the start of my administration, we have worked together to make Colorado's tax code more fair by getting rid of special interest tax breaks that benefit the few, and using those savings to lower taxes for the rest of us.

This year I propose we eliminate the business personal property tax for tens of thousands of small businesses, reducing paperwork and protecting them from onerous tax requirements.

This will save small businesses time and money and let them focus on what matters — their customers, their services, and their products.

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To help hardworking Coloradans, I propose we double the Earned Income Tax Credit, and provide up to \$600 in tax credits per child for nearly 200,000 families in our state through the Colorado Child Tax Credit.

And I propose that we stop taxing seniors' Social Security Benefits. Many seniors live on fixed incomes and we should not tax the Social Security benefits they depend on. With the leadership of **Senators Moreno and Hansen, and Representatives Weissman and Sirota**, I am confident we will get it done.

All of this, along with the voter-approved reduction in the state income tax, will deliver the most substantial and comprehensive tax relief in decades for hardworking Coloradans and small businesses.

This is why we were sent here by the voters — to take on the big challenges and make changes that will improve quality of life in our great state.

Just look at how over the past few years, we've broken down barriers holding young families back, and made Colorado one of the best places in America to raise a family: Family leave, childcare, kindergarten, preschool.

I thank the bipartisan coalition of lawmakers who supported putting Prop EE on the ballot last year. Because of your work, and the support of over two thirds of Colorado voters, we can now combat one of the **worst** challenges confronting our children — smoking and vaping — while investing in one of the **best** things for our children — universal preschool. And I look forward to working with the General Assembly to continue making progress for young families.

Now as we know — this has truly been a school year unlike any other. And tragically, the effects have rippled throughout society, not only impacting our children's education, but straining families and, in particular, forcing millions of women across our country out of the workforce.

Many parents, disproportionately women, have had to choose between working and caring for their children at home. Sadly, but not surprisingly, women of color have been disproportionately impacted, with an 8 percent decline in labor force participation over the last year.

When women across Colorado — across America — suffer, then our communities and our state suffer too.

I was fortunate to be surrounded by strong women throughout my life. Many of you have heard me speak about my mother, or even met her. She's a very important part of my life and it's been nearly a year since I've seen her in person.

When I was growing up she was not only a best-selling poet but president of the small publishing company she founded with my father.

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My grandmother, June, was sales manager of our family company for over thirty years. She cooked amazing food, knitted up a storm, worked long weeks in the office, and was loved and feared by sales reps around the country.

And now, I'm the proud father of a strong-willed daughter. She's six years old, and I owe it to her to do everything in my power to support Colorado women, and yes, men too, as they work to balance the already difficult task of raising their families in a time of uncertainty. And while of course we need in-person school now for our kids, we also need it for Colorado moms and dads.

It's simple: our efforts to support Colorado families fall short if we can't ensure Colorado women a secure place in our economy.

That's why it's so important that — with the Leadership of **Senators Danielson and Pettersen, and now Senator Buckner and Representative Gonzales-Gutierrez** — we passed a law to ensure women are paid the same as men.

As we recover, we will continue to grow economic opportunities for women across our state, and support hard-working parents by keeping kids in the classroom.

This crisis has forced us to realize the value of things we once took for granted, like having a safe place where our children can learn and thrive and play and grow.

As parents of two young children, Marlon and I share the newfound appreciation that so many Coloradans feel for teachers and other school professionals who have gone above-and-beyond to make sure our kids are learning under extremely challenging circumstances.

Like Michelle Grimes, a fourth grade teacher at Clayton Elementary in the Englewood School District. Michelle has risen to the occasion, as so many educators have, in her case by spending hours looking for students who fell off of remote learning and getting them back on track. She even helped organize a gift drive for her students and their families - sharing a little joy during tough times. I'm so excited to have Michelle here with us today -- thank you for your commitment to your students.

I salute all of the children, parents, and educators who have done their best to adapt.

It's why we should continue the General Assembly's bipartisan efforts, led by **Representative McCluskie and Senator Lundeen's** work through the School Finance Interim Committee, to make funding more equitable and student-centered, so that every Colorado child — and we do mean *every* child — has a chance to succeed. We should also seize the opportunity we have to pay down our education budget deficit to the lowest levels in more than a decade.

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Improving education is so important. But we know that it is only one part of our obligation to create a more just society where everyone has an opportunity to succeed.

In the past two years, the legislature has taken tremendous bipartisan steps to correct inequities in criminal justice, including bail reform, sentencing reform, juvenile justice reform, and police reform.

But the ongoing effort to ensure opportunity and justice for all means much more.

It means taking our lead from **Representative Herod and Senator Buckner** to stop the school-to-prison pipeline, by investing more in school counselors and less in overly harsh punishments.

It means honoring those Coloradans who have bravely served our country, yet been dismissed from the military and prevented from receiving certain state Veterans' benefits because of who they love. With the leadership of **Senator Moreno, Representative Ortiz**, and Adjutant General Clellan, we will start to right this wrong. I will be excited to see the Restoration of Honor Act reach my desk.

It means partnering with **Senator Gonzalez and Representative Gonzales-Gutierrez** to ensure state data isn't used to enforce a broken and inhumane immigration system.

It means working with tribal leaders and strengthening our government-to-government relationships so that we can tackle the unique hurdles facing our Native communities.

And it means addressing our unequal and unaffordable health care system.

Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. once said, quote: "Of all the forms of inequality, injustice in health care is the most shocking and inhumane." – end quote.

It's really our lives. That was true in 1966, and it's true over 50 years later in the midst of a pandemic.

When the virus struck last year, we moved swiftly to boost our health care capacity. And we took swift action to prevent folks from losing their coverage — getting more Coloradans enrolled in Medicaid, and extending the enrollment period for the state health insurance exchange.

Thank you for the bipartisan work of this legislature — and the work of our Lieutenant Governor Dianne Primavera, who heads up our Office of Saving People Money on Health Care.

I also thank the legislature — especially the members of the Joint Budget Committee — for continuing the reinsurance program, which has reduced rates on the individual market by over 20% across the board, and by -even more in rural areas.

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We've made significant progress, but too many families still struggle to afford the care they need. We look forward to working with this Legislature on measures to save people money on health care by passing a bill carried by **Senators Jaquez Lewis and Gonzales and Representatives Caraveo and Kennedy** to reduce prescription drug costs;

And we look forward to adding an affordable Colorado Option that will give Coloradans — especially in rural communities — more choice and savings, when it comes to selecting a health care plan. I thank **Representatives Roberts and Mullica and Senator Donovan** for their ongoing leadership on saving people money on health care.

This pandemic has only further illuminated the stark inequities that Coloradans of color, and those in underserved communities face. That's why each week we are committing portions of our vaccine supply to Community Health Centers, who every day, deliver health care to Colorado's most vulnerable, who are often uninsured. We've also set up 58 vaccine pop-up clinics in rural and urban underserved areas. This ensures that regardless of zip code, and regardless of immigration status, no Coloradan is left behind.

I want to thank the Black and LatinX Caucuses for their incredible partnership on this important issue and our continuing work to address ongoing disparities. We can, and we will, do better.

This pandemic has also forced us to be creative as we've reimaged our health care system.

Think, for example, of telehealth — including behavioral telehealth — which isn't just a useful innovation in a time of social distancing. It's a convenient tool for folks who want to receive care from the comfort of their own homes, and it's literally a lifesaver for many Coloradans in rural areas who may live far away from doctors and clinics and hospitals.

I also want to thank the Behavioral Health Task Force, which, under the capable leadership of Michelle Barnes, developed the blueprint that will streamline our mental health services, a far too often overlooked area of health care. I appreciate the bipartisan sponsors — **Representatives Young and Pelton, and Senators Fields and Gardner** — for taking on this vital issue.

In last year's speech, I thanked our brave Colorado firefighters who answered the call when Australia needed help to contain one of the worst wildfires in history.

Months later, the world watched as those same firefighters combated the three largest wildfires in the history of our state.

As our homes and communities burned, panicked families fled for shelter, leaving behind what — in many cases — had taken them a lifetime to create.

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I'd like to take a moment now to thank our incredible Colorado firefighters, who tirelessly, labored to save every life, every home, and every piece of property they could — even in the midst of a global pandemic.

Our very own Department of Natural Resources Director Dan Gibbs answered the call as a certified wildland firefighter, and fought alongside many brave men and women against the Grizzly Creek and the Cameron Peak Fires. Thank you Dan.

We are grateful to the fire chiefs and sheriffs who led those efforts to protect our communities in a time of greatest need, and I'm honored to be joined here today by:

Larimer County Sheriff Justin Smith who led response efforts for the Cameron Peak and the East Troublesome fires.

And to the many others who couldn't join us today — thank you for your leadership and your service.

I want to thank **Senator Rankin, Representative McCluskie** and all of the members of the Joint Budget Committee for supporting wildfire response and mitigation, which will help give Colorado the tools we need to catch and suppress wildfires before they get out of hand.

But wildfire mitigation is only one piece of the puzzle. How many homes and businesses must we lose — how many lives — before we resolve to meet the threat of climate change with the seriousness it demands?

Transitioning to renewable energy isn't just the right thing for our health and safety — it's the smart thing for jobs and our economy. That is why I ran on a platform of 100% renewable energy by 2040, and that's why my administration has taken bold action to rapidly move us toward that goal.

The private sector is already turning away from fossil fuels and looking forward to a clean energy future. To date, we've successfully secured commitments from electric utilities representing 99% of generation in our state to reduce emissions 80% or more by 2030. Colorado is a national leader in green energy jobs, the fastest growing job sector, precisely because we have embraced renewable energy.

Addressing climate change isn't just essential to protecting our health and building our economy. It's an essential part of protecting Colorado's iconic public lands, which — as we've weathered this pandemic — we have learned to appreciate even more for the sanctuary they provide.

Embracing the outdoors — being able to get away from the trials and tribulations of the daily grind — has always been a big part of the Colorado Way of Life. And when the crisis struck

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these vast public lands became our escape — a much-needed retreat where we could go to feel normal again. To be free.

Our public lands are a treasure we must never take for granted, and always work to nurture and protect.

I want to thank the Legislature — and particularly the leadership of **President Garcia, Senator Hisey, and Majority Leader Esgar and Representative Will** — for providing the resources to open Fishers Peak, Colorado's newest state park.

We're excited for Fishers Peak and the potential it holds for the Southern Colorado economy. But it's just the start of what we can do together to keep Colorado wild. Let's go even further to protect these places for years to come and leave a lasting legacy that future generations will be proud of.

By offering all Colorado vehicle owners the opportunity to purchase a park and public lands pass when they register their vehicle, we can expand affordable access to our great outdoors and ensure our state parks have a sustainable source of revenue to improve trails, expand camping, increase parking, and open new state parks. This kind of innovation embodies the Colorado way of solving problems, and I thank **Majority Leader Fenberg** for his partnership on this important initiative.

In the coming months, we will spend long hours together, working to build back — not just to where we used to be, because, we know, that wasn't good enough, but to a place that is stronger and more inclusive.

No more band-aids over gaping wounds. We in this chamber have the power to make bold transformational change that ensures our state lives up to its highest potential. We can and will seize this opportunity.

To quote my favorite Star Trek Captain, Jean-Luc Picard: "Things are only impossible until they are not."

If the problems we face now were ever intractable, today they are not. If, at some point in the past, we lacked the means or the will to tackle them, today we do not.

Over the last year we've faced a global pandemic, historic wildfires, and an unprecedented attack on our democracy. And now we have an opportunity for rebirth -- for renewal — to rise from the ashes to fulfill the promise of a Colorado for All.

Fulfilling that promise means historic investments in our people, our infrastructure, and the natural riches and beauty that surround us.

It means helping Colorado businesses grow and create good-paying jobs.

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It means eliminating the tax loopholes that benefit the few and well-connected while reducing taxes for small businesses and hardworking Coloradans.

It means ensuring Colorado is the best state in the country to start and raise a family by offering paid family leave, universal preschool, universal full-day kindergarten, and truly affordable higher education.

It means saving people money on health care.

It means ending the systems that for many generations have allowed the color of your skin, your gender, your ability, and who you love to determine the type of health care you get, getting equal pay for equal work, and whether our justice system will treat you fairly.

It's often been said during this pandemic that we are all in the same storm. But we are not in the same boat. It's time to ensure that everybody has a sturdy boat to weather any storm that comes our way.

As Coloradans, we overcome our challenges not because overcoming is inevitable — because it's not — but because we choose to do the work, to fulfill our responsibility. That is who we are. That is what we do.

So the state of the state?

This past year we've been bruised, battered and shaken to our core -- but nevertheless the state of Colorado remains strong.

This terrible virus isn't done with us yet, but we are working hard to end this pandemic. Coming out of this traumatic year, we are poised for bold transformational change. If we seize the opportunity here in this chamber, we can FINALLY live up to our fullest potential to TRULY create a Colorado for All.

There's a lot of work ahead. But we're more than ready.

God bless you all, God bless Colorado, and God bless the United States of America.