Governor Stitt Delivers 2021 State Of The State Address

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Monday, February 01, 2021

Governor Kevin Stitt today delivered the 2021 State of the State address in the State House chamber, focusing on the Stitt administration's response to the historic COVID-19 pandemic, support for Oklahoma schools and teachers, economic growth and a continued focus on improving transparency, accountability and efficiency in state government.

The transcript as prepared for delivery is as follows:

Mr. Speaker, Mr. President Pro Tem, Lt. Governor Matt Pinnell, Chief Operating Officer John Budd and members of my cabinet, Mr. Chief Justice, members of the 58th Legislature, my best friend – First Lady Sarah Stitt, my six children, my parents, and most importantly, my fellow

Oklahomans.

It is a great honor to stand before you, and to partner with you to lead our state through unprecedented times.

I respect the constitutional authority of both of these legislative bodies.

Mr. Speaker, Mr. Pro Tem, members of the House and Senate, I stand here in your chamber today and pledge to work with you, and to have the best and most productive session in state history!

I'd also like to recognize each of the 15 new representatives and the eight new senators who are just starting their service.

I look forward to partnering with you as we continue to lead Oklahoma to becoming a Top Ten state.

Two years ago, I took the oath of office in front of my family, my fellow Oklahomans and most importantly my Heavenly Father.

I promised to support and defend the constitution and perform the duties of my office to the best of my ability. I take that promise as seriously today as the day I made it.

My colleagues in the Legislature made the same promise to their constituents.

Today I'd like to talk about the promises we've kept – and the promise of tomorrow.

Oklahoma, the state of our state is strong because we are resilient and well-positioned for a bright future.

Before we look forward, let's look back.

2020 was a year unlike anything we've experienced in our lifetimes.

If we think back to a year ago, who could have ever imagined the toll COVID would take? This pandemic is unprecedented in modern times.

We've felt the impact of COVID-19 on every level -- on our families, our jobs and our day-to-day lives.

We've lost more than 3,000 Oklahomans to this virus. Each one of those has a name, a story, and a family who is mourning their loss. Like Paul teaches us in Romans 12, we mourn with those who mourn.

Throughout this past year Oklahomans rose to the challenge: as individuals, as families and as neighbors. We made sacrifices; we took care of our most vulnerable; we shifted; we innovated, but we were not defeated.

For the last 11 months, my promise has been to protect the health and lives of Oklahomans, to keep our businesses open safely and to get our kids safely back in school.

I'm so proud of Oklahoma, our team at the Health Department, and the Governor's Solution Task Force.

We successfully opened our economy on June 1st and safely restarted most schools in August.

It appears now other states are waking up to the stark reality of double-digit unemployment, huge budget deficits and the fact that our kids are safer at school than anywhere else.

They're realizing we took the smart approach in Oklahoma.

Even Governor Cuomo in New York has seen the light. Just a few weeks ago he said, "We simply cannot stay closed until the vaccine hits critical mass. The cost is too high. We will have nothing left to open."

Oklahoma faced the same decisions as every other state.

I've kept my promise to follow the data and make the right decisions for Oklahoma at the right time. And now we are months and months ahead of other states.

Across Oklahoma, doctors, nurses and health care workers have delivered on their promise to care for Oklahomans. They risked their lives to care for their fellow citizens and help them fight an unknown virus.

I've met with Chief Medical Officers and other frontline health care workers, both in my office and in their hospitals. I've witnessed their professionalism, their endurance and their compassion on full display.

Amy Petitt, the ICU Nurse Leader at Saint Anthony hospital, was one of the heroes we met. She told me about nurses and doctors working so hard to offer human touch to those who can't see their families. No matter how tough the conditions are, they're treating their patients with

dignity. They're caring for them like they'd want their own family members cared for.

We will forever owe them a debt of gratitude because they have been magnificent.

When testing was a challenge around the world, we leveraged the resources we had here in Oklahoma. We quickly converted a diagnostic lab in Stillwater, which dramatically raised our testing capacity in the early stages. Our State Health Department partnered with County Health Departments to stand up 80 test sites across the state.

We've made sure any Oklahoman who needed a test could get one for free, and we've completed more than 3 million tests so far.

We quickly overcame a global PPE shortage and refilled our stockpile. We continue to distribute millions of masks, gloves and other protective items across the state. We're delivering to nursing homes, to first responders and to school districts in every part of our state.

I ask all Oklahomans to join me in thanking Secretaries Jerome Loughridge, Dr. Kayse Shrum, Kevin Corbett and Elizabeth Pollard; Commissioner of Health Dr. Lance Frye, Gino DeMarco, Director Mark Gower and his team at the Department of Emergency Management, the men and women of the Oklahoma National Guard, our teams on the front lines at the Department of Corrections and the Department of Veterans Affairs and our many other state and local partners.

I want to specifically thank my Chief Operating Officer, John Budd.

He's in the gallery, representing the Governor's Solution Task Force and everyone who played key roles in protecting Oklahomans.

John, we cannot thank you enough.

Oklahomans across the state played a key role in our response as well.

Together, the three W's became part of our daily life. We've washed our hands frequently; we've watched our distance from others, and we've worn masks in public places.

We took the personal responsibility to protect our families, our neighbors and our most vulnerable.

Our 7-day average of new cases is down 45% from its peak. Our hospitalizations are down 35% as well.

We can see the finish line in our fight against this virus. Rather than coast our way in, let's continue together with a final sprint.

To the Oklahomans who have made so many sacrifices to slow the spread, I thank you, and I ask everyone to join us as we put this virus behind us.

I promised Oklahomans we would bring efficiency to state government. We are doing just that with our vaccine rollout.

Thanks to the hard work of Deputy Commissioner Keith Reed and his team at the State Health Department, local public health workers and our state's medical community, we are seventh in the nation – Top Ten -- in vaccines administered per capita!

I'll never forget watching Hannah White, a nurse at INTEGRIS Health in Oklahoma City, be the first Oklahoman to get the vaccine.

Once it was over, she hugged the nurse who gave it to her. She said, "Hopefully this is the start of something better." As I speak to you today, more than 356,000 Oklahomans now have that same hope.

We're accelerating our efforts --- more supplies of vaccines are on the way. I assure you we will be relentless.

My vision is to get our summer back, and we can do it by continuing to lead the nation in vaccinations.

Because I am committed to getting all kids back in their classrooms, I made sure we prioritized teachers to get this vaccine. Many teachers over 65 have been vaccinated already, and many more teachers will be eligible this month.

In almost every district in Oklahoma, parents and students have an option to choose to go back to the classroom. To the school districts that have innovated and followed the data to offer safe, in-person instruction -- on behalf of your parents, and the future of our state, I can't thank you enough.

You're providing an important safety net to our children, and you're the glue that holds many of our communities together.

I've heard stories of teachers doing everything they can, but they're worried about their students not being in the classroom.

Kathryn Szallar teaches kindergarten in Deer Creek. She's a phenomenal teacher who goes above and beyond for her students.

Her school is on an A/B schedule, and she told me how hard it is to teach young kids through distance learning. She feels it's essential for young people to have the option to be in the classroom with their teachers.

A child's education is a building block, and it starts in their youngest years.

Ms. Szallar, and many other teachers, are worried that keeping students from their classrooms could set them back for years.

Can you imagine being a first grader and trying to learn to read on Zoom?

Distance learning is perfectly fine for some students, but when we force it on everyone, it widens achievement gaps and jeopardizes our future as a Top Ten state.

Our kids deserve the option to be in their classrooms. I promise to keep fighting for our students every day!

We've kept our promise to thousands of business owners by allowing them to stay open safely.

As you know, some states shut down completely for months at a time.

But we found the right balance between protecting public health and protecting Oklahomans' right to provide for their families!

We went to Phase 1 of the Open Up and Recover Safely plan April 24th. We went to Phase 3 – fully reopen – on June 1st.

Back then, I said by reopening safely and responsibly, we'd be months ahead of other states. Our June unemployment rate was fifth lowest in the country – 40% lower than the national average – and almost 60% lower than New York.

Because of that, almost 100,000 more Oklahomans were back to work compared to the national average.

Everywhere I go across the state, small business owners and workers tell me how grateful they are for being able to keep their businesses open, to provide income for their employees and their families and to provide the services their communities rely on.

The other day I stopped in at Eddie's Restaurant in Edmond.

I got to meet Eddie, who drove across town to see me before I left. He shook my hand, sat down, and looked me in the eye. He said, "Thank you. Keep doing what you're doing. It's made a huge impact on our life."

Like so many small business owners across the state, Eddie and his wife started with nothing but hope. They took out their life savings to buy a restaurant on the corner of Coltrane and Second.

After years of sacrifice and hard work, they expanded. They now own three restaurants, a catering company and a food truck.

Eddie told me that when the pandemic hit, like many business owners, they were worried.

He said, "My daughter's college tuition needs to be paid. I don't have a private investor, a bank. I have to continue on."

Eddie said because of the decisions we've made; he and his 100 employees can continue on.

They can feed their families. They can pay for their children's education. They can continue to live.

I'm proud to tell you Eddie plans to open a new location next month, and I can't wait to be there to support him.

Through the Oklahoma Business Relief Program, we invested $143 million in 8,661 small businesses just like Eddie's.

This program touched 344 different communities throughout all 77 counties.

25 percent of the businesses were minority owned, including the Black Wall Street Liquid Lounge, a coffee shop in Tulsa's Greenwood District; TS&H Shirt Company in Seminole and Azteca Mexican Restaurant in Oklahoma City.

Azteca's owner, Alejandria Camarena, opened her restaurant three years ago. She had always dreamed of owning a business.

COVID-19 threatened that dream, but thanks to our Business Relief grants, she kept all 12 employees on her payroll. And she continues as a successful Hispanic female business owner in Oklahoma.

Small businesses like these are the lifeblood of our communities. Their continued success is key to making Oklahoma a Top Ten state.

The pandemic isn't over --- but we can see the light at the end of the tunnel.

As Will Rogers once said, "Don't let yesterday use up too much of today."

The people of Oklahoma have sent us here to make their lives better. They expect us to work together, and they expect us to do things for the right reasons – never for personal gain or political purposes.

For the past few months, we've been working on a legislative agenda to deliver on the promises we've made to our constituents.

Secretary Bingman and I have been meeting with Speaker Charles McCall and President Pro Tem Greg Treat. We've worked together to craft not the governor's agenda, not the House's agenda, not the Senate's agenda, but the people's agenda!

The people of Oklahoma made their voices heard loudly in November.

They gave House Republicans five more seats, and the strongest supermajority in state history!

More than 80% of the House and the Senate are now led by conservative Oklahomans.

We will keep burdens low on our taxpayers.

We'll support our oil and gas industry and protect it from radical liberals in Washington.

We'll fight for our farmers and ranchers and the Oklahoma way of life.

We'll enact business friendly policies.

We'll protect the rights of unborn children and stand up for the personal and religious freedoms

of Oklahomans!

“The People’s Agenda” for this legislative session has three main pillars:

Number one, Make Oklahoma a Top Ten state for business, number two, deliver taxpayers more for their money and number three, invest in our fellow Oklahomans.

I know so many of you in the chamber -- and those watching -- believe we can be and should be a Top Ten State for Business. What we need is more taxpayers, not more taxes.

I’m proud to say Oklahoma is open for business, and we’re seeing results.

More companies are looking to relocate to our state than ever before.

We’ve been aggressive. We’re reaching out to companies in states that are keeping businesses locked down and dictating their citizens’ personal freedoms.

In the past two years, we’ve had many meetings with companies in California.

They all say the same thing: “We want out.”

Over the last year, I’ve worked together with the Department of Commerce and the Oklahoma Business Roundtable to get those companies free from California’s anti-business policies.

PAS MRO, an aerospace company based in California, announced last summer it would be moving its operations to Bristow, Oklahoma.

Company President Jim Agee said the decision was easy. He said it was because of Oklahoma’s business-friendly policies, availability of highly trained workers and the lower costs of doing business in our state.

One of our key tools we have in Oklahoma to close deals like these is the Governor’s Quick Action Closing Fund. It lets us recruit new industries and growing companies.

We also need to invest in innovation by using accelerators for entrepreneurs and supporting startups statewide.

A few weeks ago, I was at the Cattlemen’s Congress at the fairgrounds in Oklahoma City.

The folks in Denver turned their back on the Ag industry. They wouldn’t let them have their

major national cattle show because they insisted on keeping their state locked down.

That put the stability of the U.S. beef industry in danger.

So we started a new tradition here in Oklahoma City, and the Cattlemen's Congress brought $50 million to our economy!

We can't have a strong economy without a skilled workforce and a strong education system.

Right now, we have the opportunity of a lifetime. We have a chance to rethink and reimagine the future of education in Oklahoma.

One of the ways we can do this is by looking at how schools get their funding. The current formula lets schools pick their highest number of students over the last three years.

Here's what that means.

Say you lived in Tulsa and moved to a new district to make sure your kids could go to school in person. Your kids could be counted by both districts.

They're called "ghost students."

We're sending money to districts to educate kids who don't go there, and that's simply not fair.

There are more than 55,000 "ghost students" in our funding formula right now. That means we're allocating close to 200 million of your tax dollars to students who don't exist.

This is unacceptable.

It's time for schools to be funded based on how many students they have now -- not how many they had in the past.

COVID-19 has also shown us that every child has unique needs. Being in a physical classroom is so important for most students to succeed.

By not giving our parents and children an option for in-person learning, schools have tied their hands.

It's now been 325 days since Tulsa students in 4th through 12th grades have been allowed to be in their classrooms. 325 days!

Meanwhile, just a few blocks away, the rest of the Tulsa metro has been safely in session most of the year.

Union, Jenks, Broken Arrow, Bixby, Owasso, Sapulpa, Sand Springs, Sperry, Skiatook, Collinsville. The list goes on. They've all found ways to put their students first and give them the choice to come back to the classroom.

The only difference between schools that stay closed and those that have safely reopened is the mindset to find a way to make it happen.

My heart breaks when I hear stories like Abby Cavness's.

She said, "I'm a Tulsa Public Schools lifer and never in a million years thought I'd be uttering these words."

"My kids are miserable. They beg every day through tears to not do distance learning anymore. My 4th grader is begging to switch to any school that is actually open."

"It is devastating to watch our beloved school lose family after family."

Abby finished by saying, "I'm scared for what Tulsa and the school system is going to become after this."

Stories like Abby's are why students and parents need the choice to transfer to public schools that best fit their needs.

If a school district has space available and is a better fit for a child, the government should make that happen – not stand in the way.

We have to put our students first. Period.

Another way to make Oklahoma a Top Ten state is to have an infrastructure that grows and attracts businesses.

Last year, we hit a major milestone as we reached Top Ten in bridge conditions -- an incredible achievement considering we were near the bottom just a few years ago.

Tim Gatz, Secretary of Transportation, is doing a great job working with the teams at ODOT and the Turnpike Authority to modernize their agencies. That lets us focus on projects that link our cities and towns and provide access to new areas for economic development.

A strong infrastructure is the backbone of any strong economy.

Another key to a strong economy is letting businesses grow without fear of government overreach.

In his first week in office, President Biden issued 22 Executive Orders. Many of them will kill jobs and put burdensome regulations on our businesses.

It's a different story here in Oklahoma. We must continue our focus on cutting red tape.

By working together to get rid of excessive regulation, we'll unlock Oklahoma's full economic potential for workers, business owners, farmers, and families.

Instead of letting Washington strangle Oklahoma's businesses, we need to unleash them!

The government's job is not to slow things down. It's to get out of the way!

Thanks to the support of our legislators, we built our savings account to $1 billion in 2019.

Some folks criticized us for wanting to save this money, but that's proven to be a lifesaver during the tough financial season we had last year.

I also want to credit my colleagues in the House and Senate for their wisdom and careful thinking during last year's session. Our state was reeling from a massive drop in oil prices and 13% unemployment, but you recognized the uncertainty and wisely held the budget to 78% of the spending authority while still providing core services.

Your fiscal prudence is one of the reasons why we have the opportunity we do today, and I thank you for the challenging decisions you made.

It's because of these tough decisions – reopening our economy, how we spent our COVID Relief Funds across the state, and the Legislature's careful budget – that the Fiscal Year 2022 predictions are much better than many states.

We'll be able to invest in strategic places while avoiding cuts.

We can also significantly replenish our savings account, so we stay prepared for whatever comes our way.

Now our challenge is to make sure Oklahomans get more for their money.

A perfect example of this is our Department of Human Services. Secretary Justin Brown and his team did a great job innovating this year.

DHS is prioritizing service over brick and mortar office space. Its closing 25 offices but embedding those staff members in more than 100 community spaces.

The result is Oklahomans get better access and more services instead of paying for real estate.

I thank the hardworking men and women at DHS and all our state agencies for innovating to get more for our money.

Another way to deliver taxpayers more for their money is to make sure hard work gets rewarded.

Like many of you in this room, my background is in the private sector. When I was building and running my business, I recruited and hired talented people.

I could pay and promote them based on their experience, capability and work ethic. But that can't happen in state government.

Agency leaders have their hands tied in who they can hire and promote because of outdated restrictions. State agencies should be able to hire the best people and promote good employees.

2020 showed us how dramatically our world can change overnight. Our state agencies need to be able to adapt and change in real-time.

Thousands of our state employees are stuck in a system where qualified, dedicated and hungry employees are often waiting years to be promoted, all because they're stuck behind someone in line.

I want to tell you about one of our hardworking state employees named Cody.

Cody has worked at OESC for 22 years. He's down in the Idabel office.

Cody was doing way more work than his title and job description indicated, but factors out of his control made a promotion nearly impossible.

One of those factors was location. An agency policy required directors to live in Oklahoma City.

Generations of Cody's family had lived in Idabel and a promotion wasn't worth leaving his family.

It took a pandemic -- and my Executive Order to have state employees working from home -- to change the policy so he could become a director.

There are men and women like Cody across state government -- talented, dedicated to serving our state, and stuck in an outdated system that keeps them from being rewarded like they deserve.

To be a Top Ten state, we need a system that rewards our state employees and gives us the flexibility we need to serve our citizens more effectively.

Finally, my team will continue to find ways to partner with the members in this room to invest in our fellow Oklahomans.

America's Health Rankings puts Oklahoma 46th in the country in health outcomes.

We're one of the worst in the country in obesity and diabetes rates. We have the third most deaths from heart disease.

That's unacceptable to me, and I know it's unacceptable to all 4 million Oklahomans.

Oklahomans hired me to bring a fresh set of eyes to all areas of our state government.

As governor, I can't stand by and continue with business as usual when the system isn't working.

We have an obligation as leaders to do better for our citizens. I think its implicit in the promises we made when we all assumed office.

With Medicaid Expansion now in our Constitution, this is the perfect opportunity to reimagine health care delivery in Oklahoma. It's time to focus on outcomes and not just paying invoices.

40 states have found managed care is the best way forward: Texas, kansas, Iowa, Tennessee,

Florida. Even California and Illinois.

It's not a red state or blue state thing. It's the smart thing to do.

In fact, almost every other state with Medicaid expansion also uses managed care.

Oklahoma, this is the right path forward.

Now, we need to talk about the most pressing issue for our state's future.

The U.S. Supreme Court's ruling in *McGirt v.* Oklahoma questions the sovereignty of the state as we've known it since 1907.

The Court overturned the conviction of a child rapist on the grounds that the Creek Nation's reservation was never disestablished for criminal jurisdiction. State courts no longer have the authority to prosecute crimes committed by or against Oklahomans who are also tribal members.

Hundreds of criminal cases are being dismissed.

This ruling also raises many other unanswered questions. Do tribal members living in eastern Oklahoma pay income tax and sales tax? If not, the Oklahoma Tax Commission estimates a potential loss of $200 million every year.

Another potential issue is who regulates agriculture? Water? The energy industry? Zoning?

Who has the right to tax businesses?

What is the state of Oklahoma's ability to enforce the laws? In Muskogee County, a convicted serial rapist named Leroy Smith was recently released. The Muskogee County District Attorney said he can't be retried because of the federal statute of limitations.

We need to resolve the many unanswered questions from this ruling.

I've invited the leaders of Oklahoma's sovereign tribes to join together and work with the State of Oklahoma. Together, we must create the certainty, fairness and the unity we've enjoyed since 1907.

Where we go from here will define the state's future.

We have a shared responsibility to live as one Oklahoma regardless of your race or where you live. We drive on the same roads; our kids go to the same schools and we benefit from the same programs.

It is critical -- while embracing the tribal heritage of many Oklahomans -- that we don't lose sight of the fact that we are all Oklahomans.

As one Oklahoma, we will become a Top Ten state. If we are divided, we will not.

We must come together.

This year has tested the resiliency of our state and all 4 million Oklahomans. We've all faced challenges and made difficult sacrifices, but at the root of it all, we've endured.

Oklahomans are no stranger to hardship. We've lived through dust bowls, tornados, floods, a bombing, and now a pandemic. But we're going to make it through, just like we have time and time again.

It's been two years since I stood on the steps of the Capitol and was sworn in as governor.

On that day, I shared something my dad told me.

He'd tell us, "Don't ever give up. Don't ever quit. The future doesn't just happen. You make it happen, so dream big."

With big dreams and bold decisions, we'll capitalize on the promise of tomorrow.

We must always focus on the next generation and not the next election. If we allow selfish ambition to drive decisions, the moral fabric of our system starts to break down.

I'm calling on every elected official to continue serving with self-sacrifice, always putting the needs of 4 million Oklahomans ahead of the few and the powerful.

I encourage us all today to renew our promise to the people of our great state. Our decisions have consequences, and as we go, society follows.

Let's lead Oklahoma to becoming a Top Ten state, and let's deliver on the people's agenda. Together.

The turnaround Oklahomans demanded is well underway.

God bless you, and God bless the great state of Oklahoma!

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