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# Governor Stein's State of the State Remarks as Prepared

RALEIGH, NC

*Tonight, Governor Stein will address the General Assembly for his first State of the State. Below are his remarks as prepared.*

Mr. Speaker, Mr. President Pro Tem, Lieutenant Governor,

Other members of the Council of State,

Members of the General Assembly,

Mr. Chief Justice and members of the Supreme Court,

Mr. Chief Judge and members of the Court of Appeals,

Cabinet Secretaries,

And to all North Carolinians watching from home – good evening.

With me tonight are:

my parents Adam and Jane,

my sister Gerda, my brother-in-law Lee, my brother Eric, and

my incredible wife, our First Lady, Anna, and our wonderful daughter Leah.

I am honored to address this chamber and share my vision for our future.

But first, I must report on the state of our state.

I was sworn in as Governor ten weeks ago today.

Assuming this office's responsibilities has led to prayer and reflection.

When any of us faces an important challenge, we search for strength.

Strength to rise to the occasion.

Strength to reach across differences in search of common ground.

Strength to stand up for what we know is right.

Strength to meet the moment.

Sometimes, you don't know how strong you are until you are put to the test.

Hurricane Helene and its horrific aftermath tested our state and our people in unprecedented ways.

The storm flooded much of western North Carolina, stealing too many lives from us and devastating too many communities.

But in the days, weeks, and months that followed, I have seen – we all have seen – that the state of our state is strong – North Carolina strong!

And that is because our people are strong.

Ashley Cook is a lifelong resident of Avery County.

Her life completely changed on September 27<sup>th</sup> when Hurricane Helene swept through her mountain town of Minneapolis.

Her roof was damaged, but her neighbors got hit worse, so she immediately turned her attention to what they needed.

She and her cousin Freddy Carpenter first went to work clearing roads and then spent weeks hauling food, propane tanks, and heaters.

In the months since, Ashley's used her Facebook page to connect people with whatever they need – gravel for driveways, roof repairs, notary services, even a sludge pump.

You ask me if our state is strong?

I point to Ashley and Freddy and the thousands of Ashleys and Freddy's who stared devastation down and went to work helping others...

The spirit of the people of North Carolina has never been stronger!

Ashley and Freddy were due to join us tonight, but unfortunately Ashley is under the weather.

But let's still thank them and all of our citizen heroes.

And let's make sure they can hear us all the way out in Avery County and the rest of western North Carolina!

By the way, the people who have been aiding folks out west don't care a whit about the politics of the people they are helping.

They simply want to help their neighbors in need, just like the Good Samaritan who took mercy on the traveler left beaten and bloody on the side of the road to Jericho.

We must follow their example and step up for our neighbors in western North Carolina.

My team and I have been focused on doing whatever we can to help.

On Day 1 as Governor, I took action to cut red tape and make it easier for folks to recover.

The crews and contractors of the Department of Transportation have reopened more than 1,300 roads so far.

And as of March First, I-40 is open! That's great work, Secretary Hopkins.

We've removed nearly 5 million cubic yards of debris from our roadways.

Half of all state parks and cultural sites hit by the storm have fully reopened, and almost all of them are accepting visitors.

So many people and organizations, public and private, have worked so hard.

I saw firsthand the remarkable efforts of Baptists on Mission in mid-January when I volunteered with them to repair the home of a schoolteacher in Spruce Pine.

Groups like Baptists on Mission and Habitat for Humanity are working tirelessly to get people back into their homes.

We need them to keep up their good work.

That's why, in January, I announced \$6 million in grants to these two organizations!

In addition to addressing housing, we've been focused on supporting struggling small businesses.

After a major disaster, more than 40% of all affected small businesses never reopen; within two years, 60% have permanently closed their doors.

Folks, we cannot let that become our story!

Small business is the beating heart of the economy of western North Carolina.

So, we have partnered with the Dogwood Health Trust and the Duke Endowment to offer \$35 million in grants to impacted small

businesses.

They can use these grants for paying their staff, restoring inventory, and fixing up their property – whatever they need.

So far, we have been able to award grants to more than 1,000 small businesses!

One of those is Chimney Rock Gemstone Mine, a beloved family destination.

Matt and Michelle Banz have run their gemstone mine for 21 years.

That was until Helene caused the Rocky Broad River to jump its banks and flood their store.

They've been working hard to rebuild so they can reopen this summer, and their small business grant has enabled them to start replenishing their merchandise, hiring back staff, and rebuilding.

Matt and Michelle, thank you for not giving up on Chimney Rock. We will not give up on you!

Western North Carolina's small businesses aren't looking for a hand out. They just need a hand up so they can get back on their feet.

And as many small businesses as we've been able to support, many, many more are still waiting for help.

So let's support small businesses with grants, just like we do our farmers.

Folks we're talking \$60 billion in damages overall – by far the costliest storm to ever hit North Carolina.

That's too much for those affected to bear themselves. They need our help.

People need to get back in their homes.

Roads and bridges need to be fixed.

Businesses need to keep their doors open and their workers employed.

And communities need clean drinking water.

That's why I'm working with President Trump, his cabinet, and our congressional delegation to seek billions more in federal funds – ASAP.

And that's why I urge you to pass the \$500 million western North Carolina recovery bill.

We need that money now.

Heck, we needed it yesterday.

Ashley and Freddy, Matt and Michelle, all of western North Carolina – they need us to do our jobs.

So let's do it, and let's pass this bill.

I am ready to sign it!

And once we get it done, let's get right back to work.

We want the people of western North Carolina to know – we will not forget you!

And by the way, when we talk about rebuilding, we don't mean only out west.

A number of folks down east still need help,

folks who lost everything after Hurricanes Matthew and Florence,

folks who just want their home back.

That bill we're waiting on also includes funding to help them move forward, as well.

And no matter where you live, you need to know that if disaster strikes, we will be there!

Fundamentally, our commitment to our people is that they have a real shot at success – to get a good-paying job or start a small business.

That's the promise of North Carolina – that where you come from should never limit how far you can go.

Delivering on that promise is what drives me as your Governor.

In recent years, we've recruited businesses that have created tens of thousands of jobs across the state.



We've been ranked in the Top 2 states for business, four years running!

We've become a leader in the clean energy economy.

There is a lot to be proud of and plenty of credit to go around.

And I am committed to doing my part as Governor to continue our state's economic success.

In just the past two months, we've announced more than 1500 new jobs, most of which are in rural North Carolina.

But we cannot rest on our laurels. Other states want what we have here – it's a competitive world.

We cannot afford to leave anyone's talents on the sidelines – we must be a state that is welcoming to all people.

We must continue to grow our economy and ensure it works for everyone!

The people of North Carolina are our greatest asset.

So to invest in our future, we must invest in our people.

And know this: while I am governor, when it comes to developing our workforce, no state will outwork us!

Our goal is to set the national pace in growing the number of skilled workers, including:

Doubling the number of apprentices over the next four years, and

Empowering hundreds of thousands more North Carolinians with the credentials they need to secure a good-paying job.

So, I'm proposing that for students getting certified in high-demand sectors, like in advanced manufacturing, health care, and IT, we provide them free community college!

We've also got to support Propel NC, which rewards community colleges when students earn credentials for high wage jobs.

And I'm creating a Council on Workforce and Apprenticeships to unite our community colleges, public schools, and local businesses around our shared goal of getting more people access to good jobs with good wages.

We know how to do this; heck, in many corners of the state, we already are.

Northern Regional Hospital in Mt. Airy had a nursing shortage and had to pay for expensive traveling nurses to fill the gaps.

So, in partnership with Surry-Yadkin Works, a local workforce organization, the hospital worked with Surry Community College to create an apprenticeship program.

Emily Orellana always knew she wanted to be a nurse, but she didn't know where to start.

This apprenticeship program helped Emily get connected to Northern Regional as a high schooler and earn her certified nursing

assistant credential.

Now, she's about to graduate from the community college's nursing program as a registered nurse with a focus on ICU care.

Emily inspired her sister Haylee, who is now pursuing her own nursing credential to work in labor and delivery.

Haylee and Emily, please stand so we can thank you for taking care of our people.

Thanks to this apprenticeship program, Northern Regional Hospital is training its next generation of health care workers – homegrown – dramatically reducing its dependence on traveling nurses.

It's about turning apprenticeships into careers, which is good for both workers and employers.

Folks should not have to get a bachelor's degree to get a good-paying job and provide for their family.

Every hard-working North Carolinian deserves a real shot at a brighter future!

And we have to create the conditions that allow them to fulfill their potential.

Yes, that means good-paying jobs.

It also means clean air to breathe and clean water to drink.

And it means lower costs.

Too many North Carolinians are struggling to pay their bills, including housing and child care.

North Carolina is the third fastest growing state in the nation after Texas and Florida.

But our housing supply has not kept up.

To keep prices down, we need more housing of all types – single family, duplexes, triplexes, condos, apartments, special needs housing.

We can find bi-partisan solutions to high housing costs if we're willing to work together.

So let's do it and get more homes built for our people!

It's not just housing that's in short supply; we also need more child care options.

You want to hear something crazy – too many parents cannot afford to work.

That's because they can't find child care they can afford, if they can find it all.

At the same time, we don't have enough child care workers because they don't get paid enough.

Currently, there is only 1 child care spot for every 5 families wanting one.

Of course, parents should always have the option to stay home with their children.

But it should be a choice – parents shouldn't be pushed out of the workforce.

When they are, they suffer – and our economy suffers.

Each year, our state loses billions of dollars in economic activity because of our child care crisis.

So this week, I announced a bipartisan Task Force on Child Care and Early Education to find innovative solutions to this challenge.

When we do, it will be a win for our children, a win for our parents, and a win for our businesses and economy.

Let's work together to expand access to quality, affordable child care here in North Carolina!

To make North Carolina a state where folks thrive, we need to invest in children and their families by cutting taxes for middle-class families.

We can cut taxes to help families manage the cost of raising a child.

We can cut taxes to make child care more affordable.

And we can cut taxes on working families to put more money in their pockets, lift children out of poverty, and stimulate local economies.

These three targeted tax cuts are what being pro-family looks like!

We can afford them and still meet our critical education, health care, and public safety needs.

But we won't be able to make these necessary investments if we do not address the self-inflicted fiscal cliff we face in a couple of years, especially given today's uncertainties.

We're at a fork in the road when it comes to our budget.

We can go ahead with nearly \$10 billion of tax giveaways over the next 4 years, mainly to the wealthy and to corporate shareholders.

By the way, very few of these shareholders are North Carolinian – heck, many aren't even American!

Or we can help our neighbors recover from Hurricane Helene, invest in our public safety and public schools, provide targeted tax cuts to support our working families, and keep up with the needs of our fast-growing population.

So what's it going to be? Give money to out of state shareholders, or invest in North Carolina families?

We cannot afford to do both.

We should choose North Carolina's children and families every time!

Of course, we have to be fiscally prudent – to be smart about how we invest taxpayers' dollars.

That's why I'm directing my budget office to set up the Impact Center to ensure our government is run effectively and efficiently...

because people should know that their tax dollars are being well spent!

But let's get this right.

Let's use a scalpel, not a chainsaw.

Today, the state of North Carolina is strong – let's invest to keep it that way!

That includes investing in our teachers.

Just remember your favorite teacher.

A good teacher inspires their students.

That's why we must recruit and retain the best.

And that's why we must give teachers a real pay raise!

Right now, North Carolina's starting teacher pay is the second-lowest in the southeast, lower than every one of our bordering states – even South Carolina.

Anna and I know some parents of recent college graduates.

Those graduates wanted to live and teach in their home state, but they chose other states because our salaries simply aren't competitive.

It's an embarrassment. We can and must do better!

Here's a goal we can all get behind: let's make starting teacher salaries in North Carolina the highest in the southeast!

And let's reward experienced teachers who stay in the classroom.

I know that there is bipartisan support for these efforts.

This is an area where we can work together.

So let's do it;

let's invest in our kids; and

let's pay our teachers a salary that shows how much we value them!

We are honored to be joined this evening by several recent North Carolina Teachers of the Year and Beginning Teachers of the Year, including Ms. Kimberly Jones who teaches English at my alma mater, Chapel Hill High.

Will these remarkable educators please stand up?

They are shaping our next generation, and we are grateful.

Yes, we have to pay teachers more, but raising pay alone isn't enough to improve our kids' education.

We need to expand the state's advanced teacher initiative to better utilize our best teachers and give them a career pathway.



We need to extend the “science of reading” to middle schools to improve learning.

And we need to put our public dollars toward our public schools.

North Carolina is 48<sup>th</sup> in the nation in per pupil investment – we can do so much better.

We should not be taking money from our public school kids to pay for wealthy parents sending their kids to unaccountable private schools, to the tune of \$7.5 billion over the next decade.

We also need to feed our kids because they can't learn when they're hungry.

A square meal improves student attendance, behavior, and learning.

Principal Ali Setser leads Eastern Elementary in Pitt County, which is already providing free school meals to all of its students.

Principal Setser, will you please stand? Thank you for your leadership.

The experience of Pitt and several other school systems prove that we can do it.

Let's provide every North Carolina student a free school breakfast!

Our students also need safe and well-built schools.

Unfortunately, too many of our schools are overcrowded or use trailers or have old, leaking roofs and broken heating and air conditioning.

It's 2025—we shouldn't have to send kids home from school because the heat doesn't work.

We need safer, healthier, and more modern schools.

So tonight, I'm proposing a \$4 billion public school bond!

Let's let the voters decide!

We also need safety upgrades like cameras, fences around playgrounds, exterior locks, and fewer access points to secure our school buildings from people who mean harm.

Nothing is more important than keeping our kids safe!

And that also means protecting their mental health.

North Carolina has underinvested in school social workers, counselors, and psychologists for far too long.

Let's make sure our schools have the support staff they need to improve our kids' mental health and help them thrive.

And when we talk youth mental health, we've got to talk about cell phones and social media.

Cell phones are a major source of distraction for students and disruption for teachers.

When teachers don't have to compete with TikTok for student attention, and

when students don't have to choose between social studies and social media,

real learning happens.

And their mental health improves.

Too many young people are struggling. Too many kids are bullied.

They need and they deserve a seven-hour break from the unrelenting pressures of phones and social media.

Classrooms should be cell phone-free zones!

I'm pleased that bi-partisan members of both chambers are tackling this issue.

And I look forward working with you to make this happen.

I spent my last 8 years as Attorney General working to keep North Carolinians safe, and as Governor, I'm still at it.

So I'm standing up for the people who protect our communities.

We ask our law enforcement officers to make tremendous sacrifices.

We ask them to run towards danger when the rest of us might flee.

Time and time again, they say yes – to protect and to serve.

There are a number of law enforcement officers here tonight with us – will all of you please stand?

Every one of these people is a hero.

For brevity, I'll call out just one – Forsyth County Sheriff Bobby Kimbrough, who has dedicated four decades to public safety.

Sheriff, we appreciate you, all of your peers here tonight, and every one of North Carolina's more than 30,000 certified law enforcement officers. Thank you, all!

As I travel the state, I regularly hear about law enforcement staffing challenges.

Vacancies make it harder for our law enforcement to keep us safe.

That's why I'm proposing salary increases for state law enforcement and correctional officers and signing bonuses for new officers.

Let's make sure that we have more police officers on the beat.

Let's show the nation:

That we put our money where our mouths are.

That in North Carolina, we value our law enforcement.

And that we invest in them like they invest in us!

And let's improve public safety and health by tackling the scourges of opioid and fentanyl addiction.

I first met Debbie Dalton after she experienced one of the most terrible tragedies a parent can face.

Her son Hunter was one of those larger-than-life people who made everyone he met feel special.

He loved golf and travel and once beat Steph Curry in a free-throw shooting competition at Davidson Basketball Camp.

Three days ago, Hunter should have celebrated his 32<sup>nd</sup> birthday.

But at 23 years old, fentanyl tragically ended his life.

There are thousands of stories like Hunter's – young people whose lives ended too soon because of one of the deadliest drugs ever to poison our country.

And too many North Carolinians are like Debbie – parents, siblings, spouses, children, and friends who will never get their loved one back.

During my time as Attorney General, we made real progress combatting the fentanyl crisis and reducing overdose deaths.

But even one death to fentanyl is one death too many.

That's why I'm calling on the General Assembly to fund a Fentanyl Control Unit of law enforcement and prosecutors dedicated to getting it off our streets!

That's how we can honor the memory of Hunter and all the North Carolinians we have lost too soon.

Debbie, thank you for your willingness to turn your personal pain into purpose for other people. Please stand.

What we've been talking about tonight – they are not red issues or blue issues, they are North Carolina issues!

Of course, on some of them, we may differ about how best to get there.

That's fine. That's the democratic process.

But I am certain that if we come together across our differences, we can find common ground and make progress.

If those of us who believe in the possibility of bipartisanship look to Washington, DC, we will surely become discouraged.

But we do not need to be pulled into those political games.

We can create something better,

something forward-looking right here in North Carolina.

And we can do it together!

After all, we've done it before.

Two years ago, Republicans and Democrats worked together to expand Medicaid here in North Carolina!

Today, more than 640,000 of our neighbors have access to newfound, high-quality health care.

And our struggling rural hospitals have been given a lifeline.

But we know that some in Washington are poised to take aim at our effective, efficient, and critical Medicaid program.

The cuts Congress is considering would be absolutely devastating to health of our people and our entire health care system.

I've been urging Washington to follow our example by putting party aside and people first.

Just as we stood arm-in-arm as North Carolinians to make Medicaid expansion a reality, let's stand arm-in-arm to defend our health care.

When we – Republicans and Democrats – come together, that's when we make a real difference for our people.

We've made big things happen before, and we can do it again.

We can help western North Carolina recover from the most damaging storm in our history.

We can grow our economy and make it work for more people.

We can make sure our workforce meets the needs of our people and our businesses.

We can keep our communities safe.

And we can put our kids first, every time.

That's because the state of our state is strong – North Carolina Strong!

Our teachers make us strong!

Our law enforcement officers make us strong!

Our small business owners, our farmers, our vets, our child care workers, and our community college students make us strong!

You the people of North Carolina make us strong.

So let's come together to keep North Carolina strong!

Thank you.

May God bless you, and may God bless the Old North State.



