



State of the Commonwealth Address

Governor Andy Beshear

January 5, 2022

President Stivers, Speaker Osborne, Members of the General Assembly, Lieutenant Governor Coleman, constitutional officers, Chief Justice Minton and the justices of the Kentucky Supreme Court, secretaries of the Executive Cabinet, General Lambertson – and to all the Kentuckians around the commonwealth who are watching safely from home, including Kentucky’s First Lady and toy-drive superwoman Britainy Beshear and our children, Will and Lila. And, of course, Virginia. Thanks for being there for the people of Kentucky once again.

I am humbled to stand before you tonight to deliver my third State of the Commonwealth Address. In many ways, this address feels both the toughest and the most exciting.

We come into this New Year with excitement and optimism, with an economy booming like never before. At the same time, we are all processing grief and sadness after a year of unprecedented natural disasters and a continuing pandemic.

We are just weeks from the deadliest tornado outbreak in state history, which took 77 lives, including one child just 6 days old. Entire towns were nearly wiped off the map, leaving thousands of our brothers and sisters homeless or struggling.

All of this as we continue to fight a COVID pandemic that has now taken more than 12,000 of our Kentucky family, friends and neighbors and more than 828,000 of our fellow Americans.

But even through these trials and the pain we carry from them, I am here to report the State of our Commonwealth is strong. And I am confident, even certain, that our time – Kentucky’s time – is here. Our commonwealth is strong. It is strong because we are strong.

In Kentucky, we are good people, tough people, resilient people. We care deeply for one another. And while they may knock us down, no tornado, no pandemic, no flood, no ice storm can break us. Because we do not break.

All of America – and indeed the entire world – has now seen who we are: neighbors who open our homes and hearts to one another. People who embrace selflessness, generosity and love. All while we were reminded that any arguments, any divisions, just aren’t that important.

And not even the difficulties of our present can stop our excitement of the future. And good people deserve a good future. Our time is here. Kentucky is no longer a fly-over state. We are the destination.



We are celebrating the greatest economic progress we've seen in our nearly 230-year history, with the largest ever private sector investment, the most new jobs and the second highest wages in state history – and we are just getting started.

We will talk more about this exciting time, our time. But first, let's address our trials and our tragedies. 2021 was marked by the loss of far too many of our friends, family members and neighbors. Everyone lost someone, maybe multiple some ones, over the last year.

On top of another year of painful losses to the pandemic, 2021 was bookended by natural disasters: devastating ice storms and historic flooding in January and February, and the deadly tornado outbreak in December.

After each of these disasters, I visited the communities that were suffering, to see the damage myself and to listen to the stories of our families. I traveled to a warming center in Ashland during the ice storm. I found a friend of mine sitting in the corner with his dad, whose dialysis machine was plugged into the wall. I watched as volunteers brought in meals, and a medical team from King's Daughters arrived and walked family to family to make sure everyone was okay.

One month later, that same warming center was underwater as record flooding hit parts of Eastern Kentucky. Days later, I went to Beattyville, which had been almost completely submerged. I listened to one of our county judges describe an amazing helicopter rescue by our National Guard. Let's take a moment to thank the National Guard for their heroic efforts this last year – I am proud to be your commander in chief.

Months after Beattyville, I was in Nicholas County. A historic flood had taken homes clear off their foundations, red Xs painted on their doors as a painful symbol that people could not return to their homes.

And then came December, with at least five tornados hitting on the same terrible night, one of which stayed on the ground bringing death and destruction for more than 200 miles. The stories of that night are tragic, but they are also heroic.

I met a farmer in Taylor County who pulled multiple neighbors from the basements of their collapsed homes, clearing away enough debris to pull them out. He told me one family called out: "Please don't leave us!" And he didn't. That man, Nevin Price, is with us tonight with his wife, Sherrie. Let's give him the round of applause that a hero deserves.

Jeremy Creason couldn't be with us tonight. Jeremy is chief of the Fire Department in Mayfield. He was among the first on the scene after a tornado leveled a candle factory with dozens of workers inside. I remember talking to Jeremy, the mayor and police chief just after midnight on that difficult night as they worked to save so many lives. To all our first responders, the people of Kentucky thank you.

Nothing I'd ever witnessed prepared me for the level of destruction I saw in Western Kentucky. One of the hardest hit places was my dad's hometown of Dawson Springs. This is a place I know, a place that I love. This was always a safe place for me, a place where my family sang hymns on my grandfather's porch. Miraculously, that home, that porch still stand, but just a block away everything is gone.

Seventeen people, from a town where bad things simply don't happen, were lost. My faith teaches me that while we struggle to understand the whys of human suffering, we can see the presence of God's in the response. Scripture (Galatians 6:2) tells us: "Bear one another's burdens, and so fulfill the law of Christ."

We saw that in the actions of our people and in the outpouring of love and support from around the world. People from all over, many with little or no personal connection to Kentucky, have pledged millions of dollars to help the recovery and have volunteered thousands of hours. Many others – including Lieutenant Governor Coleman, folks from the executive branch and LRC – rolled up their sleeves to give blood at drives like one sponsored here at the Capitol. And when the First Lady started a toy drive, gifts poured in and piled up by the hundreds of thousands to make sure these kids who had already lost so much could have a good Christmas.

Britainy, I am so proud of your work. I was changed by your toy drive. Passing out those toys, and in visiting with those families, I had at least two special moments.

One was when I joined Coach Cal and Samaritan's Feet to hand out shoes. A young boy lit up as I pulled out a new pair of blue sneakers. He immediately asked if he could put them on right there, right then. We got them on him, and he jumped up and began running around, showing pure joy in a pair of shoes... just days after devastation.

And then there was Kara McKnight, a special girl I met at our Christmas celebration at Pennyrile Park. It had been a tough month for her and her family. She lost her older brother, Logan, around Thanksgiving. And then she lost her house in the tornado. My daughter, Lila, and I volunteered to be Kara's personal shoppers, and I started handing her more and more board games and other toys.

When her hands were full, I started loading Lila up with more, just for Kara. And that's when it happened. She began to laugh. An amazing, special laugh I will always remember. A laugh that reminded me that even in the darkness, there is wonderful, pure, joyful light.

Kara, her brother, Jett, and her parents, Ashley and Jason, are with us tonight. And I know Logan is here with us, too. Thank you to Kara and her entire family for their strength and for their goodness.

The courage and compassion Americans and Kentuckians have shown for one another during our plight fills me with pride at being your Governor and also with certainty that we – as Team

Kentucky – have what it takes to meet this challenge. We are committed to being there for those who lost everything in these tornadoes.

I appreciate President Biden’s support for our people during this disaster. He granted my request that the federal government pay for the entire cost of the first 30 days of cleanup. That’s a huge help, and I have requested an extension. Because there’s so much more that needs to be done.

As part of that effort, I am working with House and Senate members on fast-track legislation to help our impacted families. This legislation directs \$150 million to help our communities rebuild. Another \$50 million would go to the region’s schools to help them recover and get them ready to provide the best possible education to the kids there. It provides additional tools to bring and keep jobs in these communities. And it shows that we – Democrats and Republicans, House and Senate, Executive and Legislative branches – will stand with these families.

So I want every family and community touched by these storms to know that I am with you, the General Assembly is with you, and the Commonwealth of Kentucky is with you, today, tomorrow and however long it takes. We will rebuild. Every structure, every life.

Now, we cannot talk about the state of our commonwealth without addressing the ongoing COVID pandemic. As I noted earlier, we’ve lost more than 12,000 of our fellow Kentuckians to this evil virus. The nationwide death toll has surpassed 828,000. Those are 828,000 children of God, missed and mourned by their communities and those who loved them. And right now, we are seeing a severe, unprecedented escalation of cases due to a new variant we must take seriously. In fact, today is the most new cases we have had in a single day during the pandemic.

Yet even with these concerns, I remain convinced that we can and will beat COVID, because in 2021 we gained the tools and knowledge we need for victory. And in a point of pride we should all share, Kentucky and our people continued to take a leading role in this fight.

In late December 2020, I visited U of L Health as the very first COVID vaccines arrived, delivered by one of our very own UPS employees. Later, I visited UPS Worldport; the workers there, proud Kentuckians and maybe a few misguided Hoosiers, continue to ensure these lifesaving Shots of Hope reach people here, throughout America and around the globe.

The testing and vaccine protocols developed here in the commonwealth with the help of partners like Kroger and Gravity Diagnostics have gone on to become national models. Think about, in little more than a year, we’ve built the most robust testing and vaccination networks in human history. It was called the greatest logistics challenge since World War II, and we got it done.

In just over a year, we’ve vaccinated over 62% of every man, woman and child in the commonwealth, something that has never, ever been done before. Right now, people can drive or even walk to one or multiple locations where they can receive, free of charge, COVID testing, or a vaccination, or a booster. Get your booster.

We still need many more of our people to choose to get vaccinated and boosted, but we can and should take pride in the fact that our vaccination rate has consistently been in the top three in our region and now nearly 75% of all Kentuckians 18 and older have received at least their first shot of hope.

My administration's COVID response is and will always be based on saving lives: not what is easy, not what is popular, but what is necessary and what is right. That's why we were one of the very first states to prioritize vaccinations for our educators. It's how Kentucky was one of the first states to return to in-person instruction in every single school district. The rest of the nation later adopted our approach.

And as our kids went back to in-person learning, they had the support of the First Lady's Coverings for Kids. That effort ensured that students across the commonwealth had a mask to wear to protect them as they learned. Individuals and businesses, including Ford Motor Company and Humana, donated more than 2-point-4 million masks.

Folks, COVID is our Spanish flu. It is our plague. But we are strong enough to defeat it no matter how long it takes.

Yes, in 2021 we faced a once-in-100-years pandemic that is the challenge of our lifetime. On top of that, we have dealt with flooding, ice storms and deadly tornadoes. Still, we never took our eye off the ball and worked every day to build a better future of our kids.

Along the way, we shattered every economic development record in the books! We attracted a record \$11.2 billion in private-sector investments. Even better, these investments will create more than 18,000 quality jobs for Kentucky families.

In September, we landed the largest single investment this state has ever seen. At nearly \$6 billion and 5,000 new jobs, Ford Motor Company and its partner, SK Innovation, are going to build the nation's largest electric vehicle battery plants right here in Kentucky.

Bill Ford Jr. is Ford's executive chair, and Henry Ford's great-grandson. He sat in my office and said, "Andy, this is the biggest step in the auto industry since the Model T. And this is the biggest investment Ford has ever made, and we are making it in Kentucky."

That's when it hit me: Ford Motor Company – a company that is as American as America – was betting its future. And who did Ford trust enough to bet its future on? The people of the Commonwealth of Kentucky.

And it is not just Ford.

Pratt Industries is making its largest ever investment – a half-a-billion-dollars – in Henderson. This is the largest project in Western Kentucky in 25 years.

Toyota continues to believe in us, investing over \$461 million in electric vehicles and adding 1,400 direct, full-time jobs.

GE Appliances is expanding in Louisville, showing us that U.S. manufacturing is back. In October, the company announced a \$450 million investment and 1,000 new jobs.

Amazon operationalized its new \$1.5 billion Air Hub, creating 2,000 jobs in Northern Kentucky.

Ahlstrom-Munksjo located a second facility in Madisonville with a \$70 million investment that will create more than 50 jobs.

And Fidelity Investments in Covington, which was already one of Northern Kentucky's largest employers, announced 600 professional jobs this summer.

These are world-class companies choosing us; some of the most sophisticated corporations on the planet betting their future on Kentucky. These are the jobs of the future and they are coming to every part of our state.

Kentucky is leading on electric vehicles. Ford and Toyota's investments were joined by Firestone Industrial Products, creating 250 jobs in Whitley County.

We, Kentucky, are leading in agritech, with AppHarvest announcing four expansions in Morehead, Somerset, Berea and Richmond. AppleAtcha, who is growing apples on abandoned coal mine property, is expected to create 2,000 full-time jobs in Inez. AppleAtchah's own Bernie Kosar – Super Bowl and national champion quarterback – is here with us tonight. Thank you Bernie for the work you all are doing to fuel our agritech industry and feed our people. Fresh Harvest continues to grow in Stanford and Enviroflight is thriving in Maysville.

Other high-tech companies have made great strides, including Rajant in Morehead, which expanded its mesh telecommunications system, and Novelis, which opened its first new facility since 1982 investing over \$300 million in Todd County.

Kentucky was already the worldwide leader in bourbon production, but in 2021 we saw the industry continue to expand, both in production and tourism. We welcomed revivals like the Dant Family and Log Still. We celebrated exciting new players like Horse Soldier Bourbon in Somerset. These folks are the real deal. American heroes that, again, chose us. They are investing hundreds of millions of dollars in Southern Kentucky to build something really special. We also applauded stalwarts like Four Roses and Heaven Hill for cutting ribbons on expanded visitor centers. And I must say a special personal thank you to Secretary of Commerce Gina Raimondo, whom I personally worked with to remove harmful bourbon tariffs and ensure a bright future for a signature industry.

As you can see, the incredible economic leaps we are taking aren't confined to just a few counties or a few cities. And my pledge is that everyone will share in the coming prosperity, especially the regions and the neighborhoods that are far too often left out.

Let me give you one of my favorite examples. A month and a half ago, I returned to Beattyville. This time, it was not to respond to a natural disaster, but to welcome LION First Responder back to the community. LION, which reopened its PPE manufacturing in the community; and it did so in the same building the company left in 2010. What I saw that day was not just hope, it was progress; it was a step toward prosperity. Here with us tonight representing LION are Diane Best and Patty Barker. Let's thank them for investing in our Kentucky communities.

So after a record year – one where we won, and we won, and we won some more – where do we go? The answer should be simple: forward.

With all that we have experienced this year, we should be over the fighting, over the bickering, over any games.

After this year, I am convinced that our role in government is not to move the state right or left, but to move it forward.

So this year, and in this session, we have a duty – a responsibility – to make the investments that can turn two years of great progress into 20 years of real prosperity.

In a little over a week, I will join you again to unveil a budget that does just that.

I believe a budget is more than lines and numbers. It's a values statement, and my upcoming budget will reflect our Kentucky values of family, faith, community and a deep compassion for our neighbors.

It will make historic investments in education, as world-class companies require a world-class workforce. It will create a fund for investing in development sites, so that we attract the next Ford or Toyota. It will invest in essential workers, like our Kentucky State Police, our nurses and our teachers, to ensure we can not only recruit, but retain these critical jobs.

It will ensure we remain a leader in agriculture technology in Eastern Kentucky and will build on our pharmaceutical footprint in Northern Kentucky.

It will continue to deliver on our promise of a world-class airport in Paducah. It will continue to invest in infrastructure, with more water and sewer grants. And we will continue to expand the Mountain Parkway to four lanes and construct the I-69 bridge. It will move us ever closer to the announcement – which I hope we can make next year – that we will construct a Brent Spence Companion bridge without tolls.

And it will include a raise for all of our state workers. We simply cannot say that we respect and support our teachers, social workers and other state workers while removing their pensions and not providing them a raise in over a decade. And I care enough for each and every one of them to get them closer to paying them what they are worth.

Folks our time is here, and our future is now. But for us to achieve our destiny we have to embrace it and work for it. President Abraham Lincoln a hero to this state and this country said it best: “You cannot escape the responsibility of tomorrow by evading it today.”

As representatives of the people of Kentucky, we are called at this crucial moment in our history to accept this great responsibility and to lead. I know we can agree to work together to rebuild and recover. I know we can take the bold actions needed to move us forward.

If we choose to act wisely, maybe if we choose to act kindly, then we can look back decades from now and see that it was this moment, right here, that made all the difference.

After standing in what used to be downtown Mayfield, after walking through what used to be Dawson Springs, after seeing the devastation of Bremen, I think we should all be changed people.

So let’s spend this legislative session focused on bettering the lives of our people. Let’s focus on restoring and repairing lives and buildings in Western Kentucky. Let’s focus on reducing the number of children or seniors who go to bed hungry each night. Let’s focus on bringing healing and recovery to those struggling with opioid and other addiction issues. Let’s focus on making sure our children are getting the very best education. Let’s work together to support our workforce to fill all the jobs coming our way. Let’s make sure that our incredible economic momentum reaches every corner of the commonwealth and every neighborhood in all of our cities. And let’s not devolve into anger, division, bitterness or hate ever again.

We’ve been called to be better people. And we should be.

Scripture further guides us: “Let us not become weary of doing good, for at the proper time we will reap a harvest if we do not give up.” We are too strong to give up. We must go forward.

Our time is here; our future is now. God bless and God bless the Commonwealth of Kentucky. Thank you.

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