

2021 State of the State Address
Governor Brian P. Kemp
Thursday, January 14, 2021

Lieutenant Governor Duncan, Speaker Ralston, Speaker Pro Tem Jones, members of the General Assembly, Chief Justice Melton, Chief Judge McFadden, and my fellow Georgians: In my first State of the State address, I talked about building on a sure foundation. We applauded the leadership of Governors Perdue and Deal who guided our state through difficult storms. I extended my gratitude to the Georgia General Assembly, who helped pour the concrete with key investments in education and economic development.

During that first address, which quite honestly, seems like an eternity ago, I retold the famous parable of two builders: one who built a beach house and the other who picked a better lot on higher, more stable ground. The rains came. The flood waters rose, and the house built on a sure, solid foundation weathered the storm. And then last year, I talked about our house plans – the blueprint for a safer, stronger Georgia. Each side of the structure protected those who lived inside; windows faced the future; and a front door, open for those who were looking for safety, opportunity, and a better tomorrow.

One year ago, I had no idea what we would experience in 2020 – what we would endure, the storms we would face. One year ago, our economy was growing at a rapid pace, with unemployment the lowest in the state's history. We had full faith and confidence that our best days were still to come.

When I stood at this rostrum on January 16th, 2020, I didn't know that a deadly, global pandemic was on the horizon. We didn't know that businesses would be shuttered, unemployment would skyrocket, and opportunity would slow under the weight of COVID-19.

We didn't know that our prosperity and our economy would be undermined at the same time that our health and well-being was threatened. We didn't know all of the challenges ahead; all of the impossible decisions to make; all of the struggle, pain, and grief. My family didn't know that we would have to say goodbye to Harrison Deal, the love of Lucy's life, like a brother to Jarrett and Amy Porter, and a son we never had to Marty and me. We didn't know that political division would generate ridiculous and harmful conspiracies, lawlessness, and death. Friends, standing here 12 months ago, I had no idea that 2020 would present more challenges than any year in my lifetime.

There is no doubt that this virus has impacted all of us beyond what we could ever have imagined. Too many families are now missing loved ones – a heartbreaking, devastating loss that I know many Georgians are still grieving today. And at this time, I'd like to observe a moment of silence to honor the life of every Georgian, every American, taken from us too soon by COVID-19. Those great Georgians may be gone, but they will not be forgotten. We will win this fight against COVID-19 and their legacies will live on for generations to come.

In Georgia, our people are the foundation. Despite incredible loss and unprecedented challenges, Georgia is still standing. Our house, built on a sure foundation, survived the storm. This state, while battered, is not broken. A better, brighter future is right around the corner. Yes, we still have challenges ahead, a virus to beat, an economy to rebuild and restore. But my fellow Georgians, the State of the State is resilient, and we will endure.

As you know, agriculture is Georgia's oldest and largest industry, supporting nearly 400,000 jobs and \$76 billion in economic impact throughout the Peach State. While we often take these hardworking Georgians for granted, we were reminded of their importance in the wake of Hurricane Michael. With winds topping 70 miles per hour, this storm destroyed thousands of acres of pecans, cotton, and timber; leveling homes, store fronts, and structures; literally upending lives and livelihoods. When the dust settled, I traveled down to Southwest Georgia to talk with local farmers and support the state's recovery efforts. I remember many conversations while I was there, and most of them went roughly the same way. These families were facing the destruction of their livelihoods, with bills piling up and federal assistance far away. I would always ask how they would move forward. Would they be able to continue feeding, clothing, and producing for our state – and the world? Nearly every person said they would clear the fields, repair what they could, and start planting.

As we begin a new year, a new legislative session, there are some who want to look to the past, assign blame, settle old scores, and relive and relitigate 2020. Today, I think we should take the advice of those wise farmers. Let's clear the fields and start planting.

While Jesus was a carpenter like his Dad, he had some timeless wisdom on farming and life. In Matthew 13, Jesus shares a few best practices with the crowd that had gathered:

“A farmer went out to sow his seed. As he was scattering the seed, some fell along the path, and the birds came and ate it up. Some fell on rocky places, where it did not have much soil. It sprang up quickly because the soil was shallow. But when the sun came up, the plants were scorched, and they withered because they had no root. Other seed fell among thorns, which grew up and choked the plants. Still other seed fell on good soil, where it produced a crop – a hundred, sixty or thirty times what was sown. Whoever has ears, let them hear.”

This parable, told over 2,000 years ago, is just as relevant today. A good harvest starts with good soil. Our future as a state – for decades or more – will be determined by the decisions we make in the days to come. To ensure a strong harvest in the years ahead, our top priority over the next few months must be to continue protecting both lives – and livelihoods – against COVID-19.

From the beginning of this pandemic, I stressed the need to balance those two priorities: the health and wellbeing of our people, and their ability to put food on the table for them and their families. In March and April of 2020, that was not easy. Many problems we confronted as a state led to long days and sleepless nights. It seems like

forever ago, but in the early days of our fight against COVID-19, protecting lives was a minute by minute battle against a virus we knew little about.

Our first test was in Albany and the southwest part of our state. A few super-spreader events led to the first surge in virus cases and hospitalizations throughout the region. The local health care infrastructure was being strained to the breaking point, and community spread of the virus was rampant. In response, the state quickly deployed National Guard infection control teams to local nursing homes, contracted with additional hospital staff to aid local frontline health care workers, and dispatched a state-purchased mobile hospital unit to help with patient overflow. We stood up additional bed capacity and purchased critical PPE supplies and ventilators to aid in the critical care of infected Georgians. Alongside local leaders, we made every resource available and worked tirelessly to provide life-saving medical treatment, protect the most vulnerable, and flatten the curve.

The local community stepped up to the plate and bought into what local and state leaders asked them to do – they wore a mask, practiced social distancing, avoided large crowds, and followed public health guidance. The community – not the government – flattened the curve and slowed the spread of COVID-19. And while every part of our state continues to see higher cases, more hospitalizations, and more deaths at the hands of this virus, the Dougherty County community has shown what is possible when we all work together and choose to be a part of the solution instead of part of the problem.

Here with us today is a gentleman who led a team of health care heroes through some of the worst this virus has thrown at our state. During one of the darkest times in recent memory, Scott Steiner and the hardworking Georgians at Phoebe Putney Health System held the line. They worked with local community partners to educate the public when so much about this virus was unknown. They provided life-saving treatment to thousands of their neighbors, friends, and coworkers, and like so many nurses, doctors, and health care professionals across the state, the Phoebe team worked long hours under extraordinary circumstances – not just because it was their job, but because they have a deep, abiding passion for their work. Thank you, Scott, and thank you to your team for your dedication and service to the people of our state!

Learning from Albany, as we moved into the summer months, the state launched a strategic plan to address the effects of COVID-19 and its impacts on our health care infrastructure and communities as a whole. Thanks to help from our federal partners, the state purchased four mobile hospital units to respond to increased hospitalizations in real time. Working with the General Assembly and Grady Memorial Hospital, we ramped up the Georgia Coordinating Center to allow for statewide coordination of hospital capacity, and we brought in additional bed capacity at the Georgia World Congress Center, allowing metro-Atlanta hospitals the ability to quickly adapt to changing conditions on the ground. We kept hospitals open, accepting patients, and keeping Georgians healthy.

Like every other state across the country, the pandemic introduced the dire need for rapid, accurate, and widely available testing – an infrastructure the Department of

Public Health literally created from scratch. But we persevered through significant supply chain challenges. We brought in the Georgia National Guard and contracted with Augusta University to boost testing, set up mega sites and drive thru testing operations, and engage hard-to-reach communities to help identify cases and slow the spread of the virus.

As of today, there have been a staggering 5.7 million tests administered in the state of Georgia. As we all know, COVID-19 has hit our most vulnerable Georgians the hardest, especially those residing and working in nursing homes. From the start of the pandemic, Dr. Toomey and our team recognized that nursing homes – and their residents and staff – would be among the toughest challenges we faced. The state sprang into action and was the first in the nation to utilize National Guard infection control strike teams to conduct missions in facilities in nearly every community. All told, the Guard's 65 infection control teams conducted missions in more than 2,400 facilities.

Speaking of the National Guard, I'd like to pause here for a moment and recognize their truly remarkable efforts throughout this pandemic. In addition to spearheading our early testing and infection control efforts, our very own men and women in uniform also helped Atlanta-area schools deliver 948,000 meals to children who were out of the classroom throughout the spring and summer of 2020. Guard members assisted overwhelmed food banks from Savannah to Atlanta and answered the call to help keep our communities safe. At this time, I'd like to thank General Tom Carden and every Georgian serving in the Georgia National Guard for their tireless work on behalf of our state and nation.

The state prioritized the fight against COVID-19 in two other specific areas: PPE procurement and additional health care personnel staffing. Activating the Georgia Emergency Management and Homeland Security Agency's statewide network, the state secured entire warehouses of PPE from hundreds of vendors which was immediately sent to hospitals, nursing homes, doctors' offices, and other health care providers on the frontlines. Because of their around-the-clock efforts, under the leadership of former Director Homer Bryson and Director Chris Stallings, the state now has at least an 80-day supply of all critical PPE categories.

As our hospitals and nursing homes confront the fiercest part of this pandemic, the frontline health care workers in these facilities have literally faced hell on earth. They've worked under brutal conditions, for multiple shifts, over months now. There's no doubt that Georgia's health care heroes have done their job with a grit and determination that has inspired 11 million Georgians. Never has it been clearer how important your job is and how vital all of you are to keeping our state healthy and prosperous. Thank you for sacrificing your time with loved ones. Thank you for going above and beyond each and every day.

To lend a hand to these heroes, the state has spared no expense. Through the end of 2020, Georgia allocated \$250 million in CARES Act funds to augment staff at nursing homes and hospitals across the state with an additional 70 million planned thru early March. These nurses and health care professionals have been absolutely vital to our

battle against COVID-19, often serving as a lifeline for these facilities and patients. I want to thank them for their willingness to do so.

These have been dark times for our state, for our country, and for the world. We have overcome so much, and together we can now see the light at the end of this tunnel. Thanks to the efforts of Operation Warp Speed, we have a miracle of modern science that is quickly being administered, with over 283,000 Georgians vaccinated as of yesterday. We still have a long way to go, but we are making steady, significant progress. This is certainly good news, but our fight is far from over. The pandemic is still infecting and killing fellow Georgians and Americans. We must all continue wearing a mask, practicing social distancing, washing our hands, and heeding the regulations of the executive order still in place. But we also know that there are 283,000 reasons for hope and optimism. We will get through this. We will get there, together.

It's pretty common for us to refer to 2020 and the pandemic as a fight, or maybe even a battle. I know it has certainly felt like one for many Georgians, myself included. And in any fight or battle, victory or defeat is often determined by leadership. I have thanked God countless times for sending Georgia a remarkable leader to see us through these challenging moments. Because it is only through God's grace and eternal wisdom that we have Dr. Kathleen Toomey. If I recited Dr. Toomey's resume, we'd be here all day: Harvard-trained, decades of experience in epidemiology. On paper, no one would be better prepared for the job of confronting a once-in-a-lifetime global pandemic, but the resume does not live up to the woman all of us have seen at countless press conferences, interviews, and fly-around tours. Her knowledge is unmatched, her work ethic is unparalleled, and her passion for public health and serving the people of our state is nothing short of remarkable. Dr. Toomey has become a friend and someone I trust completely. God sent Georgia the right person at the right time. Doc, thanks for everything.

Thanks to the partnership of both legislative chambers and the outstanding work of the best economic development team in the country, led by Commissioner Pat Wilson, Georgia's economy was able to hold its own during 2020. In a year riddled with economic hardship from coast to coast, Vice President Mike Pence said it best, "Georgia helped lead the way back to a prosperous American economy." And if the first half of the new fiscal year has been any indication, the Peach State is well-positioned to emerge from this dark period of economic crisis stronger and more prosperous than before.

For an un-precedented eighth consecutive year, Georgia earned the title of #1 State for Business, affirming and solidifying our status as the leading competitor for jobs and investment right here in the United States and around the world. At a time in our nation's history when jobless claims have skyrocketed, our unemployment rate in Georgia sits at 5.7 percent, well below the national average.

And in the midst of a global pandemic, Georgia's economic development numbers have shattered record after record. Since the start of Fiscal Year 2021, our Department of Economic Development has announced the creation of more than 16,000 new jobs and more than \$6 billion in new investment, with more than half of those jobs going to

communities outside the metro area. Whether it was Georgia-based Wincore Windows growing their operation by 100 jobs in Swainsboro; Nestle Purina doubling down on their investment in Hartwell by 130 jobs; or major brands like Papa Johns and Home Depot relocating their headquarters and expanding their footprint, creating thousands of jobs in the metro area; those numbers constitute a 40 percent increase in new jobs created and a 47 percent increase in new investments compared to the first six months of F.Y. 20.

But what they represent is so much more than that. They represent decades of hard-fought battles, foresight, and strong, conservative leadership under this Gold Dome. They serve as a beacon of hope to Georgians who had to worry about keeping food on the table, or if their kids could build a career in their home state when the dust settles from the pandemic. They show that rural Georgia – not just Atlanta – is ripe for investment and opportunity, and they speak to the strength of our business community – the hardworking Georgians who faced very long odds to stay in business and keep their teams on the payroll.

I faced just a little criticism – from all sides – when we chose to safely and methodically reopen the state. For news cycle after news cycle, it seemed like the only voices given a megaphone were from the elites, those who could work from home long-term, and those who had the resources to shelter in place for months on end. But the voices I heard were the voices of men and women from Bainbridge to Bolingbroke to Baldwin, who had spent years building their business, creating jobs, sowing a harvest they hoped to one day reap for themselves and their families literally days away from losing it all. I heard their fear, the uncertainty, not knowing what tomorrow may hold, and it was familiar to me. You see, as a small business owner in the construction industry during the Great Recession, Marty and I had similar conversations together in our kitchen – living week to week, day to day, hour to hour, like many other hardworking Georgians. It was not uncommon for the guys on the job site working for me to have more money in their pocket than I had in my bank account.

I can tell you those memories came to me often in the early days of the pandemic: the phone calls, texts, and emails I received from folks holding out for a miracle. They weren't that different from the thoughts going through my head on more than one night all those years ago. These hardworking Georgians were struggling, not because their business was a failure or because their products or services were no longer needed. No, they faced devastation because of a virus, through no fault of their own.

While some disagreed with me, I know our decision to work with Dr. Toomey and her team to give these people a fighting chance – a glimmer of hope – meant everything to them. Salon, barbershop, restaurant owners, and so many more who sacrificed time and resources to implement new, COVID-safe protocols in their stores when we reopened. These new regulations upended their daily operations, but kept many from closing stores, laying off workers, and losing businesses that sometimes had been in families and communities for generations. Hundreds of thousands of waiters and waitresses, contractors, hospitality and tourism workers, and farmers – the pandemic came for them too. This virus took something precious away from each one of them, and not all of

them ended up in the spotlight. My message to those great Georgians has been the same every day since we announced our measured reopening: your state hears you, your Governor hears you, and we have your back.

That decision allowed Georgia's small business community to live to fight another day and some of our largest companies – like Kia and Bridgestone – to have record success. It has never been clearer that we must honor our commitment to the job creators in this state. That commitment has held true these last 10 months, in communities rallying around local businesses who overhauled to adhere to public health guidelines and keep customers safe, and in the work done by leaders in both legislative chambers to make it easier to stay in business in the era of COVID-19.

You see, in the heat of the summer, when we were facing some of our toughest days in the fight with COVID, when access to testing was crucial, and the state struggled to meet demand for critical PPE, it was Georgia businesses – large and small – who stepped up to meet the moment. From craft breweries in Albany, to local mattress manufacturers in Rome, to a plastics business that began as a small startup in a garage in Newnan 13 years ago, our very own pitched in to build up the state's stockpile, limit the need to compete with other states, and ensure our health care heroes had the resources they need to care for Georgia's most vulnerable.

One of those businesses, America Knits, cut the ribbon to mark the official opening of their facility in Swainsboro in late 2019 with 52 jobs in their community. Their ribbon cutting heralded the return of American-made apparel manufacturing to Swainsboro, more than 20 years after many cut-and-sew plants closed throughout the U.S. And of course, it meant good jobs and more opportunities were on the way to hardworking Georgians and their families. Like all of us seated here today, I'm sure no one on the team at America Knits anticipated the COVID-19 pandemic and how hard it would hit our economy, but when the pandemic hit, they didn't slow down. They rolled up their sleeves and Kept Choppin'.

These American heroes shifted their entire operation to begin producing masks and gowns for frontline health care professionals, and while their products may not bear the names of major brands, they caught the attention of those in high places, receiving FDA approval in a matter of days to sew and send life-saving garments to our frontline heroes. Steve Hawkins, the president of America Knits, joins us in the chamber today. Steve, I know at this time last year, you could not have fathomed that your plant would shift to 20-hour days, bring on more staff, and work harder than you thought possible to fight a virus we knew so little about. You and your team's commitment to that mission represents the best of Georgia's business community and reminds us all of what is possible in rural Georgia. On behalf of all Georgians, thank you!

As state leaders, we knew we had to support these businesses as strongly as they were supporting Georgia. That's why I was proud to work alongside Speaker Ralston, Lieutenant Governor Duncan, and leaders in both legislative chambers last session to support the passage of a PPE tax credit to incentivize in-state production and ensure that we aren't forced to rely on anyone but our own Georgia Made entrepreneurs for

critical supplies. That piece of legislation was exactly the type of common sense, business-friendly policy that we should champion here in the #1 State for Business – to stand alongside businesses who are working hard each and every day to provide for their employees and communities and leverage state programs to support their efforts. That is why, as part of my legislative agenda this session, I am proposing a natural next step to the PPE Tax Credit by expanding the letter of the law to cover pharmaceutical and medical equipment manufacturers. Georgia is home to some of health care's strongest pillars with the CDC, several major health care systems, and premier medical research institutions like Augusta University and Emory. And as we look to a future on the other side of COVID-19, we should focus our efforts on planting more seeds in that good soil by spurring job creation from those industries that are critical to health care and building on Georgia's momentum to become a leader in all sectors of the health care industry. We've learned many lessons as a result of COVID-19, and one that we learned early on is that we cannot waste time in bidding wars with other states or foreign adversaries. No one nation should hold a monopoly on life-saving medicines and medical supplies, and we should bring these critical industries and the jobs that come with them back to America and here to Georgia.

Despite the challenges of 2020, I'm exceptionally proud of what we were able to accomplish working together last year. For the first time in our state's history, the General Assembly enacted a Public Health State of Emergency, granting my office with the flexibility and tools needed to lead our state through the COVID-19 crisis. I know that decision was not made lightly, and I want to thank each of you for placing that trust in me. Working alongside Chairman England, Chairman Tillery, and our state budget director, Kelly Farr, we were able to make the difficult choices to balance our state budget when the session reconvened last June. Through diligent work, we passed a balanced budget that reflected our priorities: health care, public safety, education, and economic opportunity. And while the media and politicians in California, New York, and others spent their 2020 throwing stones in glass houses, here in Georgia, I'm proud to report that, unlike them, the Peach State will not be facing budget cuts this year.

In fact, our careful planning and measured approach was rewarded in spades. When the pandemic's effect on our state's revenue projections looked its worst, we worked closely with Chairman England, Chairman Tillery, Speaker Ralston, Lieutenant Governor Duncan, and the House and Senate budget offices to prepare for the worst. However, thanks to the passage of the CARES Act, conservative budgeting, and our measured reopening of Georgia's economy, our rainy-day fund remains strong. Other states are looking at further cuts to employees and essential services. For aid, they are now forced to turn to a dysfunctional and distracted Washington, D.C. But because we acted swiftly and early, the budgets my administration will propose in the coming days include no new cuts to state agencies and departments, no furloughs, and no widespread layoffs of state employees. And, I might add: no new taxes to pay for it all.

This sound fiscal management enabled Georgia to maintain our coveted AAA bond rating, and we find ourselves in a position that many other states should envy as economic experts point to Georgia's ability to weather the economic fallout from COVID-19 as better than most. But now, as we begin a new legislative session, our state

still faces headwinds due to uncertainty in the national and global markets, but it is our job to till the earth, pass budgets that put hardworking Georgians first, and get ready for planting.

Continuing to invest in soil ready to grow Georgia's economy means we have to stay laser-focused on promoting development in all 159 counties – not just our capital city. This has been a top priority of mine since the campaign trail and for many under this Gold Dome. We've delivered on those promises by championing pro-growth legislation for rural Georgia and establishing the Rural Strike Team to bring local developers, elected officials, and industry leaders together to bring projects of regional significance to communities looking to grow, but this is no time to let up. We know that we can land major investments and job creation in rural communities throughout Georgia, but we also know that will not happen if we don't invest heavily in the infrastructure and resources necessary to encourage that growth.

Many of the economic, medical, and other challenges that are facing rural Georgia cannot be fixed with a top-down, one-size-fits-all approach. These issues are best addressed through targeted, innovative, public-private solutions that meet the needs of specific communities not just today or tomorrow, but five, 10, or 25 years down the road. That's why I have included in my budget nearly \$40 million to establish a Rural Innovation Fund to provide a readily available pool of resources that empowers rural Georgia businesses and entrepreneurs to get started, expand, and thrive.

This pandemic highlighted many challenges for communities outside of metro Atlanta, but maybe none more-so than the critical need for high-speed internet access for better health care and educational outcomes, for job opportunities, and something as simple as keeping in touch with loved ones. That is why I'm proud to announce that we're including \$20 million for this fiscal year and \$10 million per year moving forward to boost access to rural broadband grants so local leaders can continue a growing and vital partnership with the private sector and quickly improve internet access for the people of rural Georgia.

In a year where doctors, nurses, medical staff, public health workers, and other health care professionals have shown themselves to be the best of Georgia and the best of America, there is no question that we must direct every resource available to the expansion of health care access in Georgia to our most vulnerable, to the families who have seen their income cut, and to hardworking Georgians trying their best to make ends meet. We've made great strides toward this goal already, passing and signing over 50 health care bills in the last two years to expand access, spur innovation, and cut costs for better coverage, including the Patients First Act. Georgia has one of the highest uninsured rates in the country, and many who are insured are struggling to pay for care. In the midst of a pandemic, that is, quite honestly, unacceptable. More action is needed. That is why my budget proposal for the coming Fiscal Year includes \$76 million to implement Georgia Pathways and Access to make health care accessible for the first time to thousands and affordable for millions more by scaling back dependence on the failed promises of healthcare.gov, giving low-income Georgians a hand up, and increasing competition in the private sector to drive down costs.

We'll also make use of state resources to shore up Georgia's health care programs, with \$329 million for Medicaid and PeachCare to fund projected costs in the coming year. When it comes to meaningful, innovative reforms in health care, Georgia is leading the nation. We are putting our money where it truly matters. To plant the seeds that will grow in our state for years to come, we must add important nutrients and strengthen vital, life-saving programs and invest our resources in keeping Georgia healthy and prosperous for generations to come.

Our oldest daughter, Jarrett, is in school at the University of Georgia to become a teacher. Earlier this week, she actually started her student teaching assignment. Marty, her sisters, and I are so proud that she has chosen this career path, and her passion for educating has only strengthened my commitment to the teachers of our state.

The state was proactive and aggressive in easing the overwhelming challenges that faced teachers and administrators last year, including allocating \$30 million to help ensure student connectivity, slashing the requirements on testing, allocating \$19 million to support childcare for working parents, and providing over 8.3 million units of PPE to school systems across our state. But the daunting task of teaching Georgia's next generation in the midst of COVID-19 has been anything but easy. So many educators went the extra mile to help the children in their classroom who don't have the best home life, or maybe it was to do whatever it took to make sure their kids had meals to last them through the day. In a day and age where so much is thrown at those investing in our children on the front lines, the additional burdens of remote learning, social distancing, wearing a mask, adapting to the new normal honestly made educating overwhelming.

But the great men and women running Georgia's schools didn't miss a beat. From principals, teachers, custodians, bus drivers and support staff on down, their actions have inspired us all. And today, I'm proud to announce that, working closely with State School Superintendent Richard Woods, the state will provide additional support to school system re-opening efforts, equating to a one-time supplement of \$1,000 per teacher and other employees. Richard Woods and his team have been tireless champions for our schools, teachers, and students even before the pandemic, and I appreciate his friendship and leadership. At this time, I'd like to ask those in the Chamber and those joining us via livestream to join me in thanking our educators, administrators, cafeteria workers, and school staff who faced COVID-19 with heart, passion, and perseverance!

But ladies and gentlemen, I believe it is the responsibility of those serving under this Gold Dome to send a clear message that we support our educators, students, and parents. That's why for this year's amended budget, I am recommending \$647 million to restore funding to school systems across our state, fully fund enrollment growth, and hold schools harmless for enrollment reductions – with \$573 million allocated to continue those efforts in next year's budget as well. Those funds mean schools will be able to prioritize our students' safety, ensure quality instruction continues, and stand with our educators in the months and years to come. In a year when other states may face no other option but to slash education dollars, furlough teachers, and cut back on

essential student programs, Georgia is restoring funding to schools, backing our teachers, and launching new initiatives to keep kids enrolled.

Like many families, our three daughters have had to get used to distance learning. Having seen this firsthand as a dad, I think I speak for parents, students, and teachers when I say that having class through a computer screen is leaving too many kids behind. Experts in education and pediatrics have been sounding the alarm for months, and I believe the toll the pandemic is taking on the next generation is reaching a crisis point. These challenges are most concerning for our special-needs children whose educational achievement, personal development, and emotional wellbeing have been severely impacted. To prioritize assistance to these at-risk students and families, my office will be working with the Department of Education to set aside \$10 million in Governor's Emergency Education Relief funds to reimburse expenses parents and guardians have incurred while providing a quality education to their loved ones during COVID-19. Pandemic or not, it is my commitment that we will make every resource available to give each student the opportunity to succeed.

As many of you have read in news reports over the last few months, COVID-19 has also had a negative impact on enrollment in some of our colleges and universities. The institutions hit the hardest have often been those serving minority students. With an additional \$5 million, a pilot program through the University System of Georgia can keep up to 10,000 juniors and seniors with unmet financial obligations enrolled in college. These hardworking Georgians have nearly crossed the finish line of their higher education journey, and I believe the least we can do is ensure financial hardship at the hands of COVID-19 does not stand in the way of achieving their dreams. The future wellbeing of our state and any harvest we hope to enjoy in the years to come will be determined by our shared commitment to education – to our students, parents, teachers, and school staff. As your 83rd governor, that commitment will never waiver.

In addition to the pandemic, our country faced another crisis throughout the summer and early fall of 2020. In the tragic deaths of George Floyd and Ahmaud Arbery, the entire nation witnessed injustice with our own eyes. I was proud to support the peaceful protests that drew the world's attention to these terrible acts, and those voices demanded change to protect the lives of every Georgian regardless of race, creed, or political preference. In a bipartisan way, leaders under this Gold Dome stood side by side and answered the call. Together, we passed meaningful hate crimes legislation that reaffirmed Georgia's commitment to be a welcoming state that values the life of each and every one of its citizens. I'd like to thank Speaker Ralston, Lieutenant Governor Duncan, Dean Smyre, Chairman Efration, Senator Cowsert, Senator Harold Jones, and others for their work on this important issue. Oftentimes, the best of what is accomplished in this building is achieved when we put politics aside and simply do what is right. When I signed HB 426 into law last year, I called it a "sign of progress" and "a milestone worth applauding," but we know – thanks to the example set for all of us by titans like C.T Vivian and John Lewis – that our work is far from finished.

On May 5th, 2020, a viral video shocked the world. The horrific killing of Ahmaud Arbery shook a Georgia community to its very core. We all felt anger, disbelief, and a

deep sorrow, but none more than Ahmaud's family and loved ones. Ahmaud was the victim of a vigilante-style of violence that has no place in our state. The deranged behavior that led to this tragedy was excused away because of an antiquated law that is ripe for abuse and enables sinister, evil motives. That's why my administration plans to introduce significant reforms to our state's citizen's arrest statute, and working with legislative leaders and members of both parties, I believe that we can take another step toward a better, safer, and more just future for our state. We can again send a clear message: Georgia is a state that protects all of its people and fights injustice wherever it is found.

Peaceful demonstrations across our state in honor of Ahmaud, George Floyd, and others were made possible by our dedicated men and women in law enforcement. They worked long hours to protect protestors and to ensure, if anyone had a different motive involving violence, that our communities and streets remained safe. Unfortunately, many of our law enforcement personnel were faced with events that turned destructive throughout the summer months of 2020. I don't believe it's ever been more dangerous or more challenging to wear a law enforcement uniform, but police officers across our state have made us proud. Our state cannot prosper or reap a good harvest without safe communities, safe streets, and safe families. In a day and age where many vilify the men and women who protect our communities each and every day, my message is clear: in Georgia, as long as I'm governor, we back the blue!

Atlanta Police Officer Max Brewer is an 18-year law enforcement veteran and a self-described "Motor Man for Life," and serves in the Atlanta Police Motorcycle Unit. On Saturday, May 30th, he was on duty in the city of Atlanta on the corner of Marietta and Spring Streets, assisting in traffic flow and ensuring demonstrators were kept safe. Around 10:30 that night, Officer Brewer was struck by a drunk maniac on an ATV and suffered serious, life-threatening injuries. Going in and out of consciousness and losing a significant amount of blood, Officer Brewer's need was critical. The call went out for help. The closest available assistance was a Georgia National Guard unit under the leadership of Sergeant First Class Jason Rustin. Sergeant Rustin's team responded quickly to the scene, applying a tourniquet to Officer Brewer's leg and providing life-saving medical treatment at a moment's notice. The actions of Sergeant Rustin and his fellow Georgia Guardsmen literally saved Officer Brewer's life. Once stable, but in critical condition, Max was transported by the Guard unit to Grady where health care heroes continued to save his legs and his life. These two gentlemen, and countless other first responders, answered the call of duty in 2020. Officer Brewer wanted to join us today, but is still receiving treatment for his injuries. Both Sergeant Rustin and Officer Brewer went above and beyond that call, and for that, my family and our state are incredibly grateful. Today, Sergeant Rustin is in the chamber with us. Thank you both!

As state leaders, we spend a lot of time talking about Georgia's status as the best place in the country to live, work, and raise a family. We talk about it because, for so many Georgians, that phrase reflects the reality of how blessed we are to live in the Peach State. Georgia is rich with good soil, but it is our job to weed out the evils which seek to steal that promise from all those who call our state home. It is abundantly clear that no industry embodies that theft of innocence, childhood, and opportunity more than the

sinister enterprise of human trafficking. During our first days in office, we hit the ground running to crack down on traffickers, care for victims, and eradicate modern day slavery in our state. And before I go any further, let me just say this: I don't think any First Lady in the country has done more to end human trafficking than our First Lady, Marty Kemp, and the people of Georgia – and myself included – are lucky to have her.

Marty and the GRACE Commission have done incredible work these first two years. Implementing statewide training programs so Georgians know the signs and how to report instances of human trafficking; passing bi-partisan, meaningful legislation that toughens penalties for those who participate in the sale of a person's innocence for profit; and working with organizations on the front lines in communities throughout Georgia to ensure survivors of human trafficking find their voice and transition back into society, but, as Marty and all those who are fighting tooth and nail to end that industry will tell you, there is far more work to be done.

On the heels of a year that sowed division along party lines more than any in recent history, I am asking the members of the General Assembly to unite once more. Let's build on the great work done by the GRACE Commission by implementing more training programs that equip Georgians to recognize and prevent instances of sex slavery. Let's make common sense reforms to our laws, so survivors seeking a name change to build a new life no longer have to take out an ad in the paper that puts their safety at risk, and let's strengthen our statutes to add a civil remedy that allows victims to seek court action against their traffickers or those who knowingly aided in trafficking.

There is no shortage of issues on policy or politics to debate this year, but taking common sense steps to keep people safe and bring an end to modern day slavery is a goal that each of us can work together to achieve. You see, there is so much more that unites us than divides us. And working together, we can continue taking necessary, bipartisan action to champion the voices of the vulnerable in Georgia; protect our children; implement adoption reforms that make it easier to put them in safe, loving homes; and ultimately, secure the promise of Georgia for generations to come.

As I come before you today, my memories of 2020 will not just be the struggles, the many challenges I spoke about today, the countless tough decisions, or the sleepless nights. Like many of you, I will remember time spent with my family that otherwise would not have been possible. I will remember standing shoulder to shoulder – well, six feet apart – with the best private sector, political, and civic leaders in our state to face a once in a lifetime pandemic. I will remember my travels across the state to visit Georgia companies and workers who proved innovation and hard work are the backbone of our economy and wellbeing as a people. And I will remember the countless sacrifices and hardships faced by the people of our state and how we pulled through, how we weathered the storm, how we emerged resilient and stronger than ever.

The reason you build a house with a strong foundation is not for the good times, not for the sunny days. You do it to weather the storm when times get tough. I spent my summers working on a farm. It's hot. It's hard work, but it's also rewarding. Watching the seeds you planted, grow over the days, weeks, and months – literally enjoying

the fruits of your labor. I know that many in this room, and those watching, are worn out, tired, and burdened. It's a New Year, but it all feels the same. There is no doubt that this "new normal" isn't really normal, and frankly, it's not clear when things will return to business as usual. But my fellow Georgians, we have the opportunity – and responsibility – to make strategic decisions now that will impact generations to come. We have the opportunity to act and to accomplish what we were sent here to do.

In five years, 10 years, or 20 years, we can look back and tell our kids, grandkids, and their kids that we invested in health care, education, and the safety of our communities. We upheld our sworn oath and stood up for what was right, even when it wasn't popular. We prioritized jobs and prosperity in all parts of our state. We championed legislation to make our state a more welcoming place to live, work, and raise a family. We protected the lives – and livelihoods – of what makes Georgia great: our people.

It's time to put our differences aside put 2020 in the rearview. Let's stand together as Georgians and clear the destruction caused by the storms of life. Let's clear away the conspiracy theories and the division. Let's focus on the bountiful harvests to come. Let's find the good soil together and start planting. May God bless you, and may God continue to bless the Great State of Georgia. Thank you!