

Good evening to the people of Rensselaer County and thank you to Chairman Mike Stammel and members of this legislative body for welcoming me tonight.

Last year, I stood before you and discussed our strong record of accomplishment. I laid out my vision for the future of our great county.

About one year ago tonight, so much of our mission changed.

We confronted an illness that was strange and scary, and at that time, largely a mystery to science and medicine.

We learned a new language and new ways to behave. We began to quarantine, to social distance and wear masks. Staying home became normal. Meetings became virtual, visits with family and friends done through windows or computer screens and daily counts of new cases were among the biggest headlines. We waited nervously for test results and prayed for those who became sick.

This was history in the making, and it was not expected. Rensselaer County was challenged in ways we have never experienced in our lifetimes.

We can be proud that our county met the challenge and wrote a bright new chapter in our history.

When there was fear and doubt, we responded with compassion and common sense.

When so many felt overwhelmed, our county hosted life-saving technology and medicine.

When there was loss and sadness, we countered with growth and optimism.

When the days were troubled and confusing, we did not forget our values and our mission. In fact, the toughest days of the pandemic produced one of the moments I am proudest of as County Executive.

On March 25<sup>th</sup>, Governor Cuomo and his Health Commissioner Howard Zucker issued the order to place COVID-19 positive residents into our nursing homes. That order also forbid the COVID testing of incoming residents. It was made very clear by the Governor's allies that they expected full compliance.

I read the order, the worst I have ever read in my career in public service, and responded very clearly and simply: Not here, not now, not ever. I defied that order. In fact, I was the only County Executive in the state to defy the order, saving lives at our Manor.

In the days and weeks that followed, we learned of the Governor's displeasure, as we received threatening correspondence on state letterhead, surprise inspection after surprise inspection from various offices, attempts by state inspectors to gain access to the Manor without first demonstrating – as required by their own rules – that they themselves had tested negative.

As you have all seen, the actions by the Governor and his team were corrupt, thuggish and nowhere near in the best interest of the people of this county or those served at the Van Rensselaer Manor.

We did not back down. We knew what was right. We knew what our job was – to protect those entrusted to us at the Van Rensselaer Manor. We did our job, even in the face of tremendous pressure. Imagine what could have happened if we had followed the Governor's order? In fact you do not have to imagine, because we

saw it play out at other nursing homes around the state. Experts now say 15,000 seniors died in nursing homes. But not here. Not on my watch.

During 2020, Rensselaer County came together and showed that we could not be stopped and that we believe our best days are ahead.

We learned that heroes walk among us, including many who serve with us every day in county government.

As County Executive, I have often discussed the great heritage of our county in helping forge prosperity and a better way of life for our entire country. Some of the most productive farms in the area were found here in Rensselaer County, and Troy and our county were leaders during the Industrial Revolution. We developed new technology to help win the Civil War, made important advances in clothing and production, and played key roles in the space race and development of personal technology.

We have seen major challenges before, and responded each time with excellence, innovation and ingenuity. Time and time again, we have refused to be set back and instead, rose to new greatness. That spirit is needed again in Rensselaer County in 2021. And I believe that spirit is alive today in the place we call home.

In fact, some of our greatest successes occurred in 2020, despite the odds, and every day, we continue to redefine what is possible to be achieved in Rensselaer County government.

Therefore, as your County Executive, I am proud to report tonight to you that the state of our county is strong and is set on a course for greatness. I am proud to

recognize our collective service in the face of difficulty and how we showed our best when it counted the most.

The best of Rensselaer County was shown when COVID-19 arrived, and residents looked to county government for help and guidance. We will recognize tonight the service and selflessness of so many in county government and acknowledge those who gave so much to so many.

And while 2021 is still young, we will also recognize real signs our county is moving past the turbulence of the last year. There is considerable and strong interest in new investment and job creation in our county and for the first month of this year, Rensselaer County led the region for sales tax growth, just as we did for 2019. We are perhaps the only county in the state with a 100 percent rate of delivery for vaccinations. And we are being recognized as correct in much of our decision-making during the pandemic, particularly regarding our nursing home.

But we still have challenges and missions that await us. Just as we were uncertain one year ago as the pandemic descended, we face many new questions and issues from last year.

When will we get back to life as we once knew it?

Will our businesses and institutions survive?

Will our kids have the chance to catch up at school?

Will all affected by COVID-19 be able to fully recover?

Some of the answers to those important questions will come from those gathered in this room tonight.

Just as our response to the pandemic demanded our best, our continuing fight for health, safety and eventually, full recovery, also demands our full commitment, talent and strength.

For much of the past year, since the start of the COVID-19 outbreak, I have been impressed by a new sense of cooperation and understanding of the task before us. When we asked for testing resources, we were supported in that effort by all members of this legislative body and all mayors and supervisors across the county, regardless of political party. When legislation allowing our county to respond to the pandemic is given to this legislative body, it is passed with strong support.

That support is appreciated and needed as we move forward to both respond and recover from the pandemic.

An effective partnership in government is always needed, but even more so during tumultuous times. Thanks to Chair of the Legislature Mike Stammel, Vice Chairwoman Kelly Hoffman, Vice Chair for Finance Bob Loveridge, Majority Leader Ken Herrington and Minority Leader Peter Grimm and all members of the Legislature for their support and for also supporting other important legislation to improve services, infrastructure and maintain our solid financial standing. Thanks also to Sheriff Pat Russo and County Clerk Frank Merola. Frank has been flexible in adjusting needed DMV services and other functions during the pandemic. Pat has worked effectively to protect residents as important laws were changed and new situations emerged on a weekly and sometimes daily basis.

That partnership will be important given the news from Washington in recent days. The U.S. Senate approved the American Rescue Plan, a massive \$1.9 trillion

dollar spending package that as of the printing of this document, is being considered by the House of Representatives. The bill has prompted strong reactions across the political spectrum, as can be expected.

As approved by the Senate, and verified by conversations with Senator Schumer's office, the package includes \$31 million for Rensselaer County. The exact uses and requirements for the funding have yet to be explained in detail. However, if approved, I would expect to come back and address this body and the residents of Rensselaer County separately at some point in the spring.

I would expect to also seek and receive input from business, community and education leaders on how to use this money. I can further pledge to you that this funding would be handled as all public money has been handled by my administration, and maximized to the absolute best benefit of our residents.

Let us look at some of what we accomplished together in 2020 when we were confronted with the pandemic. Because we recognize that Rensselaer County refused to be derailed by COVID-19.

Our Health Department, led by Mary Fran Wachunas, and other areas of county government performed heroically and provided help and hope when it was needed the most. The Health Department team spent days, nights and weekends providing information and comfort to county residents when it was needed most. It can be noted the Health Department and my team has only had one day off since the start of the pandemic.

The 2021 budget was adopted unanimously by this body, the third consecutive budget to be adopted with a property tax decrease.

We set a record in 2020, paving over 50 miles of county roads, improving one of the major services relied on by residents, businesses and visitors.

In the fall, the Amazon center in Schodack opened, creating 1000 new jobs.

Just as the outbreak was starting, we welcomed R&L Carriers to South Troy for construction of a maintenance facility, creating 70 new jobs.

We saw Regeneron continue to expand and create several hundred new jobs and at the height of the pandemic, make international news for developing an antibody treatment for COVID-19.

And I can report that more good news is on the way, as we prepare for more growth and job creation in the Route 9 corridor where we have had historic success.

So Rensselaer County saw success in 2020, and news of our good work was heard well beyond our borders. And for that, we can all be proud.

Our county not only maintained important services, we improved and strengthened our commitment to our residents. Our commitment to our residents can be seen throughout the services we provide and the work we do every day.

We work to reduce the burden on our taxpayers and create opportunities for future growth and investment. We provide services to comfort, guide and care. And we provide services to ensure our quality of life and the strength of our communities.

Our county continues to position itself for future job growth and investment. I will again note the 2021 budget is the third consecutive budget by my administration

to include a slight tax reduction and earn unanimous support from county legislators. Rensselaer County can also be proud that we have been under the state tax cap every year since the tax cap was implemented a decade ago. Our budgeting has been accompanied by strong independent audits and upgrades in our bond ratings. The numbers and the budgets show our county is being managed effectively and with an eye to the future.

In fact, our county now holds the highest bond rating in our history and is currently just under elite bond status. Our climb to our highest bond rating came after three years where the county generated significant savings in personnel, purchasing, energy and insurance costs. Rensselaer County has been recognized in audits for strong financial controls. We make every dollar work, every day.

Our county has also seen strong performance with our sales tax returns. More shoppers today have more opportunity and choice in Rensselaer County, which has helped keep our sales tax revenues healthy even during the pandemic. Before the outbreak, county sales tax growth right here in Rensselaer County was the best in the state. The best. We led the entire state of NY in sales tax revenue growth in 2019 with an 8.4 percent increase. The state average in 2019 was a 4.2 percent increase. We were double the state average. I am pleased to note that our sales tax returns have been very close to our budget forecast during 2020. That creates an important platform for fiscal stability for the county and the cities and towns that share in the proceeds. This happened as other counties and municipalities saw significant decreases in sales tax revenues during 2020.

Let us take a closer look at sales tax returns currently for 2020. As we meet here tonight, sales tax revenues for 2020 are comparable to 2019 returns, which is

significant. We can take heart in the fact that Rensselaer County is performing strongly even during very turbulent times. Other counties have seen significant declines in sales tax revenues, creating stress on county and local budgets. We have not seen these declines, as shoppers take advantage of more opportunities close to home and, given the current restrictions and climate, shop close to home.

Again, because it is important, I want to highlight our success in our budgets: Three budgets, each introduced with slight tax decreases, and each of the three budgets adopted unanimously. That is an important achievement and one that shows we are working together to grow our county and provide services for our residents. I again want to thank members of my team and members of the County Legislature for sending a strong message of support and unity, particularly in challenging times.

The success in managing assets was matched by our work to provide care for residents.

Our Health Department team led by Mary Fran Wachunas assisted with implementing testing and also provided invaluable contact tracing during the past ten months. We believe Rensselaer County has provided the best contact tracing services in the region with an in-depth, person to person approach that has served the county well during past epidemics. The county has contact traced nearly 60,000 cases connected to the nearly 10,000 confirmed cases. This information and work have often proved vital to our efforts to contain the outbreak and we recognize the Health Department's work helped keep cases lower than expected.

The work by Mary Fran and her team has been so solid we were able to remain independent and maintain a tried and true contact tracing system that has served our county well for generations during past outbreaks. The county contact tracing effort has relied on person to person contact, common sense and hard work. We have expanded our efforts through partnerships with students at Hudson Valley Community College and Maria College.

Thanks also to a group of everyday angels who serve with our Medical Reserve Corps. Our MRC team includes residents with medical or emergency experience who have helped us help residents during testing, contact tracing and vaccinations. Their service has helped our response at every turn. We have received many, many compliments and thanks for the operation of the county Point Of Distribution vaccination site at Hudson Valley. These kind words are greatly appreciated. Our Health Department and our MRC have worked together to make sure every dose is used to make our residents safe and healthy. We are enormously proud that we have delivered 100 percent of the vaccination doses received by our county.

The Health Department and Mary Fran deserve special recognition and thanks. They have been on the frontlines battling the outbreak seven days a week since February of last year. They have given so much over these difficult months to keep us safe, while essentially putting their own lives on hold. We owe them great thanks for their service. Their work during these difficult months represents the finest service our county can offer. Thank you is just a start.

Last February, we delivered our 4 millionth home delivered meal to our seniors. When the pandemic forced many to remain home, I directed that our home

delivered meals program be expanded. Before the start of COVID-19, our county was delivering 425 meals each day. At the peak of the pandemic, we were providing 1600 home delivered meals to seniors. Today, we are still above normal figures, with close to 700 seniors receiving meals. That is outstanding work by Commissioner for the Aging Carol Rosbozom and her team, and the many community partners and volunteers who helped with this effort.

Our team at the Van Rensselaer Manor have also showed great competence and compassion to the residents we are trusted with caring for at what we believe is one of the top senior care facilities in the region. Residents have been separated from their families for ten months, with few opportunities for visits of any kind for months. We are thrilled that visits have again begun at the VRM. As of today, we have vaccinated 95 percent of the residents at the Manor.

As you can remember, I advocated for the state to carefully relax some of the restrictions on visits to nursing homes. Imagine being separated from your family and friends for ten months with little opportunity for contact or connection. The policy set by the Governor to essentially not allow visits to nursing homes has been, in my view, overly restrictive and unfair to both residents and their families. The state has regularly made exceptions – when it wants to – and can facilitate needed contact between families and residents in nursing homes.

To the families with loved ones at the Manor, we are on your side. We want you to be reunited safely with your family members at the Manor without delay. We are happy to have helped some families meet after months apart, and fully recognize the value of these reunions.

The Manor staff has stepped up and done the best they can to maintain care and lift spirits during a difficult and unprecedented time for our residents. Thanks to our staff for their work to continue the Manor tradition of caring for residents like they are our own. Your work has been inspiring and valuable. We have a renewed focus thanks to our new director and her outstanding team. Tonight, please join me in welcoming new Van Rensselaer Manor Director Bonnie Shippee to our county.

We are proud that some of our efforts for responding to the pandemic have been recognized. Our county was awarded \$422,000 from the federal government for meeting health and safety standards at the Van Rensselaer Manor. To earn the funding, the county needed to maintain infection and mortality rates at the VRM below infection and mortality rates in the surrounding community. The funding is required to be used for response, preparation and prevention of COVID-19. All which stems from one sentence: Not here, not now, not ever.

When I ran for County Executive, I promised to focus on improving infrastructure in the county, including our county road network. With over 330 miles of roads, our county road network was showing significant signs of decay and damage. In many ways, and according to many in the county, the service most important to our residents and businesses is our county road network.

This year, I am proud to announce the county paved a record number of road miles, with 50 miles of county roads paved during 2020. This is tremendous and reason for real pride, and we appreciate all the residents and businesses that have recognized this work. We are particularly proud that during the first three years of my term, the county has paved over 105 miles, nearly one-third of the

road network. Thanks to our team at county Highway led by County Engineer Joe Teliska and Superintendent Dave Anthony and our paving partners, most of whom are based or centered in Rensselaer County, for an outstanding job.

Fifty miles of road paving in one year shows what can be accomplished in this county when there is a focus on results and positive outcomes. There are concerns however about a drop in state funding for road projects among highway superintendents across the state and we share in that concern. We are additionally worried a reduction in state funding will hurt the momentum we have established as we work to improve this important service. Our representatives in Albany need to send a strong and clear message that road funding needs to be prioritized.

One obvious highlight is the great service and compassion shown by front-line medical providers, health care workers and first responders during the outbreak. I am enormously proud of the work done by our team in Rensselaer County. Early on, we encountered difficulty in securing tests from the state for residents. In fact, New York State ignored our request. We went ahead anyways, and that led to Rensselaer County making the greatest investment in testing in the Capital Region. We are also now approaching 220,000 tests for county residents to help beat back the outbreak. We have always viewed testing and vaccines as the road map back to a quality of life and a strong economy and have made what we believe is a vital investment in the health and safety of our residents.

Thanks to the Bureau of Emergency Services and Director Jay Wilson for their work operating the testing facility. The cost for testing in our county has come with a significant price, with the county paying out roughly \$4.3 million from our

own funds to ensure our residents get the testing they need. Again, we are the only county in the region to pay for our own testing site and we believe it has made a difference in the fight against COVID-19. We do note that the federal stimulus package approved just before Christmas did include funds for local governments like Rensselaer County that have paid for testing. The county recognizes that effective testing helps us find our way back to normal life. We hope the federal and state governments make good and cover costs for testing at the county level.

Thank you again to all members of this legislative body, including all mayors and supervisors across the county, for joining our call for a testing facility in our county. Joining our voices together as one was an important moment during our response to the pandemic.

I am happy to report that despite the ravages of COVID that caused havoc on numerous municipal governments, our County Clerk Frank Merola reported revenue of \$2,712,000 against estimated expenses of \$2,350,000 returning over \$350,000 to county coffers. This is the 22nd consecutive surplus from Frank's office, a tribute to his management and customer service skills.

The Rensselaer County Record Room and DMV have remained open to county and Capital Region residents during the pandemic. People from the capital region have utilized our County DMV which, along with the record room continues to serve the public on a walk in basis without need for appointments or other bureaucratic roadblocks in order to provide the best customer service in the Capital District. Thanks to my friend and partner Frank Merola for a job well done during these times.

This year will be the year that Rensselaer County opens its new Fire Training Complex, fulfilling a promise made before I took office. While the project was slightly delayed in 2020 due to the COVID shutdown we are on track to begin construction this spring. The final permitting approval from DEC is expected in the coming weeks. The old tower and buildings have been demolished, the design is complete, the new fire training simulator tower has been delivered and now we build.

The new training facility will be a major way to thank our emergency services volunteers for their outstanding work on behalf of Rensselaer County every day, but particularly during the pandemic. As I have said often, there is no way to fully thank our emergency services volunteers and their families for their work.

In the coming days, we will also be announcing a series of grant opportunities for emergency responders to deal with additional costs from the pandemic. I thank Legislator Bruce Patire for his efforts to bring issue to my team's attention.

Twenty-five years ago, the bridge on County Route 4, Van Hoesen Road, was replaced. The Buffalo Bridge takes motorists by the historic Mesick farm and their herd of buffalo, and is important to other local farms, businesses, schools and residents. The bridge, somewhat ahead of schedule and due to a product defect, needs to be replaced. For the past 15 months, we have been working to secure necessary approval from the railroad to allow for the construction. After being delayed in 2020 due to lack of approval from the railroad, we expect work will be able to start and be completed in 2021 on the Buffalo Bridge.

We are also excited to begin an important project near the Buffalo Bridge, with extension of a sewer line from Maple Hill High School along Maple Hill Road.

Funding for the project comes thanks to the efforts of Senator Jordan and her team and will help expand utility service in an area poised for growth. This is only the start of what we hope will be among other infrastructure improvement and expansion projects in our county. If the stimulus money being discussed in Washington is approved, we hope real and lasting funding for expansion of water, sewer and related infrastructure is approved.

That project will allow our county to continue the period of historic growth and job creation supported by my administration. The Amazon project sent the very clear message that we wish to grow this county and no longer see our friends and family leave to find work in North Carolina, Texas or Florida. The job expansion at Regeneron Pharmaceuticals is transforming communities in our county, just as Regeneron's work is transforming the fields of health research.

The South Troy Industrial Road will create a new option for diverting traffic and creating new opportunities for development in the area, and this county assisted with a needed easement to the City of Troy.

The R&L Trucking project restores blue collar jobs to South Troy. We are excited about another project set to be announced in the area of the Port of Rensselaer that will create more manufacturing and blue-collar jobs. And we are looking forward to continuing success in the Route 9 in the coming months. As our late friend, Senator Joe Bruno was fond of saying: Stay tuned.

This job creating success comes as we are also looking to support the many small businesses that provide the foundation for growth in our county. We have accepted grant funding for establishment of a new position to strengthen interactions between county government and business. The position will include

visits and surveys of business to find our shared goals and missions. The county has also revitalized the Job Development Program, which has provided an important source of support for small or start-up business.

We can expect to face challenges from state government in 2021. We are facing a fiscal reckoning for the pandemic shutdown and all solutions will not come from Washington. New York State was well into the red before the pandemic and the need for the state to correct its ways is greater than ever.

We have communicated to our representatives in Washington our need for reimbursement and assistance for our pandemic response. Remember, Rensselaer County has incurred millions in expenses for testing and preparedness that have yet to be repaid. As of tonight, only about half of the expenses for testing have been repaid. Our county made a huge investment in testing, preparation, PPE and other supplies and equipment and deserves fair treatment.

The state still needs to take action to correct the Bail Reform blunder. We saw the public safety problems created firsthand. Remember, it was just last February that we saw a man arrested three times on a single day in Troy. The pandemic may have diverted our collective attention, but it did not erase the problem. Bail reform is an overreach that hurts public safety, the security of our neighborhoods and the ability of law enforcement to protect us. Recent events in Albany should not distract from resolving the bail reform issue productively and quickly.

Let there be no mistake: My administration and the people of this county support law enforcement.

The past year was the first year that expanded engineering services were put in place at the county Environmental Health, hopefully expediting permits for septic

and other services. We are working to provide a high level of safeguards to protect the public and the environment while streamlining the regulatory process in the county. We are now furthering our improvement and expansion of engineering services with a shared services agreement with the County Legislature and county Sewer District that is being considered tonight by lawmakers. The agreement will create a savings in the Sewer District.

Rensselaer County has embraced innovation when confronted with challenges. In the fall of 2019, we introduced the ER Anywhere project, which allows Medicaid recipients to access medical services and consults from the convenience of their home via a cell phone. Consider ER Anywhere a virtual emergency room. We believe ER Anywhere offers a realistic solution for our residents, particularly during these times when social distancing is encouraged. My team has been invited to speak to other counties and leaders from states across the country on the initiative and believe ER Anywhere can provide answers on how to effectively provide services to a large number of residents at a reduced expense to taxpayers.

We are very proud that we have generated over \$2 million in savings through ER Anywhere, with \$400,000 in savings for Medicaid. Our county will be continuing this good work during the coming months of 2021. It shows my team's willingness to be creative and embrace new technology to maximize savings and service. The state of New York should recognize this groundbreaking program and adopt it statewide.

The Bureau of Central Services under the leadership of Director Jim Gordon has aggressively worked each year to ensure every purchase, every contract and

every service that is procured or retained provides the best value and outcome for the taxpayers of Rensselaer County. The department has expanded the pool of qualified vendors and implemented new purchasing strategies that have resulted in approximately \$1 million in purchase order savings since 2018.

As we discussed last year, the county has regenerated our solar energy initiative during 2020. Tonight, I am pleased to report that we are fully engaged and our dependency on grid electric has been significantly reduced. Annually we are deferring over 2.2 million watts from the grid to solar which in turn generates over \$105,000 and \$2.4 million over the contract life. The 7.4 mega-watts is enough to power over 6,000 homes.

Additionally, we launched our Community Solar initiative earlier this year. Property owners throughout the county can participate, at no cost to themselves, to reduce their dependency on grid electric and reduce their household or business electric bill by 10%. Those interested can sign up for free and start saving at [www.ampion.com/egs](http://www.ampion.com/egs).

In addition, to our reduction on grid electric and the cost savings associated with it, we were able to take advantage and renegotiate our electric utility agreements in 2020. These renegotiations will result in an additional \$340,000 over the contract period.

As a continued effort to ensure every expenditure made by the county is accurate and true the department has undergone an audit of the county's utility accounts. The results to date have returned approximately \$50,000 in over charges to the county. This audit is ongoing with further credits being realized.

Over the past year our Bureau of Central Services was able to achieve what many others in local and state government was unable to and that is the sourcing and procurement of PPE for use by our county and local partners. Everything from N95 masks, gloves, face shields, hand sanitizer, wipes, gowns and many other items were received and distributed for use during the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic. It is also worth noting that many, if not all these items, we purchased at a reasonable cost – while others were paying an extraordinary mark-up we were able to negotiate reasonable rates for ourselves and our local municipal partners, which included school districts, towns, villages and cities, and Hudson Valley Community College as well as our fire departments.

One of the operational goals of my administration upon taking office was to improve our county's IT infrastructure and services. As I stand here tonight I am proud to announce the accomplishments we have made and those that are soon to come.

The ease and security of being able to pay your taxes, registration fees, and other payments to the county will be available later this spring. You will be able to make these electronic payments through our county website, new mobile app, or in person at the department.

During 2020 we were able to negotiate contracts to greatly improve the speed and performance of our computer network and telecom service. This will allow our departments to interact with local, state, and federal agencies more efficiently and to perform daily tasks more effectively. While the new service agreements provide service enhancements that previously weren't available to the county, the cost comes at a savings of \$342,000 over the contract period.

In 2020 we greatly increased the security of our computer network with enhancements to our systems infrastructure and with our disaster recovery site going on-line. Now in the event of a breach or system failure we have capabilities to restore county network operations to minimize any shutdown.

The project was kicked off in 2020 and will soon be completed in 2021 and will feature a complete redesign of our county website, [rensco.com](http://rensco.com), and our county tourism site, [renscotourism.com](http://renscotourism.com). Enhancements will improve upon the overall functionality and appearance and include more interactive and available constituent services. We are excited that this project will allow for a more transparent and interactive county government through use of newer and modern technology.

Another project announced and started in 2020 and soon to be launched is our RenscoConnect Mobile App. The app, once downloaded from the Apple iTunes or Google Play store, puts county government at the fingertips of our residents. Here you will be able to pay bills, report issues such as pot holes and DSS fraud seek out local business, events and historical sites, as well as find all the pertinent information on how to contact those within county government. Also, highlighted on our app will be the latest information on how to obtain a COVID-19 vaccination and test.

Our County Court House has been recognized time and time again for its unique characteristics and historic significance. Twenty-one years ago the facility underwent a massive \$20 million restoration. As I announced last year we commissioned an engineering and architectural service agreement to explore the restoration of the exterior of this great building. Last month we received the

preliminary results of the study and look forward to reviewing them and discussing our options in the coming months.

We are excited to see our Court House and Family Court set to be featured in the spotlight in the upcoming HBO historical drama series *The Gilded Age*, set to air in the coming months.

As we discuss the improvements at the Court House, we can also look long term and the existing facilities supporting county government. As Executive, I want to reduce our reliance on rental space. I also want to look at our five senior centers. Two are in solid shape but the remaining three are in need of attention or replacement. As we come out of the pandemic, we will make improving our county senior centers a priority.

Among the many operational improvements made during the COVID-19 pandemic at Manor were improvements to the air handling system. We understood one of the best ways to prevent the spread of COVID or any other virus within the nursing home was to ensure the air was continually purified. Along with our partners at Siemens we commissioned a project that included the installation of O2 Prime within all air handlers and smaller units installed in the ductwork in each room at the Manor. What we achieved was a level of air purification that exceeds that of the MERV-13 requirements set by the State of New York. This work was completed as a part of a larger capital project at the Manor at no cost to the residents of Rensselaer County. We are able to have the project approved under the CARES Act and through State DOH reimbursement.

Our Department of Social Services led by Commissioner Theresa Beaudoin has provided important support and safety net services during the pandemic. Public

Assistance cases have decreased over the last year. A small part of this decrease was due to the additional unemployment insurance benefits available due to COVID-19 under the Federal Pandemic Unemployment Compensation Program.

The DSS Safety Net 60-month caseload decreased by 35 percent from 2019 to 2020. This is the public assistance program with the biggest allocation of funding in the county and it has decreased due to an intensive front end detection investigation prior to case opening.

The DSS Temporary Assistance caseload decreased by 30 percent from 2019 to 2020. This is also due to an intensive front-end detection investigation prior to case opening. The number of children in residential placements has decreased from 46 percent to 35 percent over the last year due to an increase in preventive services which allows families to take advantage of community-based services. Foster care placements are extremely costly and this initiative affords families to get the services they need to stay together and reduces the cost to the county.

In 2020 the Probation Department continued to fulfill its mission by focusing on justice system involved individuals and the impact of their behaviors on society. Due to COVID-19 Pause restrictions many of the activities associated with this duty were put on hold. While Probation Officers were in continuous contact with probationers and their families virtually or by phone, the reduction of in-home field contacts and face to face interactions produced several occasions of offenders to relapse into addictions. Further compounding the problem is many of the community resources normally utilized by probation officers to assist with behavioral health and substance abuse were also using a virtual format for contacts to meet the COVID-19 restriction mandate.

While COVID-19 restrictions eased during summer and early fall, with the availability and use of PPE, probation increased contacts for youth and adults. Our partnerships with the schools in Rensselaer County allowed us the ability to make in person visits to the youth we serve. The Department's Criminal Court Division, particularly Domestic Violence, DWI, Mental Health, Opioid, and Sex Offender Supervision Units also intensified efforts during this time period. Now that officers have been vaccinated the Department will increase to 100% functionality by March 15th, 2021.

The Department will continue to evaluate and seek knowledge and guidance to reduce racial and ethnic disparities with the justice system. In 2020, an Implicit Bias Committee was formed to raise awareness through teaching and training Probation Department staff about diversity and biases we may form at work and in the community. Our goal is to improve practice and achieve a system that is equitable and fair.

The county Sheriff's Department and team at the jail continue to provide safety and security for residents of the county, while also continuing services and initiatives to house and redirect those charged or convicted in our courts of law of various offenses. The department and jail complied with strict state and federal requirements and navigated the challenges of a tumultuous year.

The Sheriff's office and others also ensured protection of our important constitutional rights. The year 2020 was one of diverging viewpoints and ideas. Regardless of your viewpoint on particular issues, this county can be proud that 11,000 came to Troy on June 7 and the demonstration was conducted peacefully and without violence.

The department also fulfilled the state requirements for the Police Accountability and Reform effort, including opportunity for public comment provided in partnership with my office.

As we noted, in 2020, the Rensselaer County Office for the Aging achieved amazing milestone of the 4 millionth meal served. The nutrition program is the nucleus of all Aging programs. It had been noted that with good nutrition, seniors are able to remain in the homes and active in the communities. In 2020, the department served 196,592 meals. Due to COVID-19, the department saw home delivered meal numbers increase dramatically. Before COVID-19, the department was averaging 425 home delivered meals a day and at the peak of COVID-19, delivered 1,600 home delivered meals a day. Since COVID-19, an additional 40,000 home delivered meals were provided to meet the increase in need compared with 2019. Please note Rensselaer County is the only county in the Capital Region that directly provides meals to seniors. The remaining counties contract this service out to other providers. Being a directly provided service, the county is able to see first-hand the needs of the seniors in our community and provide encompassing support and programming.

The Aging Department provides medical transportation to seniors in our community. In 2020, 300 seniors were provided with transportation to and from doctor appointments. The Aging Department contracts for both levels of personal care. This personal care can help with companionship and assistance with bathing and dressing. More than 60 seniors were helped in 2020 with this higher level of assistance to keep them in their home safely and avoid nursing home placement.

In 2020, the Aging Department contracted for a much-needed program: Online Caregiver Training. With our partner, Trualta, we are able to provide on-demand caregiver training at the convenience of the caregiver. This unique training provides on-demand, bite sized content that can fit into the busy lives of caregivers. It is instant access to the content from any computer, smartphone or tablet; completely optimized for mobile devices. Trualta also allows for learning preferences, unique care situations, and location-based offering are tailored caregiver needs.

The county Employment and Training continued to operate the County Career Center during the pandemic, assisting approximately 12,000 individuals during 2020, an increase of 18 percent. Led by Commissioner Brian Williams, the department held virtual job search workshops on a monthly basis, served 150 low-income, at-risk youth, and supported the GAME effort to help provide skills training. The department has also provided valuable assistance with recruitment at Amazon.

We envision skills training as a significant issue in the coming years, with regular shortages for CDL drivers, CNA staff, LPNs, computer coders and pharmacy techs. Brian and his team have taken important steps to expand training options to help our county stay prepared and staffed during these fast-changing times. The skills training facilitated at our Employment and Training department can help individuals avoid being displaced when economic downturns occur.

Rensselaer County Department of Mental Health functions as both the Local Government Unit and operator of Mental Health and Addiction/Recovery Services. As with all aspects of life in 2020, the COVID-19 Pandemic presented

new challenges in the provision and funding of care. Additionally, requests for treatment services for mental health and substance use disorders have increased, with a new population of persons who have not sought treatment or services in the past. In addition to the routine duties to support the mission of the department, the following highlights emerged in the pandemic.

During 2020, the department provided care for established and newly referred clients via telemental health and limited in person visits, and was a first place performer for 2020 in the CDPHP County Clinic & Hospital Incentive Program. Mental Health provided prevention services to youth in virtual and in person learning situations, deployment of social work aides to support persons in the community age 60+ years who are experiencing emotional distress and isolation due to the pandemic in collaboration with the Department of Aging.

Mental Health maintained mental health and addiction evaluation services for persons in the community who are disengaged from care, care coordination services to high risk children, youth and adults, achieving standards of care and opening a second school satellite clinic operation at the Hoosic Valley school district.

Our Health Department, Mental Health and Opioid Recovery Coordinator Neil Kelleher have collaborated to respond to the ongoing health crisis caused by drug abuse, especially heroin and other dangerous drugs. We remember the day in May when dozens of residents fell prey to overdoses, some fatal. We recognize that we are facing two health crises, and the toll of those who have fallen to drugs or despair sadly mirror those lost to COVID-19.

As we have with the pandemic, we have responded with common-sense and compassion. We provided test kits with no questions asked to provide some measure of safety. We have provided 325 of reversal kits, including Narcan, to save lives. We have provided a bridge to treatment and recovery for those ready.

We recognize that in our current times, drug abuse knows no boundaries. All are affected, and to those struggling, understand that Rensselaer County is here to help and heal.

Thanks also to our Health Department for continuing to provide other services to our residents as they respond seven days a week to the pandemic. The department continues to provide wellness services for families and infants, restaurant inspections, water quality tests and rabies clinics. The work of health and safety has obviously taken on a more prominent role for our county in the past year.

Rensselaer County is a caring and giving county. We stepped up to collect and distribute 20,000 lbs. of food to feed the hungry. We look forward to doing that good work again this year. In fact, next week, we are partnering with the Capital District YMCA, Costa Fruit & Produce Company, and the USDA farmers to Families program to distribute 1200 boxes of food to families of Rensselaer County.

Our annual Coats for Kids Golf Tournament was the most successful in the three decades of the event, and in 2020, we distributed nearly 900 coats for kids in need.

As the pandemic was accelerating, our county set another record, distributing nearly 40,000 faces masks free of charge during a memorable and tiring day in April, far more than any other single distribution event in the region. Our team

made many, many individual visits to homes across the county to provide masks to residents, along with regular deliveries to our partners in city, town and village governments. These deliveries recognize we are united in the mission to protect our county.

Our response to the pandemic illuminates our path to the future. When challenged, our county came together. The health and safety of our residents was put first, and a comprehensive response was given. Our actions helped save lives, helped protect many others and let each and every resident of our county know that they were a priority.

When confronted with orders that jeopardized our residents, my administration spoke out and stood up. When we were denied testing, we united and worked to provide the testing that created a roadmap to recovery.

There is so much more ahead of us as a county in the months to come.

The year 2020 was the year of the pandemic. The year 2021 will be the year of recovery and renewal. During the past year, we brought about tremendous success in creating new jobs and opportunity. We continued with our fiscally responsible policies that produced a third consecutive tax reduction and promoted our county enough that we continued to be a leader in sales tax growth. We expanded or improved needed services like our roads and emergency response.

All of that good work is a foundation for our future, and our way back to normalcy. During the coming months, we will again face challenges, including some discussed here and some that are unexpected. We have shown that united

and focused our county will not be denied our chance for prosperity and a better quality of life for all.

On the day I took my oath of office, I said: "I fought hard to get to this office, and I want you to know I will fight even harder for Rensselaer County." I believe we have done just that during a year of unprecedented challenge. I stand before you proud of our accomplishments, and even prouder of the way our county came together to protect our own and accomplish important and outstanding goals and achievements. Let us continue to make history together for Rensselaer County.

Thank you.

