

Oakland Together

Building Our Future Now

2021 State of the County Address David Coulter, Oakland County Executive

Wednesday, May 19, 2021
Broadcast as Virtual Event at OakGov.com/SOTC
Filmed at The Baldwin Theatre • Royal Oak, Michigan

As Prepared for Delivery

INTRODUCTION

Where is everybody?... The show's about to begin.

Oh, that's right.

It's 2021 and here we are, still in the midst of a global pandemic.

This show is about to begin, but there is no one here to join me today because of COVID.

Just think, last February, I had finished up traveling to cities, villages and townships to hear from people in every corner of the county.

I was at the Strand Theater in Pontiac with 800 people in the audience to hear about the state of Oakland County and our vision for how to move forward into the future. It was a wonderful evening with a theater full of people and a sense of optimism about what lie ahead.

Exactly one month after that speech, the first case of coronavirus hit Oakland County and everything changed.

The all-consuming pandemic has robbed so many of us of our livelihoods, our sense of normalcy, our ability to interact. For many, the virus has claimed the lives of family, friends and neighbors and left many debilitated and still dealing with the after-effects of this cruel pandemic.

Through it all, however, I've seen a resilience in our people, our employees and our businesses. We're stepping up, fighting back, getting vaccinated and yearning for the life we all knew before COVID.

And now that we're on the cusp of getting a significant portion of our population vaccinated, I'm hopeful that the path towards building our future will continue with the help of my partners in the federal, state, regional and local governments.

And, of course, I'm so grateful for the other countywide elected officials and the Board of Commissioners who have worked in lockstep with us to deal with this crisis.

This would be the moment when I would welcome the elected leaders who graciously accepted the invitation to attend my State of the County address. While I miss your presence here tonight, I know we

are all collectively in this fight against COVID and we will surely be together next year when all of us reflect on the state of our respective corners of government.

Before we can begin to talk about our principles and visions, however, we can't help but look back on a year like no other.

PANDEMIC RESPONSE

On this lovely stage, the historic Baldwin Theater in Royal Oak was having one of its best years ever and was attracting a packed house for the play "Rag Time," with three more productions in rehearsals.

In Oakland County, we were moving forward on some of our most ambitious proposals:

- making sure 80 percent of our adults got college degrees or training certificates by 2030;
- providing affordable and quality health care to vulnerable residents with our Health360 plan;
- and ensuring that we maintained the county's AAA bond rating.

Then the call came in on March 10th about our first case of COVID and our focus immediately shifted.

We were hit early and hard by the virus. Our hospitals were filling up and we were scouting locations for field hospitals to keep up with an expected overflow of patients. Rush hour traffic disappeared from our streets as businesses shut and families hunkered down in their homes.

We knew this deadly virus wouldn't be contained to the metro region for long and the rest of the state would soon experience the same losses that were becoming painfully familiar here.

Thom Hardesty, the director of our emergency management department, said plans for dealing with a pandemic had already been in place for a long time in the county, but those plans usually revolved around getting preventative drugs to people quickly. With this pandemic, the drugs wouldn't even become available for another nine months and we were faced with a staggering number of coronavirus cases and deaths.

So, an unprecedented mobilization of our emergency operations center and our Health Division began that very first day with an aggressive response that focused on scouring all of our vendors, businesses and residents to find the personal protection equipment that was desperately needed by our hospitals, long term care facilities, schools and businesses.

Then we had to gear up to begin testing residents for COVID and educating them about this frightening new virus.

HIGHLIGHTING OAKLAND'S PEOPLE

Our county's residents, showing their strength, compassion and resilience stepped up.

When we put out the call for donations of PPE, the response was amazing and the drop-off site at the Farmer's Market in Waterford was packed. From residents who contributed a single box of masks or gloves to corporations donating truckloads of supplies, I've never been so proud of our county.

There were people like **Karen Buscemi**, the president and CEO of Detroit Sewn who helped create the Michigan Mask Donation Center in Pontiac as a spot where home sewers could donate home-made

masks for workers in the service industries. Her company also switched gears to focus on making medical masks for hospital workers.

Or corporate leader, **Roger Penske**, who quietly donated the warehouse space we needed to distribute more than two and a half million pieces of PPE that came through the county.

These are residents who are very successful in their fields, but who knew they had to lean in during this most pressing crisis and make sacrifices for the good of us all.

I also have to mention the hundreds of stories I've heard in the last year of our residents who have volunteered to shop or run errands for their neighbors who might be in a medically fragile state. Or those who have organized drive-by celebrations for people isolated in their homes.

Our county and local clerks were frontline heroes, too, this past year, keeping voters safe and our elections secure. And the voters responded in record-breaking numbers.

And by the way, any measures that make it harder to vote, should stop right now.

This pandemic has been one of the biggest challenges of our lifetime and through it all, you have persevered and taken the initiative to make sure your families, neighbors and even strangers stay safe and survive.

This fighting spirit, however, is not a surprise to me. The Oakland I've come to know is full of people up to the task.

HIGHLIGHTING OUR EMPLOYEES

Our employees, who already prove themselves every day, also rose to this daunting occasion.

We were competing with the state and other local governments to find the masks, gloves and gowns as well as the supplies needed to conduct COVID testing. It was a time that our purchasing and emergency operations' employees were working 16 hours a day. And no one thought twice about it.

Same for our Health Division. Their dedication was and still is extraordinary from the top with Kathy Forzley before she retired in February to Leigh-Anne Stafford who took over the role, all the way to the nurses.

Oh my goodness, the nurses have been phenomenal, staffing testing sites, vaccination clinics, the Nurse on Call lines and fitting in their normal duties at the same time. Our epidemiologists helped us understand this awful virus and provided invaluable guidance on how to best stop the spread.

Environmental workers, sanitarians and janitors all pitched in too, knowing that the county's health and safety was on the line.

Just one of many, many examples is Calandra Green, who had more than a decade of service as the vice president of nursing at McLaren Hospital Oakland before she decided to follow her calling to become a public health nurse. She came to work for the Oakland Health Division in 2019 and was promoted to the job of quality and process improvement supervisor in February of last year. And then, we all know what happened.

So, in addition to her new job, she assumed even more roles, helping to increase the number of Nurse on Call phone banks five-fold to handle the thousands of calls that were coming in from concerned residents. Since March of 2020, the hotline has handled more than 140,000 calls.

Calandra became a liaison with Oakland County's school districts and helped to hire 68 nurses who were dispatched to work in schools across the county. And, she has helped with outreach into our most vulnerable communities and set up COVID testing and vaccination clinics in Pontiac and Southfield.

She told me that public health nursing is a passion because it gives her the opportunity to reach the public in a hands-on way that allows her to truly understand residents' needs and provide equitable services that have often eluded them.

Other than a week off in September to get married - Congratulations Calandra - she's on the job. And she's just one example of the amazing work that the entire Health Division has done.

Every department has played a key role in dealing with this pandemic.

Our IT department has helped keep the county running safe, taking on the herculean job of making sure our 4,000 employees could work from home by equipping them with the tools and technology they need for seemingly endless zoom meetings with co-workers and county residents.

In addition to protecting our vital systems from cyber security threats, the department has also put the technology in place to keep residents well informed about what was happening with the pandemic. They mapped the course of the virus, installed the technology we needed for countless Facebook Live videos and virtual meetings and produced web-based dashboards that continue to provide vital information for our residents and the media in an easy and accessible format.

The Workforce Development office also was stretched to their limits, volunteering to assist the state Unemployment Insurance Agency to field more than 800,000 calls from people who lost their jobs and needed unemployment benefits as businesses in the state were shut down to help stop the spread of the virus.

The workers in the six Oakland County Michigan Works! offices took on the additional role of becoming a call center to often angry and frustrated residents who were just trying to feed their families, make the rent or keep their lights on.

Even the county's Parks and Recreation department chipped in, keeping the parks open, for free, so our residents could escape their homes and get a little fresh air. And when we were looking for a spot to memorialize the people we lost to COVID, parks offered up a half-mile trail and split the cost with us to convert the site into an emotional illuminated and interactive Tribute.

Brandy Boyd, the chief of recreation and program services for parks, helped lead that effort even as she was grieving the loss of her parents to COVID.

These are the people who work for Oakland County: dedicated, passionate and creative in finding ways to provide seamless services to our residents even as they also faced their own personal challenges of diminishing childcare, helping their kids with remote learning, and tending to sick and dying family members.

I will never be able to thank them enough for the incredible work they've done this past year.

HIGHLIGHTING OUR BUSINESSES

Let me take a moment to recognize the businesses that also have been deeply impacted by this virus.

We all know the importance of the strength of Oakland County's economy and how critical it is to make sure they survive. Many of them received grants from us to transition their manufacturing plants into making masks and ventilators, hand sanitizer and gowns.

The shift in their business models was another example of the resilience of our businesses, ready to contribute in ways that will not only help the community, but keep people working during a time of economic uncertainty.

Take **Ken Bylo**, the executive vice president of PolyFlex, a Farmington company that transitioned from making packaging materials for auto parts, to designing and manufacturing the face shields that were in such short supply for our frontline workers.

He was battling COVID himself, barely able to breathe, when he got a call from a nurse who said her hospital only had two face shields for the entire staff. Ken told me that in a brief meeting with his partners, it took about two minutes to decide — they were in and looking for anyway to help.

The company made 120,000 masks and still have some to donate, but Ken told me he's kind of thankful that he has no takers at the moment.

Or there is **Rich and Tonya Lockwood**, the owners of Motor City Gas, a Royal Oak distillery that shifted their whiskey making business to producing hand sanitizer for three months last year.

Tonya told me that they were looking for a way to give back to the community and that it was simply the right thing to do. They donated 50,000 units to hospitals and just recently donated some batches to the Royal Oak Schools when students began returning to the classroom.

There are so many more examples of other businesses that leaned into the emergency and decided to shift their production to help out in a public health crisis.

It was just a remarkable outpouring from the community.

The businesses will still have the capability to respond in the future, although we all hope they won't have to.

When we received \$219 million from the federal CARES Act last year, we knew that our businesses were struggling, so we awarded \$145 million in grants to our small businesses, our residents, our communities and non-profits to help them survive the pandemic.

Nearly 15,000 small businesses and 22 chambers of commerce, 57 cities villages and townships, 278 non-profits, 31 veterans' service organizations and 28 school districts received grants.

We provided 15,000 businesses with ReOpen Toolkits, filled with the masks, gloves, thermometers, signage and cleaning supplies that helped them reopen safely.

Thousands of meals went to needy families, the homeless and our frontline workers. We provided free grocery delivery service to 5,000 seniors, grants for basic expenses for 6,000 residents and \$1 million in rent and mortgage assistance to 250 households.

Valencia Van Loan was one of the 785 restaurant owners who received grants from Oakland County.

She was all set to open her My Nana's Kitchen restaurant in Pontiac last February but hadn't gotten her final permits when COVID hit. The virus didn't stop her rent from coming due, though, and an initial \$2,500 grant from the county got her through the summer.

She was finally able to open in September, but carry-out sales were slow and in-person dining would soon end in November when a second COVID surge hit. Facing eviction again because of \$8,300 in late rent, Valencia told me that a sign from God came to her in the form of a second grant from the county in the exact amount of \$8,300.

Valencia told me it was like a miracle because she had been sustaining her restaurant by draining her personal finances and maxing out her credit cards.

For **Alan Semonian**, the executive director of StageCrafters here at the Baldwin Theater, the loss of the season at the theater was heartbreaking.

But the grant that he got from the county delivered a silver lining. The \$40,000 in funding allowed him to pay the substantial monthly expenses at the theater for the past year.

And he was able to use the money raised from annual fundraising from season ticket holders and benefactors to make necessary repairs to the 100-year-old grand theater while it was shut down by COVID.

"We would never have an opportunity to do these repairs because the building is always in such full use. With vaccinations going up, we're waiting for the moment when we can safely recognize that we can move forward and hopefully open in the fall," said Semonian.

And for the curious out there, the first show at the reopened Baldwin Theater this fall will be "Don't Drink the Water," followed by a season of comedies that might make us, at least momentarily, forget the challenging year we have all just endured.

I'm so thankful that we could help people like Valencia and Alan and the thousands of other small business owners who help make up the fabric of our communities. Without them, the county would be a far less interesting and vibrant place to live.

After a year without movies and theater and in-person dining, I think we all realize how much we need and miss these businesses.

To return to that sense of normalcy, we are in the final stages of getting our residents vaccinated.

Through hundreds of vaccination clinics, which have ranged from large scale sites to drive-through options at fire stations, to smaller, targeted clinics at churches, community centers and non-profit organizations, we're nearing that vaccination rate that we need to end this pandemic in its tracks.

We've gotten this far in fighting this pandemic and failure is not an option if we want to beat it. So if you haven't gotten your vaccine yet, there are lots of options for you. And One-by-One, we can return to that part of our lives that have been put on hold.

Speaking of vibrant places to live, COVID may have put a pause on many of our plans, but it didn't stop them.

Because of everything we've been through in the past year and all of the actions we have taken to survive and emerge from COVID, we know we have the tenacity, the know-how and the resolve to jump in and build our future together.

BUILDING OUR FUTURE NOW

We just launched an expanded and renovated health care clinic in Pontiac earlier this month with our partners at Honor Health and the Oakland Livingston Human Services Agency in Pontiac.

As part of our Health360 plan, it will provide health care and referral services to the most vulnerable, under-insured and uninsured populations in the county. If the pandemic has taught us anything, it's that a program like this cannot be delayed.

The Pontiac location is joining our Health Division's operations in Southfield, which is offering affordable health care and referral services in the southern end of the county. Since opening in August last year, the program has provided services to 1,100 county residents.

Our environmental goals are also moving forward after the Board of Commissioners approved our proposal in March to hire a Chief Sustainability Officer to lead our green agenda.

We're committed to building an environmentally friendly government campus. But we also want to collaborate with our federal, state and regional partners to lower greenhouse gases so all of us and future generations can continue to enjoy our splendid surroundings, filled with the lakes, parks and trails that we're lucky enough to call home.

I'm also proud of our efforts to address the historic inequities faced by our minority populations and people of color.

Last year, I hired Robin Carter-Cooper, the county's first Chief Diversity, Equity and Inclusion Officer to help us cultivate a welcoming and diverse environment for our county workforce.

We created the county's first Equity Council and more than 100 people applied for the 30 slots on the council. They will be leading our internal efforts to help create a workplace that promotes cultural sensitivity and understanding among all our employees.

I'm also especially excited about developments in our Oakland80 strategy geared to leading our state in getting 80 percent of the county's adults a college education or certificate training by 2030.

The Oakland80 program will get underway this summer and will fan out across the county to give residents the assistance they need to get into college or skilled training programs.

So far, more than 7,300 Oakland County residents have been approved for the Michigan Reconnect program, which could provide free community college tuition. And more than 10,400 Oakland residents have been approved the Futures for Frontliners scholarship program for tuition-free education beyond high school.

If we want to compete globally, we have to provide our residents a path to greater success and good paying jobs. This is how we secure the future for both our residents and the companies that are looking to locate here and create the jobs for our skilled workforce.

In addition to Oakland80, our Clean Slate initiative just got off the ground last month. It will help our returning citizens take advantage of the state's new expungement laws and clear their records so they can apply for those jobs without having to worry about getting turned away for past mistakes.

In just the first week of the program, more than 650 people applied for help to get their records expunged. And that's just one part of our plan to address criminal justice reform in the county.

By the fall, the assignment of defense attorneys will be independent, and it is my intention to establish a public defenders' office in Oakland County within the next two years in order to provide defendants with dedicated attorneys, who are solely focused on representing people who have been charged with crimes, but can't afford a lawyer.

We want to make sure that all defendants have equitable access to representation.

In light of the horrific murder of George Floyd by a Minneapolis police officer last year that spurred protests across the nation, including dozens of peaceful marches in Oakland County, we began important and necessary conversations on these injustices and we're committed to pursuing actions that will make our criminal justice system more equitable, efficient and fair.

You see, we don't need to wait for the end of this pandemic to build our future. We must start now.

And the federal American Rescue Plan is going to help us make some transformational changes for our future.

My administration, along with a reconvened Economic Recovery Task Force of key community leaders and my partners in county government are coming up with a plan for the \$244 million that is coming from the ARP.

This money won't be used for ongoing operations of the county and we must continue our well-deserved reputation for fiscal responsibility as proven by our just reconfirmed AAA bond rating. We can't jeopardize that because this will serve as the foundation to build toward these new goals.

We'll look at partnerships to leverage the federal money to make strategic investments in key areas. We're going to target initiatives that build on Oakland County's strengths, address our disparities, and prepare us for a strong future.

But we have also learned some valuable lessons from COVID-19 that can be transformed into policy with the help of this federal funding. As we look ahead to emerging from this pandemic, there are key areas that we need to address to build our future.

We learned that Families suffered from a lack of affordable childcare options before and during the pandemic. According to the Michigan League for Public Policy, only 60 percent of the county's childcare providers were open at the beginning of this year and the cost of that childcare is higher than any of our surrounding counties.

One of the really troubling statistics that has come from the pandemic is the loss of women in the workplace. The Bureau of Labor Statistics reported that 2.4 million women have left the workforce during the pandemic and that could have a lasting and negative impact on our economy.

We can't afford to lose such a large and talented segment of our workforce, so we must do better on this front.

The pandemic also forced so many people into crippling and lonely isolation, straining our ability to keep up with the demand for mental health services, so we need to be able to offer a helping hand to our residents who are struggling in so many different ways.

But the good news is that we have demonstrated that when we put our minds to it, we have the ability, the resilience, the where-with-all to tackle big, difficult challenges that confront us.

When our generation was called upon to address this unprecedented global health and economic crisis, let history remember that we answered the call.

CONCLUSION

I hope I've captured for you a bit of the resilience and spirit I've seen over the course of the last 14 months. And that's the reason I'm so confident we will move forward and achieve these goals together.

With smart and forward-thinking planning, Oakland County will not only emerge from this pandemic stronger, but we will also be thriving.

And I'm confident that by this fall, we will move from an "extended intermission" to a packed house ready for our next act.