

2026 State of the County

I want to thank you all for being here today. Once again, we are at Turning Stone Resort Casino. Thank you to our host: Oneida Indian Nation Representative and CEO of Turning Stone Enterprises Ray Halbritter. I appreciate your hospitality and your friendship. The partnership we have forged together over the past 19 years is the bedrock for many of the accomplishments we have seen in those years.

I am honored to receive this coin commemorating Nation heroine Polly Cooper. Her story is one of resilience, compassion and leadership and her actions not only altered the course of history, but continue to remind us of the critical role, our first allies played in securing America's independence.

I want to recognize the unbelievable commitment and dedication of all our county government employees. They carry out our mission with professionalism and skill. Without them, nothing I talk about today, or have ever talked about in one of these addresses, would get done. They are the best government workforce in the State of New York.

Thank you to the members of the Oneida County Board of Legislators for their partnership, especially our new Board Chairwoman Mary Austin Pratt.

I also want to thank my fellow elected county leaders: District Attorney Todd Carville, Sheriff Robert Maciol, County Clerk Mary Finegan and Comptroller Enessa Carbone.

Thank you to Utica Mayor Michael Galime and Rome Mayor Jeffrey Lanigan for your partnerships.

I also have to thank State Senator Joe Griffo and Assemblymembers Marianne Buttenschon and Brian Miller for joining us today.

And thank you to all the other elected officials who have joined us today. You are vital in all we do.

And finally, special thank yous go out to the Sheriff's Office and the Oneida Indian Nation Police Department for their color guard presentation, Technical Sergeant Christen Mills for that amazing rendition of the National Anthem, Father Paul Angelicchio for his beautiful invocation and my good friend and Executive Director of the New York State Association of Counties Steve Acquario for emceeding this event

To my wife Eleanor and my family who are here with me today, thank you for your constant support and encouragement.

As we continue preparations for the United States' 250th anniversary, I want to take a moment to update you on the work currently underway and what to expect in the months ahead.

Oneida County has formally established the America 250 Commission, which is actively coordinating efforts across the county to ensure a unified and well-organized commemoration.

A key component of this initiative is the development of a consistent identity for America 250 in Oneida County. We finalized a logo that reflects our region's historical significance, with a design that highlights the Battle of Oriskany and symbolizes the longstanding partnership with the Oneida Indian Nation. This is available to all municipalities and organizations who would like to use it. The logo was designed by Hali Schoff, the graphic designer in our county Planning Department. She did an amazing job and is a testament to the type of talent we have here in county government.

To support coordination and public awareness, we have launched along with Oneida County Tourism, a dedicated America 250 landing page and centralized events calendar. This platform serves as the primary hub for information, allowing all to promote their events and ensures the public has a clear, comprehensive view of activities taking place throughout the county.

Many municipalities are already moving forward with their own plans, and the county's role is to support, connect and amplify those efforts. This will include providing banners to hang in each community, which you can see here today, along with other promotional materials such as the stickers and pins at every table.

While we recognize our past, we must continue to honor those who fought for the freedom we all hold dear. Our veterans gather at American Legions and VFW Posts across this county. The buildings can be hard to maintain, and the cost associated with their maintenance and upgrades can be difficult for our veterans to absorb. I'm creating the Veterans Capital Restoration Matching Grant Program. We will set aside \$500,000 toward this effort. These buildings should reflect our commitment to all who serve this great nation.

The celebration of America's 250th anniversary has allowed me to reflect on where we have come from, where we are and where we want to go. The journey this nation and our community have taken during those years has been remarkable. We grow. We change. We go through good times and bad. We keep moving ahead every day. As a community we must remain focused on moving forward together.

Today I introduce 250 Forward, an aspirational vision for the community. One that honors the past while building a new future. 250 Forward has two overarching principles. First, Oneida County must be a place where all are able to achieve what James Truslow Adams called the promise of the American Dream. He coined the phrase in 1931, and his words ring true to this day: "That dream of a land in which life should be better and richer and fuller for everyone, with opportunity for each according to ability and achievement."

Second, 250 Forward also acknowledges a hard truth that lies under the surface of Adams' words. Not everyone has the same opportunity solely based on their ability and achievement. We as a nation can sometimes lose sight of this truth: no one realizes their full potential on their own. All of us start somewhere. That starting line is not the same for everyone. That is just a fact. My promise to this community is no matter where you start, this government is committed to creating an environment where your full potential can be realized.

This is not an unprecedented or even a novel take on government's role in helping leave the next generation better off than the one that came before it. The examples are many. One such was when GIs came back from WWII. They had fought and won the most consequential war in the history of mankind. When they got home, our nation made a commitment. Their ability to achieve the American Dream must be assured. The GI Bill was created, and the greatest generation was sent to college, given unemployment insurance and low-cost home and business loans.

Everyone starts somewhere and everyone needs help.

That's the promise of 250 Forward. It is more than one program or one initiative. It is a comprehensive approach to government that will address the very barriers that stand in the way of achieving the American Dream for far too many. It's a people first approach to addressing housing, workforce training and alignment, as well as health and human services. In addition, we need governments, at all levels, that can adapt to meet the needs of today while being ready to face the rapidly changing challenges of tomorrow.

We will implement housing programs to meet our identified need for 4,000 new homes by 2030 and an additional 2,000 by 2040, over half of which will be senior and workforce housing.

One week from today, the Oneida County Industrial Development Agency will vote on a new housing tax exemption policy that will increase the types of housing that can be incentivized through a PILOT agreement. This builds on our existing mixed-use policy but expands the reach in a commitment to create new housing. It will include points for micro-units, new technologies, childcare availability, senior housing and single-family owner-occupied housing.

This new PILOT is just the first step. We need to cut through local red tape to create more housing. We recently released a step-by-step guide for local governments to clear the path to enact an all-encompassing approach to housing. This guide takes what we have learned from our housing plan and creates a practical way forward. It includes 18 separate implementation strategies related to land use and housing with dozens of action steps to better allow for the creation of essential housing.

Now, as we lower the ever-present barriers of taxes and regulations to development, we must address the other financial hurdles that exist mainly because of New York State. Developers don't build housing when the result is losing money. We need to address the issues that are preventing making these crucial investments.

We will create the Home Forward Investment Fund by dedicating \$10 million over the next five years to make critical development more affordable.

Infrastructure like sewer, water, sidewalks and lighting – along with the cost of materials – add an unbelievable cost burden to development, making many projects unviable. For projects that create at least five homes, the Home Forward Investment Fund will provide \$5,000 per home, not to exceed \$250,000.

With partners, we can do so much more. That's why I'm asking any municipality, financial institution or non-profit that wants to invest in our community by creating the housing we need, to reach out to me as soon as possible. One partner that is committed to filling this need is the Oneida Indian Nation. They have already created 50 apartments and 100 dormitory style suites below market rate in the Villages at Stoney Creek and they have plans for more.

The Home Forward Investment Fund will supercharge new housing options, especially for seniors or households making between \$55,000 and \$120,000 a year. Homes people want and can afford are an essential part of achieving the American Dream.

Where can this housing go? The St. Luke's campus is one site primed for development. Another is St Elizabeth's.

A comprehensive zoning code update for St. Luke's is underway. The update will build on the master plan, ensuring future development.

A Request for Expressions of Interest is also being advanced. All of this is being done to effectively market the site and solicit developer interest. However, the redevelopment of St. Luke's—and maximizing its potential—relies heavily on the demolition of the main hospital building.

Oneida County has led the way on St. Luke's. We have already invested more than \$1 million in its future and have secured \$2 million in federal funding, but we need more. I call on the Governor to support the redevelopment of St. Luke's and St. Elizabeth's, and support the construction of new housing, by providing up to \$50 million in funding.

We have the vision...now we need the funds.

250 Forward will continue to align our workforce with the career opportunities being created in Oneida County today and into the future.

Our departments of Workforce Development and Family and Community Services work on this issue every day, connecting the unemployed to work.

However, we know there are job opportunities all around us.

I recently had a kickoff meeting with major employers, and many are facing recruitment and retention challenges. What we need to continue to do is align what jobs are available with what is required for people to obtain them and provide training for advancement.

With commitments from employers, we will create a wide-ranging multimedia outreach campaign. In addition, we will expand our extensive alignment opportunities.

We must continue to grow our workforce and make sure our people have the skills needed to succeed. With partners like Mohawk Valley EDGE, Mohawk Valley Community College and the Manufacturing Association of Central New York, we're already doing it.

MACNY's programs have produced more than 1,000 apprentices who are employed by local manufacturers. Ninety-three percent of apprentices stay, and grow, with their employer. It's a model that works and one I strongly encourage more companies to take advantage of.

MACNY is one of several organizations teaming up with MVCC as they establish the Mohawk Valley ON-RAMP Center. The center will connect students and workers with career pathways in advanced manufacturing.

The most important disruptive change to workforce development, and possibly every other facet of our lives, comes from artificial intelligence.

The Oneida County AI Task Force is off and running. We must be prepared for this technology. The world changes. Technology changes. This community cannot be left behind. In the early going of the Task Force's work one thing is clear: AI literacy for the community at large is vital. We must give the community the opportunity to understand what it is, how it can be used and how businesses and educational institutions are and will be using it. This isn't a small thing. Those who are unprepared to incorporate the tools related to AI are going to fall behind in the workforce and the companies who fail to adapt will falter in the marketplace. We will launch more AI literacy efforts this year.

The Task Force will work on real-time solutions for a major problem that every single community is facing: the anticipated inability for college-educated, white-collar workers to access private sector entry level employment. Based on recent reports and projections from AI leaders and economists, some forecasts suggest that up to 50% of these roles could be erased.

We must think outside the box and with an eye on the future. To pretend this isn't going to happen would be the biggest mistake any elected official could make, whether that's a County Executive, Governor or the President of the United States.

I don't believe anyone has all the answers, but we are going to figure it out together. We will look at a variety of paths forward for feasibility, and this could include:

- Talent retention programs
- AI-centered curriculum in our colleges
- Expanding internship opportunities to increase entry level experience, and
- Entrepreneurial opportunities

We will work diligently and quickly to put items in place now.

As we look forward, we know things are not going to look the same as they did in the past.

One area where things have changed rapidly is the health and wellness of our young people. The 2025 Teen Assessment Project offers a comprehensive and nuanced portrait of youth in Oneida County.

The data reveals encouraging signs in areas such as substance use, mental health and family support. Youth are reporting lower rates of alcohol, marijuana, vaping and prescription drug misuse, with many indicators showing significant improvement compared to both 2019 and 2022. Mental health data also suggests a rebound from the pandemic's emotional toll, with depression and suicidal ideation rates returning to pre-pandemic levels. However, persistent challenges remain, including elevated rates of cyberbullying, sexual harassment and screen time overexposure. The TAP report offers 18 recommendations over six specific areas of emphasis.

Never have those challenges been more evident than the news out of the Clinton Central School District a few short weeks ago. Something horrific could have happened. Something we have seen play out many times on our televisions. Children here in Oneida County were planning the unthinkable.

I want to thank the Sheriff and his team and all those involved, especially the parent who intervened, for their swift action, which most certainly avoided the nightmare scenario.

This isn't new in our nation. That is why we have placed special patrol officers in our schools. It's why we have launched our Threat Assessment Management Team. It's why we have enacted Crisis Intervention Training for law enforcement, and soon for our 911 dispatchers. It's why the New York State Department of Mental Health has chosen us to pilot its "Responding to Youth in Crisis" program. And it's why we have launched the Oneida County Youth Investment Initiative to combat youth violence.

What is difficult to admit is that it can happen here. Violence is never going to be eradicated. We know that. However, children are not born with violence in their hearts. We must do more. We need more CIT training. We need more juvenile probation and resource officers in our schools. We need more mental health and children wellness programs in our schools. We need more mental health professionals in our schools. We need more juvenile mental health beds. We need more cooperation and information sharing between all our partners. We need more. The State and the Federal Government need to do more. Provide more funding that is flexible and allows us on the front lines to do what we need to do.

I wish I could tell you there was one thing that would make every child safe, but there isn't. We must continue to be diligent. We must continue to level the playing field and bring these vital pieces to the table, so they are available to every child. And we must continue to be willing to change and be forward thinking.

To that end, we will take the following action.

We need our youth to take a leadership role in their own mental health and the options available to them. In recent weeks, I've heard from every adult under the sun and everyone has heard from me. The only ones we haven't heard from are the students themselves. Well, that's about to change. I have asked every school district to send 10 students, two from each grade eighth through twelfth, to an event we will hold on June 5th at the Delta Hotel. I want to hear what they worry about. What they face in their hallways, classrooms, at home and in their neighborhoods.

And after that important gathering takes place, we will continue to make our youth active participants in this vital discussion. We will establish the Oneida County Youth Wellness Cabinet, which will bring together representative students from all our school districts to create their list of wellness and mental health priorities. They will take ownership of what they want to see in their schools and communities.

Youth taking an active role in their community can't just begin and end inside their school building. For decades the Summer Youth Employment Program has instilled in many children the pride associated with their first job, and in 1977, I was one of them. Youth work with local organizations and at community sites, often doing beautification projects like lawn work, painting and other activities. This year we will expand the program to include neighborhoods throughout the county that need good old-fashioned TLC. These youth are going to work with us and make the very neighborhoods many of them reside in look sharper, cleaner and safer. That pride of ownership will start from the very first job they have ever had in the very places they call home.

We are addressing the need for multi-generational services in our rural schools and communities. Large geographic rural areas of the county often need services and material goods and have trouble accessing them due to physical and economic limitations. The Oneida County Department of Family and Community Services along with Connected Community Schools and Adirondack and Camden Central School Districts will create a cost-efficient bridge to meet the identified human service gaps in these communities.

Both districts have agreed to make their facilities and resources available as community hubs. I thank both Superintendents Heidi Smith and Jason Evangelist for their commitment. Oneida County will fund community navigators to manage the hubs and bring county resources to the table. Through these hubs, Connected Community Schools can receive and process referrals and provide direct services and support, including material goods, such as meals for seniors, school supplies for students and more.

We will also be working with all our school districts to send health educators out to speak to fourth grade school children about the importance of proper hygiene, address the reasons why it can be a larger hurdle for some compared to others and provide personal hygiene packets to students.

One of the things we are blessed with in this community is a wide variety of non-profit health and human service organizations, but I would like to see more coordination to align their efforts with community needs.

I'm pulling everyone together. Every non-profit, every service provider, into the largest coordination effort in the history of this county. Despite the strength and number of our non-profit community, we have too many overlapping services mixed with too many gaps and a diminishing funding commitment from the federal, state and county governments.

We will streamline our county actions, the funding we provide and to whom we provide it, while working with our partners to maximize every dollar.

We must continue to tackle substance use disorder, as it is part and parcel in dealing with larger societal issues.

Our Opioid Task Force continues its work, and the results are in the data. One overdose is unequivocally one too many, but the work of the Task Force is paying off. We've seen a significant reduction in overall overdoses. The most important part of fighting back against the scourge of opioids is keeping people alive. We have made remarkable progress. In 2025 the number of deaths dropped 66%, and so far in 2026, we are on track to reduce that number even further.

We must do more. Recently, in a partnership with Upstate Caring Partners, we opened a stabilization center offering 24/7, voluntary, short-term support for individuals experiencing mental health or substance use crises.

We will work with our Task Force partners to increase safe, structured transitional housing to support individuals in recovery from inpatient or intensive treatment. We will further educate our children about the dangers of substance use and create better information sharing tools between agencies and non-profits.

One major concern is the unregulated selling of kratom substances throughout the county.

Kratom is a tree native to Southeast Asia, used as a stimulant at low doses and is an opiate sedative at high doses. Kratom is unregulated by the FDA and is sold in powder, capsules and tablets. The FDA has warned consumers not to use it because of its serious risks.

In consultation with Public Health Director Dr. Dan Gilmore and Commissioner of Mental Health Ashlee Thompson, I've directed County Attorney Maryangela Scalzo to create a public health order to immediately stop the selling of this substance followed by a local law to ban its sale forever.

It is too often used as a substitute for illegal drugs. It is widely available on every street corner, and it is unsafe according to our public health experts. Therefore, its unregulated sale is unacceptable to me. It will stop this year.

We will continue to work on ways to ban or limit the sale of other dangerous unregulated substances as well.

Economic development remains a main priority. A thriving community is one with constant activity and opportunity.

The Air Force Research Laboratory Information Directorate at Griffiss is the nation's premier technology research center. The game-changing advancements they work on every day make our military the greatest in the world.

The proposed state budget includes \$60 million in capital funding to establish up to four quantum hubs in New York State. Oneida County is partnering with AFRL and the Griffiss Institute to make sure a quantum hub is established at Griffiss. The hub would foster the development and commercialization of quantum technologies. It would also contain an incubator to provide start-up companies with mentorship and access to local quantum networks and computing power. The goal is to attract companies to locate with the Griffiss Institute at the Innovare Advancement Center, grow and eventually expand to other spaces in Oneida County. This will create well-paying jobs and expand our role as a global leader in quantum computing. I urge our state delegation to support this effort.

Oneida County continues to attract unique statewide, national and international events. We were recently home to the New York State Tourism Conference for the first time. Next year we will host an international curling event. And next month we welcome the Special Olympics of New York Summer Games.

The Summer Games will welcome nearly 800 athletes and coaches to compete in several sports at sites throughout the county. I know our community will embrace these athletes in their endeavors during the games. Volunteers are still needed. Head to the Special Olympics New York website and sign up to volunteer today.

We continue to build on these types of events. As we stand here inside this amazing resort, it is clear we are a leading tourist destination. People come from all over the world every day to Oneida County. They come to Turning Stone. They go to Nexus. They frequent Munson. And they visit our scenic and historic treasures and entertainment venues throughout the county.

Soon the Oneida Indian Nation will wrap up its \$400 million Evolution expansion that will make Turning Stone the largest Meetings and Convention Resort Destination in New York State. Thousands of jobs were created, as many different county businesses and construction workers have been involved with this project from the start. As Ray mentioned, this June, the Crescent Hotel and its newest fine dining venue—SALT, will open, and the Grand Expo will open Labor Day weekend. This expansion will have the same generational impact on our county that the opening of Turning Stone had more than 30 years ago.

In addition to job creation and new tourism, the expansion also includes an innovative partnership with Rome Health that will create an on-site medical center here at Turning Stone. This facility will offer primary care, urgent care and other services with on-site bloodwork, imaging and more. In recent years, the Nation has also partnered with Upstate Medical to create the Upstate Cancer Center at Verona. These are critically important projects that greatly improve access to primary and cancer care for people in Oneida County.

As I have said many times, the agreement between the Nation and the County of Oneida has been the strongest and most dynamic of partnerships. The agreement has generated over \$247 million in revenue for Oneida County. But it's more than that. Our work on America 250, tourism events, workforce development, health care, their commitment to housing, the list is endless.

Here is the reality, and I couldn't be prouder of this: Ray, as the Oneida Indian Nation grows, we grow. Partners in every sense of the word. A change that embodies the spirit of America in its 250th year. First allies, allies now and allies forever.

In Utica, the U-District—a vision I first proposed a decade ago that many thought was nothing but a dream—continues to take shape. First with the renovation of the AUD and construction of Nexus, and now with the Nexus Neighborhood. All because the county had a vision and we invested in it.

The Nexus Neighborhood spans three city blocks and includes the Bagg's Hotel, a pedestrian skybridge that connects to Nexus and the creation of additional retail and housing. It is supported by a \$25 million ACHIEVE grant from the State of New York.

The county will continue to lead what we started and we will continue to grow.

The Runway remains in our sights as an adaptive reuse of the large hangar bays located at Griffiss International Airport. We have commissioned a market analysis and economic impact study with Camoin Associates, which will be completed very soon. From what we have already learned, I can tell you, and it will come as no surprise, that the analysis is strong and the impact will be consequential for our community.

In addition, we put a Request for Expression of Interest on the development of The Runway project to get real responses from qualified partners on ways they would breathe life into our vision for this multi-use sports facility. We are currently reviewing what we have received.

These endeavors show us monumental change is possible. In Utica, as we build on Nexus and the Adirondack Bank Center's success. Here in Verona, because of Ray and the leadership at Turning Stone Enterprises and also because of the historic agreement we made together. In Rome, because the county never gave up on investing in a closed Air Force base that left a community devastated. It is now home to cutting edge research facilities in national defense, quantum, unmanned aerial systems and a myriad of other thriving businesses, as well as housing and recreation options. Soon it will be home to Chobani's largest investment in their company's history, and with it 1,000+ jobs and a boon to local dairy farmers.

Site work on Chobani has already begun: the clearing of trees, building of a sound wall and construction of a new roundabout. We are on track and I can't thank Hamdi Ulukaya and the people at Chobani enough for their commitment to this project and our community.

Communities change. They grow. Stagnation is intolerable and I have always approached this job knowing we as a county and community cannot stand still.

We know the American Dream can and should be possible for everyone who calls Oneida County home. 250 Forward is a vision to make that possible.

Just this past Sunday, I was honored to give the commencement address to Utica University's undergraduate class of 2026.

I spoke of the growth of this county and how very different it looks from just four years ago, let alone 250. I told them how this is one of the most diverse communities in the United States and how, while we're imperfect, we get things done and we get along. I also posed to them something I will pose to you. Don't hate. Let's not get caught up in the rhetoric of Washington and other communities who disagree only to disagree. That is not us. We have been through some very difficult times and there will be more. But we have succeeded where others have failed because of our respect for each other. Let Oneida County be the community that gets it all right. Development, growth, safety, health and peaceful dialog. Let our difference of opinion be constructive, not destructive.

There were a great many differences 250 years ago just down the road in Oriskany. But the people there came together, different cultures with one goal to build a nation. And they got it right. What can we build today with all that we have at our disposal? The sky is the limit.

The state of Oneida County is strong. Strong financially and strong physically. Strong because our people don't give up. Like those in Oriskany in the Revolution, like the greatest generation after WWII, like our time after an Air Force base closed or when we lost hundreds of manufacturing jobs.

It is strong because we have our eye on the next 250 years, not looking in the rearview mirror, but focused on today and an even better tomorrow.

Let's move 250 Forward together.

God bless you, God bless Oneida County and God bless the United States of America.