

2025 State of the County Address
David Coulter, Oakland County Executive

Wednesday, March 19, 2025, at 7 p.m.
Berman Center for the Performing Arts in West Bloomfield, MI

Good evening, everyone. I want to thank you so very much for joining us this evening. I'm really glad you're here. And for those of you who are observing this holy month, Ramadan Mubarak.

I don't know about you, but the stakes in our country have never seemed higher. And, our emotional response to it, even higher. Across the nation, some are encouraged by the direction we're headed, while others – myself included - are deeply concerned. And far too many have grown disillusioned, feeling powerless to make a difference in a political and economic system that too often feels broken.

But you are here. So that tells me you are not disengaged. You might be pleased or troubled, but you're not tuned out. You're invested in Oakland County. You want to know what we're doing because you believe it's relevant to your life. And, for that, I am grateful. Because I need you. I need you to believe in the future of Oakland County. And, more importantly, I need you to be a part of it.

I'm a student of history and I know the course of our country is paved with eras of tremendous disruption. Disruption can bring progress. It's propelled us forward through technological revolutions, from the printing press to the internet, and through economic transformations that have reshaped our industries and our communities. In each of these times, people felt unease, yet they persevered with new ways of thinking and creating – and collectively pressing this great American experiment forward.

The current turmoil in our country comes on top of a period of tremendous economic and societal disruption caused by COVID.

In Oakland County we haven't shied away from these challenges. In fact, we've leaned into them. We've stretched beyond the normal role of county government because that is what the times demanded of us.

That's why, in the midst of COVID, we launched Project DIAMOND to equip small businesses with 3D printers, helping them adapt and thrive. That's why we set ambitious goals like Oakland 80. That's why we're aggressively pursuing the next generation of automotive engineering and manufacturing.

We're riding this wave of disruption to a brighter future for Oakland County.

But let me be very clear, I reject the disruption we see in the Trump Administration because, quite frankly, too often it's just simply destruction.

When I became County Executive, I was determined to do much more than maintain the status quo. Of course, I wanted to change from the previous administration, but you can have change without chaos. You can lift people up, without tearing people down. You can speak with clarity and strength without being mean and derogatory.

So, for tonight, this one night that you've chosen to give your time to Oakland County to hear about our present and our future, let me tell you a story of a county government that can work for all the people it serves. Where problems are addressed with thoughtful solutions. And, yes, where the diversity of our residents is seen as a strength. Where one person is not lifted above another person, but where all are welcome and provided an opportunity to create their own exceptional future in this special place that we call home.

Oakland County is in a stronger position today than it was ten years ago. And, we have gotten here without drama, destruction or division.

You've heard me say this before, we're Michigan's economic engine with 22 % of the state's GDP. With 720,000 workers employed here, including more than 400,000 who commute here from other areas. We have the lowest unemployment rate in the state.

We're an international magnet for foreign investment with 830 companies from 34 countries around the world doing business in Oakland County.

We have the highest per capita income in the state and we're ranked 14th nationally among counties with at least one million residents.

In fact, we account for a full 40% of the research and development that takes place in Michigan.

But at the same time, we're addressing the intractable problems, investing in the future and removing the burdens that hold residents back.

As you will see this evening, this didn't just happen because we maintained the status quo, or took a reactive posture. We created a strategic plan. We were proactive and we relied on our core principles – empowering people, putting progress over partisanship, and delivering a government that protects the tax dollars and works for the residents and businesses it serves.

I know that these are values that my colleagues in public office share with me. I'm really pleased to welcome our county-wide officials, the members of the judicial branch and the Board of Commissioners this evening. Prosecutor Karen McDonald, Clerk and Register of Deeds Lisa Brown, Sheriff Mike Bouchard, Treasurer Robert Wittenberg, Water Resource Commissioner Jim Nash. Please join me in thanking them again for all they do for our county.

We're also joined by Chief of the Circuit Court, Judge Jeffery Matis, Chief of the Probate Court, Judge Jennifer Callaghan and Chief of the 52nd District Court, Judge Travis Reeds. Thank you for being here this evening.

And importantly, the Board of Commissioners, Chairman Dave Woodward and Minority Leader Mike Spisz, and all the members of the board – thank you for being full partners in governing.

I'm also really happy to welcome and thank my executive leadership team as well as our 5,000-person strong workforce. They provide outstanding service to our residents every day. Let's give them a round of applause.

I'm also grateful that my partners in the region have joined us tonight. Help me welcome Macomb County Executive Mark Hackel, Wayne County Executive Warren Evans and Detroit Mayor Mike Duggan. We're so much stronger when we work together as a team for the good of our region and Michigan.

And finally, several of our state and federal leaders, including Congresswoman Debbie Dingell, Secretary of State Jocelyn Benson, and several members of our Lansing delegation are here. Thanks for your friendship, your service and your support.

This past year, our government family suffered a terrible tragedy with the loss of Sheriff's Deputy Bradley Reckling, who was killed in the line of duty. Deputy Reckling, was described by all who knew him as a great cop, but an even better friend. A loving husband and a fun-loving father of four. There are no words that can truly explain such a loss or ease the pain felt by those who loved him. But we can join together in remembrance, in gratitude for his service, and in support of his family and colleagues who continue to heal. Please join me in a moment of silence.

Thank you.

As Executive, I understand that the legislative branch holds the power of the purse strings. I am not looking for “my way or the highway.” By working together with our Board of Commissioners, we’ve improved our fiscal policies and maintained Oakland County’s sterling reputation for fiscal responsibility. We’ve updated our Rainy Day policy to preserve it for true emergencies or strategic investments, and we’ve maintained a low tax rate that protects the hard-earned money of our taxpayers.

Wall Street’s key indicator that we’re worthy of investment – our AAA bond rating – not only saves us money over the long term and signals to companies looking to invest in Oakland County that we’re best in class. But it’s also the foundation that allows us to invest in the things that make our county great.

And when we need to make large investments – we ask the taxpayers first – so our actions reflect their priorities. They spoke very clearly on the need for a county-wide public transit system.

Because of them, today we’ve created an on-demand service in every part of our county. And regular fixed-route service to our job centers in Novi and Rochester Hills. Just a few stats to consider about the impact of expanded transit: ridership in West Oakland County has increased 60 %. The new local service in Novi has seen a 76 % increase in ridership. SMART and local transit providers have added more than 400 new drivers since the millage passed. And our Veterans Ride Free program has provided more than 7,000 rides in less than a year for our military veterans and their caregivers. I know we have some veterans here in the audience tonight, so join me in giving them a round of applause.

And, just last year, voters spoke clearly on the value of our county-wide parks system. The investment by our county residents will allow us to preserve land for future generations, make the capital improvements necessary to revitalize our vast network of parks and trails and, improve recreational opportunities in all parts of the county.

We’re also transforming how we serve people. I want to provide you two examples from two very different areas – economic development and health and human services.

When I took office, the county’s “One Stop Shop” model had entrepreneurs having to make a trip to the county complex to get information about business opportunities. Who has time for that? Not our business owners, that often have small staff and limited time and resources. In fact, only about 400 people each year took advantage of those services.

I was confident that we could serve more of our small businesses by going to them, instead of making them come to us.

So, in 2022, we launched Business Forward, embedding nine consultants in communities throughout the county. They provide individual coaching and workshops on everything from financial plans to social media strategy – right on the doorsteps of those businesses, not just on our county campus.

The program has since evolved into the nonprofit Oakland Thrive and has grown from the original 9 consultants to add 75 contractors who are business owners and experts who are also working with our small businesses. And since we started this new approach just two years ago, we’ve connected with more than 15,000 small businesses. You heard that right. More than 15,000 small businesses in just the last two years.

One of those businesses – Moon Reflections Photography in Farmington Hills, owned by Sacred Overstreet-Amos and her husband Supreme Amos, and they got help from Oakland Thrive at a time when all small business owners were struggling to recover from the pandemic.

Sacred told us that Oakland Thrive provided communications and marketing expertise and is helping redesign their website. It also delivered the networking opportunities that helped them grow their clientele.

She said that such services have been invaluable, especially for her small family and veteran-owned business, that doesn't typically have access to that kind of help.

The second innovative approach is in our Health and Human Services Department with the launch of Oakland Connects, which takes our Health360 program to an even more accessible level for our residents.

The program is all about taking a holistic approach when people come to see us with health problems. Their medical issues might be connected to housing or food insecurity or stress caused by financial hardships.

Regardless of what door they enter for help – whether it's our housing department or public health clinic or our Veterans' Services department, one of the six members of our Oakland Connects community health care team can assess the situation and make sure they get all the help they need. This could be paying a utility bill or getting transportation, food and clothing or securing temporary housing or even a referral to our workforce development department where they can get assistance in finding a job.

The Oakland Connects initiative dovetails very nicely with the new Integrated Care Clinic in Pontiac, which provides critical physical and mental health care to people who are unsure of where to turn or have concerns about their ability to pay. Specialists are onsite to ensure real-time assessment and referrals on a full range of needed services. This clinic also provides an important resource for our first responders who encounter people in crisis and in need of immediate care.

Since the soft launch of the program last year, the clinic has provided care for more than 1,600 patients.

And at this time, I want to acknowledge the initiative and tremendous boost given to this project by Roger Penske and the Penske Family Foundation. Maybe it's his racing background, but Roger doesn't wait around for a project to come to him. If he has an idea, he puts the pedal to the metal and pursues it. And most importantly, if you bring him a good idea, he's all in. In fact, this is the second time that Roger has stepped up for Oakland County. The first was during COVID when he responded to a generic email with an offer to allow us to use his warehouse for our emergency response. And, now his foundation is providing the gap funding which is helping to turn a soft launch into a fully operational clinic. Could you please join me in thanking Roger?

Oakland Thrive and Oakland Connects both make sure that public service is just that – service to the public. Because if you can't find it or don't know who to call, it's really not much of a service.

Now, I bet you've noticed that Oakland County initiatives have some pretty creative names.

Two of those are Oakland 80 and Project DIAMOnD – which, if you don't know, stands for Distributed, Independent, Agile Manufacturing On Demand.

Project DIAMOnD is one of the initiatives that emerged in the wake of the pandemic to help our small manufacturers respond to the crisis.

After its successful launch in 2020 and the distribution of 3D printers to more than 300 manufacturers, we moved to Phase 2 of the initiative last summer and it's helping to keep manufacturing production right here in Oakland County.

Our companies are using this technology to improve and broaden their product lines. One of them is Becker Orthopedics in Troy, which is using its 3D printer to create more customized orthopedic devices for its customers. They've been able to create a special tool for their artificial ankle joints, which gives customers with complex chronic conditions more stability and mobility.

Erica Guise, a quality assurance professional at Becker, told us the 3D printer allows workers to easily modify and change the parts in the ankle joint as the person grows from childhood through their elderly years.

She told us: "Nobody likes to think about a kid who can't run and play with their friends. And this allows a child to be a kid."

The company has been operating for more than 90 years, including 45 years in Troy and this 3D technology is helping them grow and meet the ever-changing needs of their customers.

Now, the ripple effect of Project DIAMOnD has been pretty astounding. With our partners at Automation Alley, who is represented here tonight by CEO Tom Kelly, we opened the Digital Transformation Center at Geofabrica in Auburn Hills in June to provide training to companies hoping to join this 3D printing network. And, so far, 148 Oakland County firms have done just that.

And, spurred on by enthusiastic support from Governor Gretchen Whitmer, the program is also working in Macomb and Wayne counties and is going statewide. Another 126 companies from every corner of Michigan are in line for the 10-week training program.

And, Oakland80 is right there too – ensuring that our businesses have a pipeline of skilled and talented workers. But Oakland80 is so much more than an outstanding workforce development initiative. It's our NorthStar, not only because it preserves Oakland County's economic strength, but it empowers our residents to create a better future.

Tired of part-time hours in retail and want a job in health care? Want to get out of an office environment and work with your hands? Maybe you like numbers but don't have the degree to be an accountant

That's where our Oakland80 career navigators come in. They help people map out a path to achieve their goals, providing resources, coaching and support every step of the way. They also help residents navigate challenges – whether it's financial barriers, confusing processes, or bureaucratic roadblocks – so they can focus on what really matters: helping themselves and their families to succeed.

We're committed to breaking down the obstacles that hold people back from gaining the education and training they need to launch or pivot into fulfilling careers with higher wages.

For Bridgette and Jordan Sellers of Royal Oak, our navigators helped them access the financial support they needed to get through those final classes at Oakland University. Just last month, Bridgette started her first nursing job at Corewell Health and Jordan is looking forward to the job promotion that could come with his newly minted bachelor's degree in program management.

And I also just want to acknowledge and applaud what great partners our higher education leaders are, like Oakland University President Ora Pescovitz and Oakland Community College Chancellor Pete Provenzano.

But, it's not just about college. High-paying, in-demand careers in the skilled trades are within reach, with top-tier training available through union apprenticeships. Oakland80 ensures residents have access to every opportunity – whether in the classroom, on the job site or along any career path in between.

And I'm proud to report that our Oakland 80 efforts are paying off. Three years ago, we started with 61 % of our population having achieved a post-secondary degree or credential. Our goal is to get that number to 80 % by 2030 and when we get our annual report in the fall, I'm confident that we'll have surpassed the 70 % mark. And that translates into more talent for our businesses and higher wages and opportunities for our residents.

But, we're also committed to supporting our K-12 schools and high school students. We know that high school can be challenging, and with so many distractions, it's not always easy to focus on the future.

That's why at the start of this school year, we placed 12 Oakland80 coaches into high schools across the county to help students take their first steps toward a career. They're assisting with college and financial aid applications, leading campus tours, and even helping students get pre-registered for classes and apprenticeships. More importantly, they're guiding students toward careers that not only align with their passions and skills but also match job opportunities that are in demand.

Think about your own life - what have you pursued with the most energy? Chances are, it's something that you're passionate about. That's exactly why our efforts focus on helping students discover what excites them. And events like the successful MICareerQuest and our 10th annual Manufacturing Day bring careers to life through hands-on demonstrations, giving our students a real-world glimpse into their future possibilities.

And here is why that makes a difference.

[VIDEO: MICAREERQUEST AND MANUFACTURING DAY]

We're also making those connections for our youngest residents in our Acorn to Oak program – providing micro-grants to our young people to pursue an idea, an activity or a talent. Over the last two years, Acorn to Oak has helped deliver nearly 100 grants.

I love how passionate these young students are. Take Allie Kelco, a 12-year-old from Clarkston. Diagnosed with celiac disease at the age of 4, Allie used her Acorn2Oak grant to start a gluten-free baking company called "The Blissful Baker."

Or 18-year-old Abu Touray from Pontiac who used his grant to help transform a pre-engineering internship into the creation of a National Society of Black Engineers Junior Chapter here in Oakland County.

We're supporting our young people at their highest moments -- and at their most difficult. COVID was tough on our kids. And, Oakland County hasn't been immune from the terrible tragedies of gun violence - in our schools and our parks.

We have stretched and stepped up to take care of the mental health of all our residents. I'm proud that one of the single largest investments we made with federal ARP dollars has been in the area of mental health.

- We've invested in mental health services in our schools
- We've supported the urgent needs of hospital emergency rooms
- We've invested in community-based mental health providers
- We've created co-responder programs for law enforcement.
- And we've strengthened the network of senior centers and activities for older adults

Consider the impact that our co-responder program is having. Steve Norris is a director at the Alliance of Coalitions in Troy, which runs a crisis response unit that partners with deputies from the Oakland County Sheriff's Office.

The team responds to substance abuse and mental health crisis calls, ensuring that people get the appropriate care they need, whether it's de-escalation, rehab, or a hospital stay.

The team gets anywhere from six to 15 calls a day and continues monitoring their clients for months, even in years.

Since the program started, countless people have gotten treatment options, rather than jail. And the overdose death rate dropped by 31 % last year.

Steve told us this: "That's 101 people who are still living and breathing today. And I would say that's an absolute success."

This mental health funding didn't just provide services to hundreds of thousands of residents; it also reinforced the foundation of our non-profit network. By enabling these organizations to update equipment, expand their training programs and increase staff capacity, we helped them become more resilient and better prepared to sustain their critical work. As a result, these non-profits are now stronger, more connected with us and each other, and are better able to serve residents for years to come.

Now a critical intersection of mental health and economic independence is housing. It's often said that housing – whether rentals or homeownership - is the biggest cost most of us will have in our lives.

Now imagine the stress and uncertainty of being housing insecure. For the 40 % of Oakland County residents who spend more than a third of their monthly income on rent or mortgage, that anxiety is a daily reality.

We had a choice to make as a county. We could be a wealthy county where life was really good for the well-off among us. Or we could be a wealthy county that uses its prosperity to address the conditions of poverty and welcome more people into the middle class.

So, for us, the choice was clear. We got busy investing in both a Housing Trust Fund and a Land Bank because we had a lot of ground to make up if we were going to improve the availability of affordable housing in Oakland County.

In just one year, we've provided the gap financing and incentive funding for nine housing projects across the county, which will create 649 new affordable, accessible housing units.

Two of our most exciting projects are Walton Oaks and Auburn Oaks in Rochester Hills.

There, we broke ground in September in partnership with Three Oaks Communities to provide neighborhoods that include housing for people with Intellectual and Developmental Disabilities. The family members who were there were overjoyed that their loved ones were going to be able to experience a level of supported independence for the first time in their lives.

In fact, this is only the second such development in the state and it will provide the residents of these neighborhoods the opportunity – and the blessing – to live in an inclusive community that understands and respects people of all abilities.

Among the other projects we've invested in are 216 senior housing units at Oakland Woods and the rehabilitation of a 50-unit apartment building that's a real architectural gem in Pontiac, 32 affordable homes in Royal Oak Township and a 72-unit building at Wellspring in Southfield.

However, getting a home or an apartment is just the first step. We all know that homeownership comes with a cost and numerous little projects and investments – big and small – all of the time. That's why we invested in the Oakland Saves program – to help people stay in their homes and save money through energy efficient upgrades. Repairing a roof, upgrading a furnace or replacing windows improves the quality of life for each family, but it also strengthens our communities, improves home values, deepens our tax base and it's great for the environment.

So now, I want to drill down on this question of when government decides to help individuals. We do it – of course – when you pay into the system as is the case for Social Security, Unemployment Insurance and Medicare.

But, I also believe that government has a role to play as the great Equalizer – not as thrilling as Denzel Washington or Queen Latifah, perhaps – but when the system gets off kilter and is not providing a level playing field for all its residents. I believe our effort around medical debt is a good example of this. Our health insurance system can be hard to navigate and we know that for all too many people, one unexpected medical issue or bill could deal a huge financial blow.

In Oakland County, we've decided to protect 80,000 residents from that fate. With a \$2 million investment, our partner organization, Undue Medical Debt, buys the medical debt from local healthcare systems for pennies on the dollar. The first 14,000 residents received letters in December, wiping out more than \$9 million in medical debt. This is the type of news that relieves financial burdens and rehabilitates credit scores, giving people the freedom to move ahead with plans for their future and do things like buy a house, or a car or save for a child's education.

"For pennies on the dollar." That phrase sticks with me because another role for government is to use our leverage to help individuals where a little bit of investment can go a long way. Take our student loan relief program. There are dozens of student loan repayment programs – many to incentivize in demand workers like teachers, health care professionals and military service members. But again, what good are these programs if you don't know about them?

And that's why we're paying the \$70 fee for residents to enroll in a turbo tax-like program run by a national technology startup called Savi that scours local, state, federal and private programs geared toward reducing student loan debt.

And you know what? So far, nearly 900 people burdened with more than \$25 million in student loan debt have already signed up for this program. They've reduced their debt on average by more than \$42,000 each. That's \$154 a month back in their pockets and back into the local economy.

That is a government program that puts people over politics.

Another one is our Nurse-Family Partnership program. One of the goals we set in our strategic plan was to reduce the level of infant and maternal mortality that exists in Oakland County. The program is simple, but it's working. Six public health nurses are assigned to first-time families. They help with nutrition, connecting with doctors and coaching mothers and fathers in the care of their newborns. The nurses stay with the families throughout the pregnancy, birth and the first two years of their baby's life, providing a lifeline, a coach, and a friend. The program helps reduce early preterm deliveries and cases of pregnancy-induced hypertension in moms. And it's been found to significantly decrease emergency room visits for parents and their babies.

For Monique Whittaker, who is here with us tonight, the program, literally, was a lifesaver.

Here's a little more on her story.

[VIDEO: NURSE-FAMILY PARTNERSHIP]

And as you saw, Karim is now a thriving, rambunctious three-year-old. And her family is just one of the success stories from our Health department, but there were more than 200 families who were enrolled last year in the program that is leading to healthy outcomes for moms and their babies.

When we think about these programs, or the role of government, it's important that we understand this work is not a zero-sum game. One person's gain is not balanced out by another person's loss. That is how I feel about Diversity, Equity and Inclusion. I'm proud of the county's effort to create a welcoming county, a diverse workforce and to address the historic biases and stereotypes in all that we do.

It's also why I believe so strongly that our economy, our culture and our population benefit from immigration. In fact, the only reason the population of both Michigan and Oakland County grew in the last decade was that immigrants chose to live here.

These new residents are business owners, skilled workers, engineers and advanced technology experts who are fueling our growth. And they are our neighbors and friends, helping to make our communities more vibrant, and successful.

As we look toward a bright future for Oakland County, I'd also like to offer a glimpse of what's ahead for the one of our central cities: the historic downtown of Pontiac.

[VIDEO: DOWNTOWN PONTIAC]

I'm bullish on Pontiac, so stay tuned! Our Pontiac project will really start taking shape this year.

I believe there exists for all of us a common thread. It's what binds us together from one generation to the next, from one group to the next, from one place in the world to the next.

We'd do well to look for it, hold on to it, cherish it and respect each other for being a part of our shared humanity. It's a thread woven with love, understanding and the recognition that, despite our differences, we're all part of something greater than ourselves. This thread carries the stories of those who came before us, the hopes of those who walk beside us and the dreams of those yet to come.

I'm grateful that you've been here this evening. As you leave, I hope you will be inspired to share our story. To tell people about a place just north of Detroit - where leadership is about service, not politics. Where challenges are met with innovation, not hyperbole. Where disruption leads to progress, not division. Where we walk this path together, knowing that our strength comes from our unity. And, where we don't need to make Oakland County great again, because we have always been great, and together, we can do even more good.

Thank you and God Bless you.