



Governor Andy Beshear's State of the Commonwealth Address *Jan. 14, 2020*

Mr. President, Mr. Speaker, Members of the General Assembly, Lt. Governor Coleman and Chris O'Bryan, constitutional officers, our Kentucky Supreme Court, invited guests, Kentucky's First Lady Britainy Beshear, my children Will and Lila— and, most especially, all of our Kentucky families watching at home.

Here we are.

Convened in this auspicious chamber, together.

Rural and urban.

Legislative, executive, and judicial.

Democrat and Republican.

Northern, central, eastern and western Kentucky.

We are all here, together tonight, on Team Kentucky.

And because of that, I am proud to report to you tonight that the state of our commonwealth is strong, coming together, and ready to face our challenges. We are all here, together, with an opportunity to fulfill the promise that is Kentucky.

That's the promise of a better life for all of our families.

Let's examine what that means.

A better life for our families requires an obligation by all of us to focus on the challenges facing our communities in *every* part of this commonwealth.

It means committing ourselves to action—not just talk—on public education so that every child gets a chance.

It means that access to health care is a pressing need that every family faces.

That the opioid epidemic must be addressed with compassion and real-world solutions,

That there are far too many Kentucky moms and dads working two, three, four jobs just to try to scrape together the monthly budget, all while their bills go up but their wages stay the same.

It means that every child who has to go to school hungry, or is in foster care or who is trying to learn algebra and history while reeling from domestic violence at home is an urgent, critical priority for each of us in this room today.

It means that we must turn the lost, the lonely, and the left behind into the found, the friended, and a meaningful part of Team Kentucky.

When I think of the challenges that we Kentuckians face, I am reminded of 1st Peter Chapter 4, verse 10 which tells us “Each of you should use whatever gift you have received to serve others, as faithful stewards of God’s grace in its various forms.”

We are each here blessed to be able to serve.

But that comes with a special responsibility.

That responsibility has been laid out everywhere from the bible to pop culture.

Luke 12:48 it states: "For unto whomsoever **much is given**, of him shall be **much** required,"

Similarly, the wisdom from Uncle Ben that launched a superhero franchise is – “With great power comes great responsibility”

To those in this chamber, much has been given, so much is expected.

And the power to govern, to change laws and to change lives, is a great power, which comes with great responsibility.

We, in this capitol and around Kentucky, are responsible for using the power and privilege of office to do right by Kentuckians, to focus our energy not on partisan squabbles but on working together to figure out how to better the commonwealth we all love so dearly.

And let me be clear: every moment we focus on partisanship, every moment we focus on national divisions, we fail to address the reality before us.

It is a reality where we are the third poorest state by per capita income.

Where 22% of our children live in poverty.

Where we are in the top eight of states in terms of hunger.

Where we have some of the highest child abuse and neglect rates in the country. Where we lose more of our brothers and sisters to opioid overdoses than all but a handful of other devastated states.

Where a recent ranking had us 45th in the country for adults with high school diplomas.

Where we are in the top 10 in lung cancer, diabetes and heart disease.

And where we incarcerate our own people at one of the highest rates in this country and in this world.

Now don't get me wrong, I believe Kentucky has a lot going for it and that the state of our commonwealth is strong.

But there are so many needs, so many in crisis, too many families crying out for help.

There is simply not enough time or enough bandwidth to solve these problems if we play partisan games.

Because those games separate and divide us, which leaves us alone.

And that is not how we do things as Kentucky.

Think about the ice storm in 2009. There are dozens of stories about the National Guard going door to door in hard hit areas, expecting to find people alone and in the cold. Instead, they saw neighbors helping neighbors – a fallen tree on someone’s property was met by a half-dozen Kentuckians with chainsaws.

And anywhere there was power, there were extension cords leading to the next house.

Think about our military and guardsmen and women who are stationed around the world. These brave men and women, many of whom have dangerous assignments, count on each other.

Their unit, their ability to work together is the key for not only their success, but coming home, safe, to their families.

Let’s take a moment to recognize all of those Kentuckians serving in our armed forces, and protecting this commonwealth and this country

So today, we still need each other to survive, but we also need each other to *thrive*.

Because we can’t do that alone, either.

Thurgood Marshall once said, “None of us got where we are solely by pulling ourselves up by our bootstraps. We got here because somebody ... bent down and helped us pick up our boots.”

I grew up in a Kentucky where my family, teachers, mentors and friends all bent down and helped me pick up my boots.

And I have seen firsthand what lifting up the boots of even one generation can do for every generation that comes after.

See, I am the proud grandson of a Baptist preacher named Orlando Russell Beshear from western Kentucky.

He and my grandmother worked hard every day of their lives to make sure my dad and his brother and sisters could become the first generation to attend college in the Beshear family.

My grandparents, and the teachers of Dawson Springs public school system, helped pick up those boots.

My dad Steve Beshear is with us tonight along with my mom Jane Beshear. I am so proud of them and their service to this commonwealth.

They show you that the change in just one generation, his generation, changes everything for the generations to come.

I see it in my kids. That they now have more opportunity because a community picked up that man's boots in the 1960s.

That's the promise of our commonwealth.

That by breaking one cycle of poverty, by providing one person a high school or college degree they never dreamed they can achieve, we can forever – and for the better – change the trajectory of our people.

Today thousands of Kentucky children and adults need us to realize this promise. They need us to help pick up their boots.

It may be help going to see a doctor through K-CHIP, the children's health care program, or expanded Medicaid.

It may be the meals provided in public school or the coat provided by FRYSCKy - our Family Resource and Youth Services Centers.

It may be stepping in to stop abuse and neglect.

Right here and right now, we have a can't-miss opportunity to make major, widespread progress. So we have to take on the big challenges, not do what is politically safe.

It's what our people deserve. It's what we were elected to do.

In our first month in office, my administration took immediate action:

I restored voting rights to more than 140,000 Kentuckians that had committed nonviolent felonies.

My faith teaches me the value of redemption and these are thousands of our neighbors who served their time and should have the opportunity to become part of our democratic process again.

I will never forget that day. Rynn Young had lost his right to vote at 18 – he'd never voted in his life. He'd served his time, become a productive citizen. But he could not take his twin 16-month old girls to the polls to show them the importance of voting.

Now, he can. After signing the executive order restoring his and other rights, I handed him the pen. The look on his face was something I will always remember.

But he and so many others deserve more. It's time to pass a constitutional amendment that automatically restores voting rights to non-violent offenders that complete their sentences.

Days after restoring voting rights, I rescinded the Medicaid waiver that would have kicked more than a hundred thousand Kentuckians off of their health care.

Access to health care is a basic human right and it will be protected during my administration. We can't expect to create the work force of the future if our people aren't healthy.

My administration further stopped \$8 billion in managed care contracts that were rushed through just days before I took office.

The government contract review committee, made up of legislators in this room, unanimously recommended the contract be terminated, because these contracts should be subject to a process that the people of Kentucky have confidence in.

Last week, in what may have seen like a small step to some, the Lt Governor and I announced that we would waive the GED testing fee for anyone who couldn't afford it.

Already, we are seeing major response from those that realize a high school degree or GED can change their life and the next generations of their family.

And I have been intentional about building an inclusive cabinet that reflects the people of Kentucky and who will represent their interests.

Diversity isn't a buzz word or a metric. It's a value. It makes us a better government and makes our state more attractive to investment.

We're making so much progress already and I will bring this same energy and dedication each and every day of my term.

Because we have so much more to do.

What I am focused on is the **WHERE** we are going. It's a simple acronym that encompasses our Team Kentucky agenda.

W is for Wages. *For far too many families the bills are going up while incomes are stagnant.*

H is for Health care. *We can't sit back while prescription drug prices soar and access to health care remains under attack.*

E is for Education. *Public education has the power to transform lives. It will be prioritized under my administration.*

R is for Retirement. *A pension is a promise and should be treated as such. We owe so much to our educators, social workers, first responders and public servants.*

The last E is for Example. *I am committed to changing the tone in Frankfort because we have so much more in common than what divides us.*

This is our obligation. To make sure that every action we take in this capitol building helps our people.

It means our economic approach must be grounded in creating good-paying, family-supporting jobs across our commonwealth, and not just increasing corporate profits.

And that those good jobs must pay a woman the same as they would a man. In 2020, it's time equal work results in equal pay.

We have so much to offer in Kentucky: unparalleled natural beauty, a workforce of educators and health care providers who go to work every day to do right by their neighbors, farmers who wake up early and work late grow our food, miners who continue to work underground to provide for their families, business owners who

run the diners and shops that make up the main streets of our communities, and dads and moms who work second and third shifts at our factories to make ends meet.

These are the people that I think about every day. These are the people that should be at the forefront of the decisions we make in this building.

That is why it is my mission, and it should be our mission, to work to transform our economy to become an international leader in the industries of the future, starting with agriculture technology.

I want to take a moment to give credit where credit is due, the last administration landed an amazing agri-tech project in AppHarvest, and its founder Jonathan Webb.

Jonathan, who is here today, is building what will be the largest greenhouse in North America. He's going to employ nearly 300 Kentuckians, and he's doing it in eastern Kentucky.

But this should just be the start. We have already begun exciting talks on how to build our agri-tech infrastructure with everyone ranging from our Council on Postsecondary Education President Aaron Thompson to an official delegation from the Netherlands.

To attract the jobs of the future, we must invest in three areas: infrastructure, workforce training, and most importantly, education.

On infrastructure, we must focus on completing important projects for families across our commonwealth. It means I'm committed to speeding up the Mountain Parkway project in Eastern Kentucky and building the I-69 bridge to open up western Kentucky.

It also means ensuring that every area of Kentucky has clean drinking water. Because our families deserve it and new business demands it.

And it means coming together to chart our future to ensure every area of the state has high-speed internet.

We can do this, as Team Kentucky, because every part of our commonwealth matters and every part has an important role to play in making our economy thrive.

I believe in a bigger brighter future.

That requires that our Kentucky families don't have to worry about losing health care coverage because of a preexisting condition. I hear members of both parties say those very words.

So this session, let's pass a state law ensuring no one can lose coverage in this state, ever again, based on a preexisting condition.

But that is not enough.

There are far too many Kentuckians who are right now rationing insulin, or deciding between a prescription drug expense or healthy food, rent or school supplies.

In fact, a member of this chamber has talked about having to ration insulin himself

Most bottles of insulin cost just \$7 to produce and yet big pharma is charging our people upwards of \$300 a vial. It is wrong. It is cruel.

We must fight back.

There are a number of bills in the legislature right now to curb the costs of insulin. Representative Danny Bentley, a Republican, and Representative Patti Minter, a Democrat, are sponsoring one such bill. Let's pass it. The approximately 530,000 diabetics, according to the American Diabetes Association, in this state are counting on it.

While we are at it, while we are finding common ground on health care, we should also end surprise medical bills.

Having a loved one in the hospital, going through a procedure, needing emergency services is already hard.

Getting an unexpected \$10,000 bill is devastating.

I know nearly everyone here and everyone at home has received one of these bills. My story, was receiving a five-figure bill for a procedure and testing my family was told was in network and would be covered.

I know the feeling and the fear that comes with opening those bills.

So let's come together and pass a law ending surprise billing in Kentucky.

And then there is our drug epidemic. It's the challenge of our times.

It continues to tear our families and communities apart.

It takes the lives of people we love and care about.

Which is why I appreciate that Attorney General Daniel Cameron is going to continue our lawsuits against opioid manufacturers and distributors.

Let's not sugarcoat it. Opioid manufacturers and distributors fueled this crisis. They have the blood of our loved ones on their hands, and they must be held responsible and made part of the solution.

We must defeat them.

And when we do, we cannot squander what will be a once in a lifetime chance to move beyond this crisis.

Let's make a pledge and turn it into law. That every dollar we get from these companies that have wreaked such havoc on our commonwealth should go towards ending the opioid epidemic.

Those steps would be a good start to addressing the health of our people.

But if we are to fulfill the promise that is Kentucky, the key is education.

It's no secret that the states that have the highest per capita income, where families make the highest wages, are the most educated states in our country.

And the key to breaking cycles of poverty – that's education too.

Waiving the GED test fee is a good start.

But the future, the key to breaking cycles of poverty, of creating a better educated population and of attracting great jobs, or creating better wages and climbing out of the 40s in too many rankings – the key and the solution is in our public schools.

It's time to come together, all of us, in support of public education.

This is a new opportunity, a new start with a new governor, where we can all pledge to lift up our communities by supporting and investing in our public schools.

We can wipe the slate clean, and we can move forward in support of public education together.

Investing in our public schools means investing in our teachers.

These teachers deserve a raise. They are on the front lines of every problem we face as a commonwealth, from family-member addiction, to hunger, to the need for better jobs.

And right now we face a teacher shortage that threatens the education of our children.

This body has spoken to the need of more engineers and more nurses in this state.

But how can that happen if we lack full-time science and math teachers.

We've figured out how to give tax incentives to corporations—so I know we can figure out how to pay a living wage to the men and women who get up at the crack of dawn every morning to go open their classrooms, stay up late grading papers, and give everything they can so our Kentucky children have every opportunity.

My commitment started with asking Jacqueline Coleman, our lieutenant governor, to serve as our new secretary of the Education and Workforce Development Cabinet.

She has graded those papers, stood in that classroom and experienced our teacher shortage firsthand

She is going to do a wonderful job

My commitment will continue with including an across the board \$2,000 raise to our Kentucky teachers in my budget. We can and we must afford it.

Our commitment must continue with keeping our promise and fully funding our pension obligations in that budget, keeping our promise to not just our teachers, but to all public servants.

A commitment to breaking cycles of poverty must also include higher education. In this state, we need more of every option. More graduates with a four-year college degree and more workers with technical degrees and certifications for skilled trades.

To do that, we must end our historic cuts to our universities and community colleges.

So stay tuned, because the education first budget that I am constructing will be designed to provide us the opportunity to truly change lives moving forward. And it will embrace higher education.

A commitment to the future also requires that we create new revenue to meet the growing needs of our state. Right now we are watching more than \$500 million dollars in gaming revenue go across the border to states like Indiana, Ohio and Illinois. It's time to stop that flow. To use that money for our needs.

Representative Adam Koenig has filed a sports betting bill. I fully support it, and we should pass it.

But that shouldn't be the end of the conversation. Because now, all of our neighboring states – most all of them Republican led – have embraced expanded gaming, while we are being left behind.

Finally, in this session, we must not just discuss, but we must pass meaningful criminal justice reform.

In Kentucky, we have one of the highest incarceration rates in the country and in the world.

Our people aren't more violent, we don't have more criminals.

We just put more people in our prisons and jails.

And in the upcoming budget, you are seeing that not only hurts our future, but our present. Because the costs of our system skyrocketing while our facilities are crumbling, and taking necessary funds from critical needs like education and health care.

Successful criminal justice reform must do several things.

It must reduce our incarcerated population.

It must decrease recidivism and the revocation of probation and parole.

It must address the racial bias and racism in our justice system.

It must provide meaningful addiction treatment and recovery services.

It must consolidate, and not expand our state prison institutions.

Other states have done this – and they’ve done it while reducing their crime rates.

We can do this too. And we should do it together.

We have the power and the responsibility to break the cycle of poverty, addiction and neglect. This should drive our decisions on economic development, on funding for public schools and social services and on health care.

In just two weeks we will be here again to do the people’s business with a budget address. It will unveil a budget that this administration has put countless hours into.

One where I believe we have transformed a budget of pain into one of progress.

One that will help us break cycles of poverty.

One that will invest in both the safety and education of our children.

With that type of budget, I know that together we can do big things.

Let’s make sure that politics and partisan rancor don’t get in the way.

I believe as Helen Keller said, “Alone we can do so little; together we can do so much.” We are each here as a deliberative body that has an enormous potential to make a positive difference for all of the Kentuckians who sent us here. We work for them.

Let’s show that despite all the cynicism, we can actually get things done for our people. Just think what a message that will send for the state of our politics.

No matter what circumstances we are born into, we all rely on other people.

In my inaugural address, I talked about how our founders created not just a state, but a commonwealth.

A commonwealth for the common good of all Kentuckians.

That in the very creation of Kentucky, they recognized—no, they demanded—that we come together to serve its people.

So, can we do it?

Can we come together to fulfill the promise of a better life?

It won’t be easy.

We live in the most divisive times of most of our lives.

Every day, forces try to divide us.

By saying that if someone is different than you, then they must be feared.

If they belong to a different religion, political party, or watch a different cable news channel, they must be wrong.

And we see widespread campaigns of misinformation aimed not just at creating division, but even hate.

And let’s admit it. These attempts at division have been effective.

We see it on the internet and in our neighborhoods.

Kentuckians unable to talk to each other.

Unwilling to shake each other's hand.

So here we are.

Right here, right now with a moment...an opportunity to turn the tide.

An opportunity to stop the yelling and the name calling. Kentuckians deserve better than the bitterness that divides our politics.

And an opportunity to prove to this commonwealth and this country that we can get this right.

It will take us burying old feuds and healing old wounds.

It will take us not just adopting civility in tone but in practice.

And doing that alone will be an accomplishment.

But it takes more than civility to thrive, it will take cooperation.

Winston Churchill once said that courage is what it takes to stand up and speak; courage is also what it takes to sit down and listen.

Coming together will take that courage to listen. To strive to understand people who may disagree with you.

It is how we move forward. I know we have more in common than what divides us.

I know that we can do what are entrusted here to do: deliver results for Kentuckians.

I am honored to serve as your governor. I will serve with honesty and good faith.

Our Kentucky motto is United We Stand, Divided We Fall. I believe that deeply. I look forward to working with all of you and the rest of Team Kentucky.

God Bless you and God Bless the commonwealth of Kentucky.

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