

2022 State of the County

Let me begin today by acknowledging my partners in government.

First and foremost, I want to recognize the unbelievable commitment and dedication of all our county government employees. They carry out our mission with professionalism and skill every single day. They are the best government workforce in the state. I want to thank the members of the Oneida County Board of Legislators for their service and dialogue, especially the Board Chairman Gerald Fiorini.

I want to thank my department heads who implement the vision for the future we will outline today and for the hard work they put in every single day. I also want to thank my fellow elected county leaders Sheriff Robert Maciol, District Attorney Scott McNamara, County Clerk Sandy DePerno and Comptroller Joseph Timpano. And also, I would like to thank Rome Mayor Jaqueline Izzo for her continued partnership.

I want to thank my wife Eleanor and my family who are here with me today for their constant support and encouragement.

I want to thank our emcee Heather Hage and Father Paul Angelicchio for his beautiful invocation.

I want to acknowledge our gracious hosts as we stand on recognized Nation lands. The Oneida Indian Nation is the county's steadfast partner and we are united in our goals for this region. We have forged a new relationship, since 2013, that is unlike any in the United States. We work side-by-side to grow this community and our economy. To borrow a sacred phrase, this partnership not only strengthens this region unto the seventh generation, it will last seven generations and beyond because we know we are stronger together. Please join me in thanking our host, the Oneida Indian Nation and their Representative and CEO of Oneida Nation Enterprises Ray Halbritter, not just for today, but for the history we have made jointly and the history we will continue to make in the generations to come.

This county has always been imbued with a spirit of community and togetherness. In fact, as a military conflict and humanitarian crisis rages in Ukraine, we have seen this community come together once again to help those in need. We have seen events, charities and awareness efforts throughout the county, which is home to so many Ukrainians. Today, we are joined by Oneida Nation employee Viktoriya Runkevich, born and raised in Ukraine, who came to Utica as a refugee with her family in 2002.

When Russia invaded Ukraine in February, Viktoriya immediately took action. She single-handedly organized a donation drive, collecting non-perishable food items, clothing, first-aid supplies, toiletries and other necessities for the Ukrainian War Relief Fund. Viktoriya's brother generously provided a tractor-trailer from his local trucking business to be stationed at the Slavic Pentecostal Church in Utica, where county residents could drop off donations.

Her tireless work offered everyone the opportunity to share donations and demonstrate incredible solidarity with the people of Ukraine. Viktoriya's work is more proof of the caring and giving nature of this region and shows how quickly Oneida County residents came together to support those in need not just in our community, but across the world. Viktoriya, please stand. Selflessness. Compassion. Hard work. And perseverance. These are the values that Viktoriya demonstrated - and these are the values that have been on display over the past two long years as we have grappled with the COVID-19 pandemic as a community.

The pandemic was a challenge unlike any in recent memory. I'm proud of the work we have done as a government to lead this community through the uncertain and fearful days of March 2020 to the hope brought on by the vaccine, and now to the final stages, where we strive every day to keep us on the path to normalcy.

The stress the pandemic placed on county government cannot be overstated. Our Health Department conducted public testing, vaccinations and contact tracing, made sure protocols were being followed and the public was protected from spread, all while contending with uneven and inconsistent directives from the State and combating inaccurate information on the Internet. And it was not just them. All county departments remained open and fully functional throughout the pandemic.

We not only stayed open, we pushed our generational projects forward. With the Nexus Center we overcame obstacles to remain on track and we look forward to its completion this year. The Innovare Advancement Center was completed and is now thriving, and soon Skydome will be as well, cementing our place as a leader in unmanned aerial vehicle research, artificial intelligence and quantum computing in the entire country.

And finally, what was once the dream of nanotechnology here in Oneida County is now a reality with the official opening of Wolfsped in just a few short weeks.

Never has the pandemic made anything clearer than the necessity of a new hospital. Mohawk Valley Health System's Wynn Hospital will be completed next year, and with it, a new parking garage.

In the past two weeks, I toured both the hospital and the Nexus Center, and let me tell you folks, you are going to be blown away.

These projects are transforming Oneida County — our economy, our healthcare system and our future. It is imperative our work, in conjunction with our partners, continue on these projects.

As we enter the next phase of this pandemic, we have learned much, but we must understand other aspects of the long-term effects of COVID.

We have issued an RFP to conduct an after-action report to look at what we did during COVID, to learn from what has happened, and refine our public health response to meet new challenges.

We have already seen challenges, new and old, throughout our community exacerbated by the virus. We cannot pretend they do not exist. We have to rise to meet them.

One of the most lasting and fundamental challenges that arose from the pandemic was the number of people who either left the workforce or decided it was time to change a career or change how they work.

The Great Resignation, as it has been termed, has left many employers, including this county government, struggling to fill necessary positions. We often talk about the workforce pipeline. No matter what we call it, the workforce challenge is a national crisis, and we must continue to find and pilot innovative ways to attract, retain, and where necessary — train and retrain — workers with the skills and education necessary to fill the jobs that are available.

The simplest way to grow your workforce is to grow your population. Over the years, Oneida County has been buoyed by immigrants and refugees. As we know, the terrible situation in Ukraine has created a humanitarian and refugee crisis. As we have done before, we stand ready to welcome them to our community. We know their worth and what their commitment will be to their new home.

The Utica-Rome and Syracuse regions are tied for fourth nationwide among similar metro areas in Ukrainians per 1,000 people. This means that while other places have larger Ukrainian populations by sheer size, there is a greater concentration here. That is why yesterday I wrote President Biden and shared our story and ensured him that our community would warmly welcome Ukrainian refugees.

Today, there exists a mismatch between jobs in the area and the skills of the labor force we have available. We must address this issue comprehensively.

There is a segment of our population that lacks some of the basic skills to obtain introductory positions. These are the language and life skills necessary to acquire gainful employment. Too many of our businesses have found it difficult to fill these entry level positions — the jobs that help so much of our economy go — hospitality workers, food service, retail and others. We will begin an initiative to bridge this gap.

Further, we immediately face shortages in two prime industries that performed critical functions throughout the pandemic — healthcare and supply chain management. The sustained strain of the pandemic has caused many nurses and healthcare workers to leave the field. While the continued growth of delivery services has outstripped the number of logistics personnel, drivers and distribution workers.

That is why I have instructed my Director of Workforce Development Dave Mathis to begin a program aimed at these two all-important sectors. Our goal is to train 200 new healthcare workers to ensure we have the dedicated professionals we need to serve the sick, the frail and the differently-abled in this community. We will also train 100 tractor-trailer drivers, so locally we can continue to have the last mile of the supply chain connected.

This is just the beginning. We will work hand-in-glove with our community college, led by a great partner Mohawk Valley Community College President Randy VanWagoner, to identify and address specific needs that have been brought to the forefront.

Together, we will train limited English speakers in high-demand fields, create a dental hygiene training program and K-12 Educator professional development, relaunch Math Corps and the 21-Day Diversity Equity Inclusion Challenge, offer a Student Career Day and build transitional housing.

Our community also continues to face challenges attracting and retaining a highly-educated workforce. Whether it is the Air Force Research Laboratory, AIS, PAR Technology, Masonic Medical Research Institute, Indium Corporation, or now Wolfspeed, our region's need for tech talent continues to grow and that is a great problem to have.

Key to meeting this challenge is SUNY Polytechnic Institute. Established in 2014, it has quickly become an essential part of our higher education and research infrastructure. As part of her State of the State, Governor Hochul proposed to strip us of this world-class research institution and it is an insult to the students, professors, companies and organizations that have invested in its spectacular success. I have been working with other elected officials and business and community leaders across the region to oppose this ill-conceived idea. Last week we launched an online petition campaign urging the Governor to abandon this proposal immediately. We will continue to press our case.

I can't stress enough how important this is to our region, we need everyone to get engaged in this effort.

A challenge to recruiting to areas such as ours is that while the pay scale is good and getting better, new wage earners can find better pay in bigger metropolitan areas. The incredibly high cost of student loan debt chases many new graduates to these markets just to pay their student loans.

Over the years, an increasing number of private sector employers have included student loan relief as a benefit for their employees, much akin to health insurance or 401Ks. I believe that is a concept worth piloting here in Oneida County.

We will create a program that will be unlike any municipal program in the United States. We will work with our non-profit and private sector partners to capitalize a Student Loan Benefit Program. Using our federal recovery funds, and partnering with the Community Foundation of Herkimer and Oneida Counties, we will assist our local employers in providing student loan relief as a benefit for prospective employees. To be successful, this will require true partnerships in program design and funding.

Also with the Community Foundation, we will expand a scholarship program for our local youth. This program will award scholarships to students to obtain higher education.

Working with our industry partners we will build a framework for the program. The goal is simple: attract and retain a workforce that is responsive to the needs of our employers and community. These programs will give new tools to students who want to stay here and employers who are competing around the nation and the world trying to fill positions in our community right now that require two-year, four-year and post-graduate degrees.

COVID-19 brought into focus another hurdle to individuals entering and staying in the workforce: child care. It continues to lack availability and costs too much for many workers. A system is broken if a person, who is able and willing to work, is priced out of a job because paying for daycare is too expensive or simply not available. Oneida County has taken the following steps to make daycare more affordable and accessible:

- We have raised the income eligibility to 200% above the poverty line.
- We have reduced the parent share of the cost from 25% to 1%.
- We will now assist providers to cover the costs associated when children are unable to get to daycare in order to preserve children's spots at their provider. A broken down vehicle, illness or other everyday issue, should not force parents to lose their spot at a daycare.
- We have expanded eligibility for subsidized daycare to include those who are job searching to be able to get to interviews and meet with prospective employers. Eligibility will now include higher education and vocational schools. Daycare should not be an impediment to those trying to better their situation for the long term.

Lastly, we will continue to look at ways to increase affordability and availability and remove obstacles in dealing with this complex and comprehensive issue. We will create a Child Care Task Force, headed by Commissioner of the Department of Family and Community Services Colleen Fahy-Box, which will work with our partners and find solutions to these problems.

As we navigated through the pandemic it became clear that closed schools, isolation from friends and loved ones and other aspects of a changed society was going to affect our most vulnerable in a variety of ways, especially our children.

We will address these emergent issues. I believe the best way to start is with real information that will chart an appropriate data-driven programmatic response.

We have worked with our school districts to issue a COVID-centric Teen Assessment Survey, which is being administered in schools across the county right now. This survey asks students pertinent pandemic-related questions dealing with remote learning, mental health and other challenges they may have faced during this unprecedented time. We will move forward with solid information as we formulate public health, mental health and education programs and policies for our students.

We believe this survey will confirm what we have learned from other data showing evidence of lost learning and the impeded development of soft skills. We will address those issues right now.

We will work with our partners to create community reading center programs. We will expand our successful county Summer Youth and College Corps programs year round, allowing our students to get that first job and work to better the community. This puts them together with others to learn the value of work, but also to learn the soft skills the pandemic has made it difficult to develop such as teamwork, collaboration and communication.

As we navigated through this difficult time, we know mental health issues have been exacerbated not just for students, but for persons from all walks of life. Our Department of Mental Health will embark on a series of initiatives to address these issues.

We begin by increasing behavioral health services for youth, increasing crisis counselor funding and creating a community mental health nursing program. We will also complete a community mental health assessment.

COVID also exacerbated the opiate epidemic and we remained laser-focused on that fight. Just yesterday, our Overdose Response Team, a part of our Opiate Task Force, met to coordinate and combat this issue. As we move forward we will:

- Continue to collect and use actionable data through our ODMAP program.
- Work with our Street Outreach Teams.
- Expand our Naloxone programs, including our Leave Behind Program and placement of Narcan cabinets.
- Put drug detection devices in our county correctional facility.
- Create an Overdose Fatality Review Team to collect qualitative data and identify trends to connect the dots between the data and individual.

We know the issues with gun crimes and bail reform continue to affect our cities and the county as a whole.

New York State's bail reform law is a disaster. Anyone can see it does not work. The Governor and the Legislature should change it today.

Meanwhile, working with Sheriff Maciol and District Attorney McNamara, we continue to lead the fight. We created a Domestic Violence High-Risk Assessment Team, participated in the Utica Police Department's GIVE program which removed over 75 illegal guns this past year and we assign county Sheriff Deputies to work daily in the City of Utica hotspots for gun violence.

In our Emergency Services Department, we are adding a Nurse Navigator program. Highlighted during COVID, 9-1-1 calls and corresponding emergency room visits have been unnecessary. This program will direct calls that do not rise to the level of a true emergency to a nurse who can help the caller immediately, so as to avoid preventable response calls and emergency room visits.

One issue we have seen as more and more people — including our seniors — stayed home, was the increasing impact of the digital divide. Many had to switch to online working; medicine; banking; taxes; grocery and retail shopping; job searching and food delivery, more than ever before. Many small businesses struggled to get their goods and payment options online. We had first-hand experience managing that divide as we administered our Boost OC Vaccination Incentive Program that issued \$100 e-gift cards to over 30,000 county residents. We found many residents and small businesses lacked the knowledge or technology to access and navigate the program.

To address this, we will work with our libraries to create a program that closes that gap. People and businesses' ability to learn and properly use technology that is becoming necessary for everyday life is important. We need to make sure that gap closes quickly. Digital literacy is critical and I can't think of a better partner to help us do that than our exceptional library system.

We continue to focus on agriculture, Oneida County's number one industry. With our partners at Cornell Cooperative Extension, we will continue growing our upstate-downstate agricultural partnership. The Upstate New York Growers and Packers Produce Cooperative will expand the program with a new produce processing facility in Kirkland.

We know a top-notch healthcare system is essential and we are all excited for MVHS and what the Wynn Hospital is bringing to our region. I want to acknowledge the CEOs of MVHS and Rome Health, Darlene Stromstead and AnneMarie Walker-Czyz for their valued partnership. I want to thank all of our healthcare workers who have labored tirelessly throughout the pandemic. They deserve our respect and admiration for their ceaseless efforts.

We are excited to see what our health system in Rome is accomplishing as they are in the midst of an essential \$13 million expansion project. Rome Health already boasts a tremendous reputation in maternity. Oneida County is committed to assisting Rome Health in delivering the highest-quality care and that is why we are contributing \$3 million to a new women's maternity surgical center. This center will enhance the hospital's ability to manage complex and high-risk pregnancies. This investment of federal recovery funds will help that project elevate to new heights.

We are moving forward. We know our infrastructure is key to surviving through a pandemic, growing our community, creating economic development and preparing for the future.

Infrastructure projects can be problematic. They are expensive and complicated. However, to let critical infrastructure become dilapidated or fall into disrepair because of those hurdles is wrong. I have always believed in these investments and where we have made them, they directly led to significant development.

Just one example to highlight this vital point. Our work on sewers and water has been a boon to every economic development initiative in the past 15 years. If we did not make that investment, had I just said: "We can't do it, it's too expensive," there would be no Wolfsped, no new hospital, no new housing.

What we know now is that we need to invest in new infrastructure that is no less critical to our future success than sewer, water, roads or bridges. Next up is broadband.

With our partners Mohawk Valley Economic Development District, Herkimer County and the Tug Hill Commission, we completed an inventory of the broadband infrastructure across our two counties.

We now have a working understanding of what this community needs and where it needs broadband. The study identifies approximately \$20 million worth of projects to bring this important infrastructure need to communities in our county alone.

We will create a Broadband Local Development Corporation and stand up a program that allows for public-private partnerships between towns, the county and internet service providers and eventually the State of New York to do this essential work. I want to be clear and unequivocal. This will be a long process. It will take five to 10 years to bring this service to everyone who needs it.

Of course as with so many issues the State of New York has actually created a barrier to progress. It is imperative the state ends the outrageous fiber optic installation fee that charges companies \$20,000 every mile they cross a state road to run broadband wire. It's absurd and it needs to end now so we can begin this work.

I look forward to laying the program out in further detail in the coming weeks. American Rescue Act money can and will be used for broadband. Local municipalities, you need this infrastructure. You have your own Rescue Act funding. Partner with us to get this done.

We know electric vehicles are no longer the wave of the future, they are here today. We have a great partner in Wolfsped who is a leader in EV technology. I said last year we would complete a plan to address this infrastructure and the first phase of that work is done.

Next, we will introduce an EV dashboard that will show the public exactly where charging stations are, and update in real time our progress of placing chargers where they need to be. The market has spoken on electric vehicles. Since 2015, the amount of electric vehicles in Oneida and Herkimer counties has increased six fold. As the technology is perfected and the infrastructure is built out to support them, that number is set to skyrocket.

I won't let Oneida County fall behind in this critical infrastructure. We are committed to increasing EV chargers in our own projects. The new parking garage will have 67 EV charging station spots with the ability to expand to nearly 300.

When we talk about infrastructure and preparing for the future, we have to discuss economic development and the preparation of potential development sites.

First, we are working on our next mega-sized development site. It's known as the Triangle and it is 250 acres located in the heart of the Griffiss International Airport in Rome. We have begun the process of getting all approvals from the Federal Aviation Administration, while simultaneously conducting the preliminary engineering work necessary to make the site available.

Second, we have to address sites located throughout the county that are brownfield or industrial and need to be recycled and prepared for development. We will identify locations that fit this criteria and assess them to understand the needs required and the preliminary work that needs to be done to prepare them for private development.

I refuse to let what happened at Charlestown Mall in Utica happen again. It had fallen into such disrepair that it became dangerous. There is no scenario where a building of that size should be allowed to become a location for squatters and a hazard that resulted in multiple fires.

Over the past two years, we saw other government offices closed for months and months at a time during the pandemic. We saw many functions of government become automated or remote. We must always be accountable to the taxpayer.

As I have said before, we have too many layers of government doing too little for too few and charging way too much to do it.

We need a comprehensive approach to consolidation, tax reduction and services. We also need to be bold and open to every possibility.

We need to act now, but we also need to prepare for the future.

Let's try something. I've been down this road before. I'm talking about true government consolidation. Not a shared service or a nibble on the edges. For any municipality who successfully achieves consolidation with corresponding savings we will pay them twice the amount saved.

I'm also directing my Commissioner of Planning James Genovese to look at the tax structure on all levels of government.

Why does a \$400,000 home outside of Atlanta have a tax burden of \$2,400 a year, yet a \$185,000 home in Oneida County has a tax burden of \$6,000 a year? We are clearly missing something.

When complete, this community, and its school and municipal governments, will have a road map to better serve our residents and save the taxpayers real, substantial dollars. It will be up to them to take the hard road, but we will create the path and share it with all of our residents.

As we move out of COVID as an emergency, we know the one thing we need to do for our economy and our businesses is to bring people back to our communities to enjoy all we have to offer.

We launched our Main Street Program and I'm pleased to say that we are moving forward. By redesigning main streets we make them attractive to businesses, visitors and residents. This program will provide 12 municipalities with reinvented, reinvigorated main streets. They will end the planning phase with a punch list that will strengthen their signature projects for their community. More importantly, we have incentivized these plans with capital dollars turning conception into reality with breakneck speed.

One participant is Sylvan Beach. The village is investing in its main street in order to fully capitalize on the Oneida Indian Nation's massive investment on the waterfront including the Lakehouse and the Cove. I applaud Sylvan Beach and the 11 other municipalities who have chosen to participate, and I once again invite those who haven't to do so.

Over the past few years in Rome, we have experienced significant investment in new housing stock at Woodhaven and Air City Lofts to meet the demands of growing opportunities at the Griffiss Business & Technology Park. To serve this growing community we are committed financially to the creation of a new YMCA in Woodhaven near Griffiss. Oneida County is proud to be a partner and today I'm announcing a commitment of \$2 million to the project.

To see the progress in Rome with Air City Lofts, the Innovare Advancement Center, Skydome, the new MVCC Campus and other new housing developments has been exciting and the county is proud to spearhead those important investments while working side-by-side with Mayor Izzo. The sky's the limit when you have strong partners who are honest brokers and have a shared commitment to moving the community forward.

We know that companies come where executives want to be. That is why we will launch a program aimed at C-suite business marketing. We are going to highlight our community during our biggest events, such as the Boilermaker, to the most important company executives. In order to understand why we are such a good fit for a company, we want them to see and experience the best we have to offer.

When it comes to marketing this community to the world, it is time to create a signature event that highlights what Oneida County is and does. We will partner with the Griffiss Institute, the Oneida Indian Nation and others, to build our own regional signature event. We have that varied cross-section of people, economy and entertainment to do this in a real way that allows more people to see what we all know. This is the best and most unique place in America to invest, live and visit.

To be known as the All Roads FEST, it will be a curated exhibition for guests to experience the food, entertainment, sports and technology that define our extraordinary lives in the Mohawk Valley. Tasting rooms, interactive displays, guest lectures, technology demos, competitions, performances and startup showcases will span three days in July 2023.

We are excited about the progress in the planning of our expansion of the REA Wing at Union Station and the creation of a Food Emporium which we believe can be a tourism draw that captures people off the Thruway to visit this unique regional asset. We have contracted with MASS Group, a non-profit global architectural firm, to work with us and stakeholders to begin the visioning and conceptual design and planning work to move this idea forward.

The movement on the REA Wing and the building of Nexus has inspired me to look at the U-District differently. Obviously we have seen great success with the Adirondack Bank Center and we know it will only get better. But really, it encompasses all of Bagg's Square and we need to think of it in those terms. Today, I'm proposing a U-District Redevelopment Corporation to streamline, direct and facilitate public and private investment into this area. This district, focused on sports, arts, entertainment and tech, will be bookended by two signature investments. The redevelopment of the county-owned Insight House property on one end, and the creation of the REA Wing Food Emporium on the other. Meanwhile, inside the district is the AUD, back in action, and the Nexus Center, which is scheduled to open in November.

But to truly realize the potential of the U-District, we need to move the rest of the area forward. The county will, through this district, spur public and private investment. I see the potential in this area of Utica. We have to make the vital connections between these signature county-owned assets and the rest of the neighborhood.

One of the first projects we will address is the safety, lighting, parking and landscaping issues around the Nexus Center. This gleaming new one-of-a-kind facility, which is already booked through March of 2023, is currently fronted by an urban hellscape. Partly the result of neglect, the area as currently situated, would be a disaster for visitors. This is unacceptable. We will continue the county's investment and commitment to Nexus and the district by providing these vital amenities and safety measures.

I can't do this alone. Fortunately we have great talent we can call upon. I have just the four people in mind to help the redevelopment district move forward with vision and purpose and to help Oneida County grow. Rob Esche, President of Mohawk Valley Garden; Munson-Williams-Proctor Arts Institute President and CEO Anna D'Ambrosio; Savneet Singh, President and CEO of PAR Technology, and of course, our host here today, Ray Halbritter. I can't think of four people who are more committed to our community or have a better expertise on entertainment and development. I thank them all for their willingness to contribute.

Today, we have laid out an aggressive post-COVID agenda. One that deals with our immediate needs while looking to the long-term future and sustainability of this community.

Ladies and gentlemen, the state of Oneida County is strong.

Our financial condition is solid, as our restrictions throughout the pandemic and the rebound of the economy have returned our reserves to levels that equal those prior to the onset of COVID. We will utilize the American Rescue Funding in measured and impactful projects, understanding this one-time stream of funding cannot, and more importantly should not, be used as carrots to curry favor with the electorate.

I have given this address 15 times, and while each had different initiatives, they all had the same goal. To make our county, our home, a better place. To move us forward. To be bold, even when the odds were against us. To build what some said could never be built. To resolve long-standing issues that some said could never be resolved. And most importantly, to make it clear that whatever we do is a benefit to all, and not just one area or people.

None of it was easy, and I did stumble a few times. But I learned from my mistakes and vowed not to let them deter me or to let them happen again. Once again, I see us at a crossroad. A crossroad of a different type. While signature projects are moving forward, our momentum needs to continue. The pieces that we have in place are not the end of our story, but rather the beginning. We have just experienced two years of uncertainty and confusion from a pandemic that took lives and stalled our economy and way of life, and in many ways, divided our country. What we were able to accomplish through all of this makes our next steps even more significant and challenging. We must keep moving forward.

Not since 1950, has this community been more poised and positioned for growth of such immense proportions. Yet some, through ignorance or obstinance, still seek to block progress for reasons beyond logic. Which is why we need to continue to be bold in our vision and aggressive in our movement, and cast aside the negativity from those who resist change. George Bernard Shaw said, "Progress is impossible without change, and those who cannot change their minds cannot change anything."

I learned a very long time ago that leadership is about taking responsibility, not making excuses. I take the responsibility for this government, and with it, the commitment to work with anyone and everyone who shares the goal of a better Oneida County. I've always believed that partnerships move us forward. It is why we are in this very room today. To all of our partners, thank you for your leadership and conviction. It is what is making us grow. And there is much more to do. Let's do it together.

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