

**ADDRESS OF  
GOVERNOR RALPH S. NORTHAM**

**The State of the Commonwealth  
Address to the Joint Assembly  
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Speaker Cox, Senator Newman, Lieutenant Governor Fairfax, Justices of the Supreme Court, ladies and gentlemen of the General Assembly, thank you for inviting me to speak with you this evening.

And to my fellow Virginians, thank you for the extraordinary honor of serving as the 73rd Governor of this great Commonwealth.

I have to admit this feels a little different up here. Just a few days ago I was sitting one row back.

Although, this is not my first time making an important speech from this podium.

When I last stood in this spot, it was to announce my candidacy for the important position of Attorney General of the 1976 Model General Assembly.

And I am proud to say that I won!

And, by the way, that I was unopposed.

Before we begin, I want to acknowledge a few people who are with us this evening.

First, please join me in welcoming the love of my life and the First Lady of the Commonwealth of Virginia, Pam Northam and our daughter Aubrey.

Pam spent much of her career as an elementary school science teacher -- she shares my passion for early childhood education and the belief that there is tremendous power in every child.

Pam, I cannot wait to see what you accomplish for the people of Virginia as First Lady.

I want to recognize Lieutenant Governor Justin Fairfax and Attorney General Mark Herring.

It was an honor to campaign with you both and I look forward to the great things we will get done together over the next four years.

Next, I am pleased to be joined by a diverse group of talented and dedicated men and women who will serve as my cabinet and closest advisors in the years to come.

Thank you for your commitment to serving this Commonwealth.

One of the most important duties of the men and women of my cabinet is to oversee the work of 110,000 of the most talented and dedicated public servants anywhere in the world.

Please join me in thanking our Virginia state employees for the outstanding work they do for all of us.

This cabinet is led by women. And like this new General Assembly, it is also one of the most diverse in our history.

This management team can be an example to our friends in the corporate world.

When people say, "we can't find enough women, or enough diverse candidates for leadership roles," I say—you're not looking hard enough.

We could not be here tonight were it not for the bravery and sacrifice of men and women who wear uniforms of every sort to keep our communities, our Commonwealth and our country safe.

From the armed services and law enforcement to firefighters and other first responders, we owe all of these public servants our thanks and our continued support.

I would like to thank Terry and Dorothy McAuliffe for their tremendous service to this great Commonwealth.

It was an honor to serve with them over the past four years and Virginia is better off for their leadership.

Finally, I would like to share my best wishes for Speaker Bill Howell and his family. He served this Commonwealth with distinction for nearly 30 years and I know we are all praying for his speedy recovery.

On Saturday, I was honored to have the opportunity to speak with you formally about the approach I will bring to my term as governor.

I believe Virginians select their leaders for one reason: to make this Commonwealth work better for them and their families, no matter who they are or where they live.

That is a simple statement.

But far too often, public servants with the best of intentions find themselves pushed and pulled by forces that do not align with that goal.

In an era of social media and cable news, in a building filled with advocates, partisans and pundits, staying on the right path can be difficult.

Those of you who know me, know the Eastern Shore shaped who I am.

It's a quiet place. A place of humility.

It's a place where they teach the old lessons, the ones about loving our neighbor as ourselves.

And it's a place that reminds us of Virginia's contradictions.

For many people, this is the best place on earth to live and work.

But while so many Virginians share in the opportunity and prosperity of a thriving state, those benefits have eluded too many of our neighbors for too long.

As Governor, I am committed to working with you to turn that around.

As we begin our work together, I hope you will join me in applying this test to the decisions we make:

Does this action do the most good for the most Virginians?

Have we been transparent with the public about what we are doing and why we are doing it?

And finally, is there a better way forward that we haven't yet considered?

Tonight, I will lay out an agenda designed to reinforce the things that are working, and to fix the things that aren't.

If we take these steps, we will answer the charge our voters gave us to make Virginia work better for everyone, no matter who they are or where they are from.

Achieving that goal begins with creating new jobs by helping Virginia companies grow and attracting new ones to every corner of the Commonwealth.

I am committed to working with you to create more opportunities for Virginia workers to get a good job that empowers them to provide for their families and lead productive lives.

But bringing more jobs to Virginia is only half the battle.

Too many of our fellow Virginians are out of work or underemployed because they lack the skills they need to begin a long-term career.

And too many of our businesses are struggling to fill high-paying positions because they just can't find people with the right skills and training.

If we are going to make Virginia work better for everyone, strengthening our workforce development system and expanding access to registered apprenticeships are key.

During my campaign for Governor, I made connecting Virginians with the skills they need to succeed in a new economy the centerpiece of my agenda.

That's why I have appointed Megan Healy as Virginia's first Cabinet-level Chief Workforce Advisor, to focus our attention on these issues at the highest level, every day.

We are also beginning the work to implement a proposal I made during the campaign called G3, which is short for Get Skilled, Get a Job, and Give Back.

The centerpiece of that agenda is a plan to pay tuition and fees for any Virginian who pursues a credential in a high-demand field, if they commit to at least one year of public service.

This innovative program, which we will pursue over the course of my term, will be a big boost to the great work that is already taking place to build the workforce of the 21st Century.

This year, I hope you will accept the proposal in the introduced budget to increase the funding for the New Virginia Economy Workforce Credential Grant Program.

Originally proposed by Governor McAuliffe, this first-in-the-nation program connects students with workforce credentials in high-demand fields by paying two-thirds of the cost when they complete their studies.

Since its inception, this program has helped Virginians attain 4,595 industry credentials. More than 90 percent have gotten a job.

If we work together, we can build on our advantages in workforce development and make sure every Virginian can get the training she needs to build a successful career right at home.

Building a better Virginia for every family starts with offering every single child a world-class education, no matter who they are or where they live.

Virginia is home to some of the best schools on Earth – and we should strive every day to make them better.

But we are also home to schools that struggle.

One of the most urgent reasons that some schools are falling behind is a nationwide shortage of qualified educators.

The proposed budget includes several proposals to address this issue, including additional funding to help school divisions recruit and retain principals in challenged schools,

and enhanced student loan forgiveness for teachers who serve in our hardest to staff schools.

We should also work together now and in the years to come to make Virginia a leader in teacher pay -- so that the best and brightest come to our schools and stay for their entire careers.

Quality teachers are critical to educational success. So are school support staff.

In difficult times for our budget, we have often asked schools to do more with fewer guidance counselors, custodians and school nurses.

These men and women play an essential role in the education of our young people and we should make sure every school can hire the best.

As we work to attract the best educators and staff on the planet, we should also recognize that a child's prospects for lifetime success are far too often determined by the school they attend.

The introduced budget includes more than \$500 million in new funding for school divisions across the Commonwealth.

The budget before us also wisely includes additional resources for school divisions in high-poverty communities where students too often fall behind.

This funding will help these schools empower at-risk students to keep pace with their peers across the Commonwealth, so that every child can enter the workforce ready to succeed on day one.

Finally, as we build an education system that prepares every child to succeed, we should make sure schools have the resources to educate students with special needs or learning disabilities.

In my medical practice I treat a lot of young people with disabilities.

These young men and women overcome huge challenges to live and learn among their peers. We have a responsibility to help them reach their full potential in the least restrictive environment possible.

Education is a key predictor of a person's prospects for lifetime success.

And so is health care.

We are in the midst of a revolution with respect to how we research, prevent and treat a range of conditions that have historically cost too many people their productivity or even their lives.

I want Virginia to lead that revolution and to reap the economic benefits it will bring.

Tonight we are joined by a remarkable young man who embodies the hope that this new age of medicine offers.

I would like you all to meet, Jennifer and Bobby Bartholomew and their son Levi, who are joining us tonight from Hampton Roads.

Jennifer called me when Levi was 3-months old, concerned that he was getting weaker every day.

He was seen, evaluated and began receiving treatment for Spinal Muscular Atrophy, Type 1, a disease that is often fatal within several months if left untreated.

However, thanks to the incredible progress we are making in treating diseases like Levi's, he just celebrated his first birthday and his mother told me that he recently rolled over for the first time during the Christmas holidays.

I hope you'll join me in welcoming Levi, Jennifer, Bobby and their doctor, Crystal Proud, for joining us tonight.

And for my former colleagues from the Virginia Senate – Senator Stanley in particular – can you believe that we have not one, but two pediatric neurologists here tonight?!

Right now, researchers are using personalized medicine to develop a cure for Levi's condition and they are getting very close.

Whoever finally identifies a therapy and commercializes it will save lives and create jobs.

If we support the great work happening at the Carilion-Virginia Tech Research Institute,

the iNova Center for Personalized Medicine

and facilities all across our state, that breakthrough, and many others like it, will happen here in Virginia.

Levi's story is a powerful reminder of the potential of modern medicine, and also the incredible value of access to health insurance and treatment.

That is why I am committed to working with the men and women of the General Assembly to expand Medicaid this year.

We have had this discussion for many years. The arguments are well-known.

Medicaid expansion is an opportunity to bring our tax dollars home and transform the lives of nearly 400,000 people who lack coverage today.

The proposal currently before us will create tens of thousands of new jobs, save the Commonwealth more than \$400 million over the biennium, reduce the strain on rural hospitals, and help combat our mental health and addiction crises.

As a physician, I believe that expanding Medicaid is a matter of basic economic justice.

Every year, I visit the Remote Area Medical Clinic in Wise County to help thousands of people get check-ups and treatment that they usually cannot access because they don't have health insurance.

If you have never visited RAM, I hope you will join me this year and witness for yourselves the incredible dedication and generosity of the men and women who put this annual event together.

I will warn you – it can be a difficult day.

Every single Virginian you meet is someone's son or daughter, and many tell tales of the daily agony they experience dealing with preventable health challenges.

At RAM clinics over the years I have diagnosed people with treatable conditions who suffered for years because they never had the resources to see a neurologist.

These men and women are not living the lives they deserve.

They are not making their fullest contribution to their communities or our economy.

But they can be.

If we join 32 other states and bring our tax dollars home to expand Medicaid, many of these Virginians who currently get health care one day a year will have access the other 364.

They will be better able to work, to provide for their families and to give back to their communities.

Bipartisanship has been the watchword of the first few days of this session, and for that I am thankful.

We all recognize the extraordinary changes that voters made to this Assembly in November.

They expect us to deliver on the mandate they sent.

Expanding Medicaid is the best way for us to make life better for Virginians and truly open a new era of policymaking in the Commonwealth of Virginia.

Let's get it done this year.

As we work to expand health coverage, we should also make it easier for Virginia women to access reproductive health care, and oppose any effort to make it harder.

Quality and affordable women's health care is a constitutional right and an economic imperative – it is also a personal decision.



There are many places where government can be an incredible force for good – but the space between a woman and her doctor is not one of them.

So this year, let's work together to repeal limitations on a woman's right to make her own health care decisions and please help me expand access to Long-Acting Reversible Contraceptives

We should also work together this year to address the public health crisis of gun violence.

Gunshots kill more people in Virginia every year than car accidents, but if you walk into the right gun show, it's easier to get a firearm than it is to rent a car.

This issue is not a new one for the General Assembly – but this is a new General Assembly.

There are many actions we should take over our time together to save lives by reducing gun violence.

Let's start by keeping guns out of the hands of people who shouldn't have them by passing universal background checks.

The Senate Courts of Justice committee rejected this legislation this morning on partisan lines, along with several other bills aimed at preventing gun crimes.

That is disappointing – but this issue is not going away.

As long as Virginians' lives are at risk because there are too many guns in the hands of people who would use them to harm others, we will fight on this ground.

As long as schools, churches, offices and concert venues are exposed to horrific, preventable violence, we will fight on this ground.

As long as the people who sent us all here continue to cry out for solutions to the epidemic of gun violence, we will fight on this ground.

No partisan allegiance or special interest influence is more valuable than the life of the next Virginian we will lose to gun violence. Or the one after that.

We must act together this year to keep guns out of the hands of people who should not have them.

Building a better Virginia for everyone means embracing and leveraging the incredible diversity of the people who live here.

This Commonwealth is home to people from every corner of the globe, every faith tradition, every political perspective and every income level.

We are also home to people who too often face discrimination or unnecessary obstacles to equality.

As we begin our work, let's ensure that all Virginians can realize their potential, no matter who they are, where they live, or whom they love.

Voting is the most fundamental action a citizen can take in a democracy.

Choosing leaders and holding them accountable is how citizens shape the future for all of us.

If we really believe in a system where the people are in charge, we should work together to eliminate barriers to the ballot box instead of building them higher.

Unfortunately, Virginia law imposes many onerous and unnecessary restrictions on voting that discourage participation for many people.

Let's reverse that troubling trend by passing no-excuse absentee voting, so more people can have a say in their future without jumping through unnecessary hoops.

This commonsense reform will make voting easier, reduce lines on Election Day and send a simple message that in Virginia, we want more voters, not fewer.

As a native of the Eastern Shore, a scientist, and a resident of Hampton Roads, I can tell you personally that, no matter what politicians in Washington say, climate change is real.

Sea levels are rising.

It affects us every day.

For anyone who has trouble believing that, come visit Tangier Island with me sometime and meet the people whose way of life is already being altered by this global crisis.

As you know, last year, Governor McAuliffe signed an Executive Directive to begin the process of capping carbon emissions from Virginia's electric utilities and use the power of the market to foster growth and innovation in the clean energy sector.

The Clean Energy Virginia initiative is an incredible opportunity to create the next generation of energy jobs and lead the fight against climate change -- and my administration will implement it fully.

I will also support a bill this session that will allow us to take full advantage of this process by joining a coalition of states called the Regional Greenhouse Gas Initiative, or RGGI.

With your approval, we can invest the significant revenues Clean Energy Virginia will generate to create clean energy jobs in rural communities, help families lower their electrical bills, and solidify our position as a global leader in renewable energy.

On the first day of this session, Governor McAuliffe spoke to you about the importance of second chances in our criminal justice system.

I was proud to stand beside him as he made history by restoring more civil rights to former offenders than any governor in American history.

My team and I will continue that policy over the next four years so that men and women who make mistakes and serve their time can reenter society as full partners in our democracy, not second-class citizens.

We should also work together this session to join the rest of the nation and raise the threshold for felony larceny.

Virginia's threshold has not changed since 1980. It is the lowest in America.

There is no excuse for the criminal act of theft, but a teenager who steals one used iPhone or a pair of boots should not have her entire life defined by that one mistake.

This year we should make the dream of a college education more attainable by tackling the difficult issue of rising student debt.

I have proposed a Borrower's Bill of rights to protect Virginians from predatory student lenders, as well as a state ombudsman to connect Virginians with resources and information to help them pay their loans as soon as possible.

Finally, during the campaign I was encouraged to see leaders in the other party agree to close a loophole in our ethics laws that allows public officials to spend campaign money for personal use.

This step will assure Virginians that we are here to serve their interests, not our own.

These proposals are solutions to problems that stand between us and the future our fellow Virginians deserve.

The leaders in this room may have other ideas to tackle them, or other challenges that you believe should be higher priorities than these – I am eager to begin those discussions with you.

I also recognize that there will be moments when political considerations, regional disagreement or unforeseen challenges may threaten our ability to stay focused on the problems Virginians asked us to solve.

Our counterparts in Washington D.C. remind us daily of how easy it is to allow good-faith ideological disagreements to devolve into partisan warfare that drowns out the needs of the people.

In Virginia, we're better than that.

Virginians are counting on us to answer big challenges with big solutions, even if that requires us to put the common good ahead of our own partisan instincts.

They are counting on us to use every dollar they send us wisely, to the greatest possible benefit to our economy and their lives.

They are counting on us to fight for every person, even those who may not have the loudest voices here in Richmond.

They are counting on us to deal with each other with civility and understanding, ready to acknowledge that we all came here with the goal of helping the people we serve.

They are counting on us to work together to solve these problems and make Virginia work better for everyone, no matter who they are or where they live.

And I firmly believe we are up to that task.

Thank you, may God Bless you, and May God Bless the Commonwealth of Virginia.



