



State of the Commonwealth Address
GOVERNOR ANDY BESHEAR
January 3, 2024

President Stivers, Speaker Osborne, members of the General Assembly, constitutional officers, justices of the Kentucky Supreme Court, General Lambertson, former Governor Steve Beshear and former First Lady Jane Beshear.

Lieutenant Governor Coleman: We are glad you are recovering and are with us tonight, along with Second Gentleman Chris O'Bryan.

First Lady Britanny Beshear, thank you for all you do for our family – and all Kentucky families.

And to all Kentuckians watching from home, good evening.

Tonight, I'm speaking from the House chambers, grateful for the invitation from our legislative leaders to offer this important annual review.

It is a new year, and everyone has something to be excited about. Many are excited that I will be serving as your Governor for the next four years, and the rest, you are excited that I am now term limited. Regardless, of your perspective, it gives us a chance to push politics aside and move our commonwealth forward, together.

Tonight, I'm proud to report that thanks to the strength of our people and our red-hot economy, the state of our commonwealth is stronger than it has ever been.

Over the past four years, we have gotten through so many hard times together. And now, we are getting to the good times together.

We have arrived here by leading with kindness, compassion and empathy for one another. That is what my faith teaches me – to love my neighbor as myself. It is that Golden Rule and the parable of the Good Samaritan that have guided and should guide us.

It is those who have stepped up, set politics and division aside to just help each other, because that is who we are as Kentuckians. No pandemic, no tornado, no flood – or any other challenge – will ever change that. How we dealt with these historic challenges wasn't red or blue. It wasn't "R" or "D." It was just us – Team Kentucky, where everybody matters.

Tonight, we are going to discuss how we can embrace a new era as an economic and moral leader in this country, and we will take time to highlight the amazing stories of those who are helping us turn the last four years of progress into decades of prosperity.

As we look forward to brighter days, I want you to hear about our Good Samaritans, our helpers and our heroes who are out there day-in and day-out making a difference – or as Poet Laureate Silas House described them: Those Who Carry Us.

First, let's talk about our record setting economy. We enter 2024 after just securing the best four-year period for economic growth in our history.

We set a record for new private sector investment – more than \$28.7 billion dollars – the most secured during the tenure of any Governor. Together, we created more than 51,200 new jobs for our communities and families – and at some of the highest wages we've ever seen, last year averaging \$26.67 an hour before benefits.

I say “we,” because economic development is a team sport. It takes both the executive and the legislative branches, along with so many hardworking local officials and business leaders. Because of **our** work – because of all of our work – the eyes of the world are on Kentucky and what we are doing.

Ford and its partner, SK On, are building the two largest electric vehicle battery plants on planet Earth in Glendale, Kentucky – that is the largest single economic development project in our state's history. It has cemented our status as the EV battery production capital of the United States and it ensures our future as an automotive leader with the chance to be **the** automotive leader.

The project is off to a fast start. As of last month, BlueOval SK had already hired approximately 400 Kentuckians, and they are just getting started. Beginning this year, BlueOval SK plans to hire approximately 2,000 more of our people to work in Hardin County.

Among those helping to get our people to work are Jamie Lowe and Ryan Wheeler, and both are here with us tonight.

Ryan grew up in E-town and had dreams of becoming a professional baseball player – and was even drafted by the New York Yankees. He started his career with Ford and has now come back home to lead as a plant manager.

Jamie is part of their HR team and has helped bring on engineers, production and maintenance supervisors, and she will not stop until she provides incredible career opportunities to 5,000 Kentuckians.

Thank you, Jamie, Ryan, SK On and Ford for choosing us ... and helping to lead Kentucky into the future.

Next, let's look to Henderson. There, Pratt Industries opened the cleanest, greenest recycled paper mill in the country. With over 320 jobs paying almost \$40 dollars an hour, Pratt is transformational for our Western Kentucky families.

Tonight, we have global CEO Brian McPheely with us. Brian sees what others are seeing more clearly every day: that Kentucky's workforce is second to none, and there's no better place to do business. Brian, thank you, and thanks to Executive Global Chairman Anthony Pratt for your investment in us. And if you think one Kentucky plant is great, imagine what two or three or even four would be like.

Tonight, we are also joined by Matt Vanderpool, who is Pratt's newest electrical and instrumentation supervisor. Matt is from Henderson and is helping to ensure Pratt is rooted in Western Kentucky. He serves as Henderson Community College's chapter president for a nationally recognized apprenticeship program. Pratt Industries is sponsoring two of his students who will start in the spring.

Thank you to Pratt for being such great Team Kentucky partners.

Creating this economy, making this happen, it takes all of us moving forward, together. I want to thank the General Assembly for coming together to pass legislation needed to secure major projects like AESC's \$2 billion dollar, 2,000-job EV gigafactory in Bowling Green. That's another project that shows we are on a roll, but also highlights the site preparation, the work that it takes to lead the country in speed-to-market and to secure these wins.

You, the General Assembly, recognized this work and invested in the last budget session, providing \$200 million dollars for site development across the commonwealth, as well as a closing fund to keep us competitive. It is paying off. We now have investments in over 85 counties stretching from Fulton to Pikeville; and the closing fund has been critical in landing projects like Ascend Elements, which is creating over 400 good-paying jobs in Hopkinsville.

In my budget proposal, I am asking that we move forward, together and re-up these good programs. This is our chance to build a Top-10 economy with good jobs for all our families. So, let's make it happen.

As our economy is growing stronger, so are our people. We have grown more resilient thanks to the Kentuckians who are helping us rebuild after the tornadoes that devastated the west and the historic flooding that ravaged the east.

Just over two years ago, the deadliest tornadoes in our state's history took the lives of 81 Kentuckians. Together, we mourned each one lost and wrapped our arms around each of those families. And just six months later, Eastern Kentucky was hit with the deadliest floods in my lifetime, which took the lives of 45 Kentuckians.

In both areas, we came together to lift up those families and we committed to be there every step of the way and to rebuild better than before. And that's exactly what we are doing.

So far, we have secured hundreds of millions of dollars in state and federal funding and raised millions more in donated funds for each region. We are rebuilding roads and bridges, water and wastewater systems, and we are building new homes for families that lost everything.

We have already pledged \$21.6 million dollars to build and repair 300 homes with the help of nonprofit partners in the west. 175 of them are completed, under construction or approved to start construction. We have projects in Caldwell, Christian, Fulton, Graves, Hickman, Hopkins, Marshall, Ohio and Warren counties.

In the east, we've now announced seven sites for new developments on higher ground. They include Skyview in Perry County; Chestnut Ridge and Olive Branch in Knott County; New Hope

and Wayland in Floyd County; and Grand View and The Cottages at Thompson Branch in Letcher County.

Each site gives us a chance to start anew, to build stronger and reimagine neighborhoods that brings revitalization. These homes aren't just a safe place to call home, they are symbols of hope.

And we could not be making this progress without leaders like Pastor Stephen Boyken, president at The Hope Initiative and lead pastor at His House Ministries, who is here with us tonight from Graves County. Pastor Boyken and his team are living The Word. And they are relentless in working to build the next and the next and the next home. They have helped so many families, like Jackie Willie, her son, Khyree, and her mom, Tami, who are also all here with us tonight.

The Willies' home was destroyed by the tornado, but the next morning, the Willie family began working to make a difference in the lives of others. Instead of focusing on her own needs, Jackie went to work at the distribution center that was set up to take care of her neighbors. Tami worked in both the distribution center and on the toy drive – even though she had recently been injured in a car crash and was not sure she'd ever walk again.

So, when their new home was built with funds from the Team West Kentucky Tornado Relief Fund, The Hope Initiative wanted to make sure that it was accessible. Today, we celebrate with the Willie family that they not only have a new home, but after many surgeries, Tami is able to walk again.

To Pastor Boyken, Jackie, Khyree and Tami: Thank you for your work and your strength.

We have also seen leaders in the east following the floods. Leaders like Scott McReynolds, executive director of the Housing Development Alliance out of Perry County. After the floods, Scott and his team got to work building houses for people like the White family, who are here with us tonight.

William, Cheyenne and their son, Caleb, were living in Troublesome Creek in Knott County. The family had just saved enough to start making their home their own, and William was starting to put new floors in as the flood hit their neighborhood. They watched as their home washed away.

But thanks to Scott and his team, as well as so many generous donors to the flood relief fund, William, Cheyenne, Caleb and their newest addition, Maggie, have their new home – and best of all, they don't have to worry about it flooding ever again. Let's thank Scott, this family and everyone in the east making sure we get the job done.

Pastor Boyken and Scott are just two among so many people, nonprofits and volunteers who came together to help their neighbors in need after these unimaginable natural disasters. Because of them, we are keeping our promise to help these families rebuild.

As part of keeping that promise, in my budget proposal I am adding \$75 million dollars to the Eastern Kentucky SAFE Fund to continue our rebuilding efforts and adding another \$10 million

dollars from the General Fund to the Affordable Housing Trust Fund. Our local communities need these additional funds, and with a record economy we can and should be there for them.

To our families in the east and in the west: We will be there every step of the way ... by working together, and leading with our Kentucky values of faith, family and community, and we will continue to march forward, together with you.

Our commonwealth's future grows brighter every day because of our public schools and our public school educators. Look, our school employees show up for our kids every single day. And that includes the toughest days.

When the tornadoes hit Western Kentucky, I visited Bremen to assess the damage. As I was walking down the road, there was a man driving a big dump truck. He stopped, and we talked for a minute. It turned out, he's an educator at Muhlenberg County High School. He has been a teacher for more than 20 years. He was volunteering with the cleanup efforts by driving that truck to haul the chaos, to haul away the debris. It was a special moment for me to meet one of our amazing teachers who was doing even more to help his community.

His name is Matthew Oates, and he is here with us tonight. Matthew was a fourth-generation coal miner before becoming a public school teacher. Matthew's wife, Jamie, is a 3rd-grade teacher in Muhlenberg County at Longest Elementary. She has also been a teacher for over 20 years. They both grew up attending public schools that they now teach in.

To support themselves and their two kids, Matthew and Jamie Oates are both working two jobs. Our public school employees deserve better than that. It is families like the Oates who need us to step up right now and pay our public school employees closer to what they deserve.

Our educators are difference-makers every day. Let's show them that we appreciate what they do by funding an 11% raise for every public school employee.

See, we have fallen behind – Kentucky ranks 44th in starting teacher pay and 40th in average teacher pay. That is unacceptable, and it is hard to understand why we have not been able to come together and get this done for our educators, especially when our neighbors are figuring it out.

The Republican governor of Tennessee signed a bill last year to provide their teachers the largest pay raise in their state's history, and Indiana is looking to do the same. Folks, that is our competition – both to the north and to the south.

This budget is our opportunity, our chance, to make things right here in Kentucky. Let's work together and get it done, in this session.

And while we are at it lets fully fund student transportation. If we want more bus drivers, let's pay them more and let's provide the support our schools districts need.

As for our youngest learners, it's time to pass universal pre-K for all our 4-year-olds.

We are rightfully concerned about learning loss. So, we should address it where it begins. In the last academic year, only 46% of kindergartners were considered kindergarten-ready. Instituting universal pre-K the right way ... means investing in both pre-K and our child-care providers. That's why my budget proposal provides record funding to help our child-care providers in their transition to serve both younger children and provide after school programs.

Funding both, together, can be transformational. If we pass universal pre-K plus our child-care plan, an additional 34,000 Kentucky children will receive pre-K services and thousands of additional child-care spots will open up. That, my friends, would make us more competitive and it would be a true legacy of this session of the General Assembly.

See, I believe, more than ever, that we can get this done, because we have already accomplished so much in so many other important areas – like building safer roads, bridges and water systems, and we're moving ahead on so many mega-projects.

We are truly in our Eisenhower moment. Look at what we are doing together: We're building the Brent Spence companion bridge without tolls, we're four-laning the entire Mountain Parkway and we're pushing I-69 forward.

Folks, we secured federal funding to make sure high-speed internet gets to every home in Kentucky. And families are getting clean drinking water – many of them for the first time.

Look to Pendleton County, one of those homes belongs to Tom and Lori Himmelsbach, who could not be here with us tonight because they own a restaurant in Butler called the Kentucky Millstone. They teach baking classes there and work to give back to their community – like when a neighbor's house burned down, they hosted a donation drive at the restaurant. For 34 years, Tom and Lori had been hauling water to their home, but thanks to the Cleaner Water Program we were able to bring public water directly to their house for the first time ever.

I've seen the difference the Cleaner Water Program makes. It's life-changing, and it's something we owe to all our people. That's why I'm proposing we invest another \$500 million dollars in grants to our counties and local governments to continue this vital work.

Folks, this is not a partisan issue. Clean drinking water is a basic human right, and this program is building on what we created together.

To build this better, stronger Kentucky, I'm also seeking \$300 million dollars to speed up the Mountain Parkway in the east and the I-69 River Crossing in the west, as well as \$50 million dollars to help repair local bridges. Those are bridges that get our people to school, to work and to church.

We will keep moving forward, together by strengthening the infrastructure that keeps our families healthy, safe and connected and by modernizing the infrastructure that businesses rely on to succeed. These investments are our pathway to progress. They help our communities bring in new investment and new opportunities.

Our future is also brighter thanks to the health-care heroes working in our communities.

Health care is also a basic human right, and I've spent my entire public career working to increase access to quality health care for our people. From keeping us safe during the global pandemic to caring for those affected by historic natural disasters, our health-care heroes have more than proven their worth these past four years.

And in that time, we've seen some amazing progress: We protected health care access for nearly 100,000 Kentuckians by removing governmental roadblocks; we relaunched and expanded the state insurance marketplace called kynect; we expanded Medicaid coverage for new moms; we boosted our workforce by adding dental, vision and hearing coverage; we capped the cost of insulin; and we've invested in our hospital systems across the state.

One important step was securing the first hospital in West Louisville in 150 years. See, we cannot move forward together until all of our people have access to quality, affordable health care in their own community. No one should have to drive two hours or take multiple busses just to see their doctor.

That's something Corenza Townsend recognized in her own community. In 2016, Corenza was working at a Norton Healthcare Center when she noticed West Louisville families didn't have a reliable place to get their health care. So, she got to work on the idea of starting a community health fair. But she also had bigger dreams – dreams of a hospital in the West End.

Ultimately, it was Corenza's pitch that got the ball rolling on what we now know as the Norton West Louisville Hospital. Today, Corenza has been named the chief administrative officer of this state-of-the art care center that is receiving its final touches as we speak.

Corenza views the new facility as, in her words, “a community-based hospital with no walls.” That's pretty special. Corenza is with us tonight, along with Russell Cox, president and CEO of Norton Healthcare.

Russ, we know that Corenza is a perfect example of our health-care heroes going above and beyond to move our commonwealth forward, together. Thank you both.

I also want to take a moment to talk about mental health care. Our administration has always treated mental health care the same as physical health. That is why we launched the 988-crisis hotline, which connects Kentuckians facing a risk of suicide, mental health distress or an addiction crisis with trained counselors who can help.

In Kentucky, we want people to know it's OK not to be OK, and 988 is available to help 24 hours a day, 7 days a week, 365 days a year. On the other end of the line, you'll find dedicated and compassionate Kentuckians like Haley Johnson.

Haley is a 988-crisis counselor from Lexington, and one of the first people hired there to answer calls. Haley has been there for Kentuckians in some of their darkest hours. She takes the time to talk to these individuals, and make referrals for services and follow-up calls to make sure people know someone cares.

Haley is with us tonight. I want to thank Haley and all of our mental health-care heroes for the amazing care they provide to our people. Thank you.

Tonight, let's commit to moving forward together on our people's mental and physical health. To do that, we need to fully fund Medicaid – including expanded Medicaid – to make sure we're continuing to care for more than 1.5 million Kentuckians. We should further fund the expansion of the Michelle P. and Supports for Community Living wavier programs – they help our most vulnerable citizens.

Because we're seeing more opportunity for us – more opportunity for our people – than at any time during my life. We need all of our people healthy enough to be a part of this future and the prosperity it will bring. So, let's continue to expand access to quality health care for all of our people.

We also have to thank those treating addiction and helping those in recovery. Across the nation the opioid epidemic continues to devastate communities and families, with fentanyl taking a deadly toll. We've lost too many parents, children, relatives and friends. All are all children of God, taken too soon.

We have worked hard to boost access to treatment while also reducing the stigma around asking for help. And in 2022, we saw the first reduction in overdose deaths since 2018 – we were one of only eight states to record a decrease.

Combatting this epidemic takes commitment – a commitment we have embraced by increasing treatment beds by over 50% in the last four years – and I am proud to say that we now have the more treatment beds per capita than any other state in the country.

This is thanks to so many who are committed to helping others recover. And it is due in large part to amazing organizations like Addiction Recovery Care, or ARC. With us today, we have Tim Robinson, founder and CEO of ARC, an essential partner in our fight against addiction.

We worked with ARC to transition the former St. Catherine's College in Springfield to Crown Recovery Center, a 575-bed drug treatment and recovery campus. To date, over 7,000 clients have walked through their doors. This facility is leading the way in helping many Kentuckians to get better and then helping them find a good job.

And there are some, like Joseph Bentley, who have completed the program and are now joining the addiction treatment field. Joseph, who is here with us tonight, faced active addiction for 20 years.

He entered Crown Recovery Center soon after it opened and was the first client there to obtain his GED, and then he began helping others to get theirs. He also started working there and has worked his way up to a program manager, where he is once again helping others.

This fall, Joseph is starting college and, most important, he's spending more quality time with his family. Joseph, we see you, we are proud of you, and I can't wait to see all the great things you are going to do.

Tonight, we are also joined by Debbie and Walt Rains. Sadly, Debbie and Walt lost their son Zac to addiction. I cannot imagine the depths of pain that comes from losing a child, but Debbie and Walt have turned it into purpose.

We are thankful for the work they are doing to educate our first responders on the importance of administering Narcan, and folks, the answer to how many times you should bring somebody back with Narcan is every single time. That is someone's son. That is someone's Zac.

They also have been helping to reduce recidivism by speaking with our inmates prior to their release. Debbie, Walt: We love you and thank you for helping your fellow Kentuckians. Thank you for being here with us tonight.

Every Kentuckian also deserves to feel safe in their community, and our commonwealth is stronger thanks to our brave law enforcement officers, first responders and our soldiers.

First, let me start by saying that we have the best National Guard in the entire country. From the tornadoes to the flooding, and every major weather event in-between, we have seen our Guard leave their own families – not knowing if it would be for a few days, a week or a month or longer to go help their neighbors.

Our Guard, with assistance from other first responders, conducted 1,400 rescues during the flooding alone. That is 1,400 Kentuckians that are still alive today.

No matter the difficulty or obstacle, we see the very best of who we are through our Kentucky National Guard. So tonight, we are honored to have representatives with us.

I want to recognize the achievements of Master Sgt. Rudy Parsons and his canine companion, Callie. Together, they achieved a historic milestone. See, Callie is the first live find-search canine in the Department of Defense – a program Sgt. Parsons started. Their exceptional service during natural disasters and the recent mine structure collapse has showcased their unwavering commitment to our commonwealth and its citizens.

I also want to commend Chief Warrant Officer 2 Kristen Beard. She is an aviator with our aviation medevac unit and was a key partner in our response to the Eastern Kentucky flooding. She is also an officer with the Lexington Police Department, serving as a pilot in the Air Support Unit. Chief Beard's dual role is a great example of the type of Soldiers that make up our National Guard.

Thank you both for your service. We are the home of the free because of the brave.

Thank you to all our soldiers and airmen at home and those serving abroad. Let's take a moment to pray for each and every one of them.

Those who serve in the armed forces, in law enforcement and first responders live out their faith and their values, often in the toughest of circumstances. For those whose service requires the ultimate sacrifice, that is a debt we can never fully repay.

For their boundless love and selflessness, they only ask of us that we remember them. So tonight, we once again remember those lost in service to their community, state and country.

It has been heartbreaking. Since 2022, we lost a Kentucky National Guard Service member while he was serving on the Southwest Border, and another Guardsman was severely injured.

We lost two active-duty Marines, one serving on a NATO mission in Europe; nine Soldiers from Fort Campbell who were lost to a helicopter training mission over Trigg County; and another five from Fort Campbell in a helicopter crash in the Mediterranean Sea.

Since 2022, we have lost eight Kentucky law enforcement officers in the line of duty. They all served their fellow Kentuckians honorably until the very end, and I know the commonwealth joins Brittainy and me in honoring them.

Tonight, we are pleased to have Savannah and Paisley Chaffins here with us. Paisley lost her dad and Savannah her husband when we all lost Prestonsburg Police Officer Jacob Chaffins in 2022 as he ran toward danger to protect his community.

Jacob was a true public servant – a member of the Prestonsburg Fire Department, a sergeant in our National Guard, an EMT, a U.S. Marshal. Jacob was selfless and is missed every day by his loved ones.

Today, I was blessed to spend time with Paisley to make sure she knew how much we all appreciate her dad's service and sacrifice – and how important she is. The least we can do to honor Jacob is to ensure Paisley has a big, bright future filled with love, happiness and success.

Thank you, Savannah and Paisley, for being here and letting us show you how much the commonwealth loves you. We will always be here for you.

Sadly, that same time we lost Jacob, we also lost Prestonsburg Police Captain Ralph Frasure, Floyd County Deputy William Petry and a K-9. We will never forget their sacrifices, nor the sacrifice of Scott County Sheriff's Deputy Caleb Conley, who we lost in 2023.

Our commitment is to remember them and to lift up their families and to make sure we do everything we can here in Frankfort to support our law enforcement.

That is why my budget increases the pay once again of our Kentucky State Police troopers and officers. We are also proposing a raise in the training stipend we pay local law enforcement officers and local firefighters – and for the first time, let's add certified, part-time local law enforcement officers to that fund.

I am further requesting \$35 million dollars to fund grants for body armor to better protect our law enforcement and first responders on those days when they are required to run toward danger.

On that tough night in Floyd County, we would have also lost a state trooper, Trooper Billy Ball, but for the newest in body armor. Let's make sure every single law enforcement officer has the very best protection.

Tonight, we have been reminded of those in our great commonwealth who help make us so strong, who are helping us build a better Kentucky.

During the inauguration, just over three weeks ago, we also heard from our very own Tyler Childers, who reminded us through his “Universal Sound” to use our time to focus on the things that really matter the most.

For me, as a dad and as your Governor, that means working tirelessly to leave a better world for our fellow Kentuckians, for my children, for all of our children.

To me, improving life right here at home is the most important focus that we can have. And these next four years are our chance – Kentucky’s chance – to be the difference, to be both an economic and a moral leader of this country.

This is our time to push away the division; to prove we can govern without name-calling or scapegoating; to do it without anger, fear or hatred. That we not only talk about our collective faith, but we actually live it.

Just think about what has happened when we have worked together. We passed medical marijuana, which is going to bring relief to so many. We finally gave our people what they want in sports betting. And we solidified our place as the Thoroughbred capital of the world after passing HHR.

Passing each of those measures took both Republicans and Democrats. They required us to move forward, together.

With this new year comes new opportunity for progress, to build that better, brighter Kentucky. That is what our children deserve. Children like those we mentioned tonight: Khyree, Caleb, Maggie and Paisley. We owe it them and all our children to make sure they can chase any dream they could ever imagine right here at home.

Scripture reminds us, “Our God is merciful and tender. He will cause the bright dawn of salvation to rise on us.” We’re walking into that bright dawn, and we’re doing it together.

Remember: Life is short, so do good things and be kind to each other.

God bless the Commonwealth of Kentucky and God bless each and every one of you. Good night.

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