



2023 State of the State Address

Utah Gov. Spencer J. Cox

Utah State Capitol

House of Representatives Chamber

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Embargoed until 6:50 p.m.

Mr. Speaker, Mr. President, Madame Lt. Governor and to Utah's public servants and my fellow Utahns gathered here tonight: Welcome.

Since 1852, territorial and state governors have been delivering a State of the State message in Utah, but this is the first time that elected officials in the Legislature have been accompanied on the House floor by their children, grandchildren, nieces and nephews and other young family members.

Abby and I are joined this evening by our youngest daughter, Emma Kate. I will warn each of you that she received her Utah driver's license just a few weeks ago. Should any legislator within the sound of my voice tonight choose to run a bill changing the legal driving age to 21, I know a governor very interested in signing that bill. I did promise her I would try to limit the number of dad jokes.

In all seriousness, it is to this group of very special guests — the youth of our great state — that I wish to direct my remarks this evening.

We have much to cover in a short amount of time, and so I'll ask again like I did last year to please hold any applause until the end of the speech, no matter how difficult that may be.

Faith, not fear

I'd like to focus my remarks tonight on one well-worn line in our nation's Declaration of Independence. I hope you are all familiar with this foundational and revolutionary idea: that we are all endowed by our Creator with the unalienable rights of life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness.

In particular, I want to focus on that last right: the pursuit of happiness. You see, it isn't government's role to give you happiness, but it is government's job to protect your right to pursue it.

Unfortunately, researchers from the University of Chicago recently reported that for the first time since the survey began almost 50 years ago, more Americans reported being "not too happy" than "very happy."

Recent polling tells us that more young people than ever before believe that, for the first time in our nation's history, their generation will be worse off than their parents. Many people seem to be accepting it as a fact that any efforts to create a better world are futile, as if some sort of slouching towards mediocrity — or worse — is inevitable.

I know that many of the challenges of our day weigh heavily on your generation.

As hard as it is to believe, your moms and dads and grandparents seated next to you tonight were once young, too. I grew up in the '80s and '90s, and we worried about a lot of things you probably can't relate to:

We were hiding under our desks to practice for the nuclear bombs we were sure Communist Russia was sending our way — as if those desks would have provided any protection. We worried about overpopulation, acid rain, and — it's true — the Great Salt Lake destroying homes and businesses in the floods — yes, floods — of 1983.

We hung out at the 49th Street Galleria and the Delta Center — that's right, the Delta Center — and worried about someone scratching our brand new CD, the world shutting down thanks to Y2K, or accidentally calling long distance when it wasn't a night or a weekend.

But one thing scared us the most was something known as the hole in the ozone layer.

Due to our state's unique geography and demographics, we were told that the consequences of this environmental disaster would be especially dire in Utah. With a population of only 2 million people, one local newspaper reported that more than half of us, an estimated 1.2 million Utahns, would contract a life-changing cancer.¹ Farmers and others who work outdoors were said to be especially at risk with one report warning that even sheep were likely to go blind (which, if you've ever spent much time around sheep, you know would have been hard to detect — right, Rep. Chew?).²

We eventually found out that the culprit of the problem was chlorofluorocarbons, or CFCs, which at the time were found in many products such as aerosol cans — most notably, hairspray. Some people wondered why we had such great hair in the '80s. Well, my friends, we discovered that great hair comes at a great price.

Sometimes I miss those days, and I definitely miss that hair.

If you haven't heard much about the hole in the ozone lately, that's probably because we've been busy fixing it and good news doesn't seem to sell as well as gloom and doom. The world came together with the United States leading the way and our planet is restoring that critical part of our atmosphere.

While these particular issues and many others from my own childhood may not be familiar to each of you, there is a common root in all of them — fear.

A former U.S. president famously called fear the “nameless, unreasoning, unjustified terror which paralyzes needed efforts to convert retreat into advance.”

Oh, and fear destroys happiness.

To every young person today grappling with fear, I want to speak to you. Whether it be fear of finding a good career or a home you can afford to buy. Or fear of a planet in peril, or attacks on

¹ <https://www.deseret.com/1994/6/28/19117095/utah-lies-in-ozone-depletion-risk-zone>

² <https://www.newsweek.com/life-under-ozone-hole-201054>

democracy — at home or abroad, or the effects of inflation. Or fear of any of the other crazy things in our society today.

If there is one message that I could give to you, it is this: The future of our state is not written in the stars. It is for us, the free men and women of Utah, to dictate our destiny.

If I could turn your fears into one thing, it would be faith. I don't mean faith in the religious sense, although I am a proponent of that, too. I mean faith in good things to come. Faith in us and faith in yourselves. Faith in our capacity and commitment to solve today's hard problems together. Faith in a future worth being excited about.

To anyone who believes that the next generation in Utah will be worse off than their parents, my message is simple: not now, not on our watch.

Teachers

Let me begin with the place where you spend most of your day: the classroom. To those in the room tonight who had the terrible once-in-a-century luck of attending school in the middle of a global pandemic, you proudly led Utah as the only state in the nation where middle school math and reading scores did not decrease during COVID-19. You have proven your resilience time and time again despite the unprecedented challenges you've had to face.

And you weren't alone. The data is clear. The largest variable in student outcomes is the quality of the teacher. I have said this many times, and I will say it again: If we ran an experiment with two identical students, and you let me pick the teacher, and I let you pick everything else: the school, the curriculum, the books, the software and electronics, the administration, I will win every time.

And if we want to guarantee that we have the best teachers, we must invest *in* our teachers.

That is why I am asking the Legislature to help me make this the "Year of the Teacher." Not only can we provide at least a 5% increase to the Weighted Pupil Unit, but we can also give every teacher the largest raise in our state's history.

And one more suggestion, if I may. A small "thank you" to your teachers goes a long way. A recent poll shows that nearly every Utah parent approves of their child's local school, with only 2% saying they view them "not at all favorably." But I worry that our teachers haven't felt that love from Utah's silent majority quite like they should. Teaching was once a destination profession and it can be again. Let's make Utah the state where the very best teachers want to live and work with our kids.

Housing

But even having the best teachers won't matter much if young people can't find an affordable place to live. In Utah, we want nothing more than for our kids and grandkids to live near us, but not necessarily with us.

Fortunately, this is a problem that we can solve.

I took an economics class when I was your age, and the one thing I remember is that when demand exceeds supply, prices go up. It really is that simple. If we want less expensive housing, we simply need more of it. And not just deeply affordable or low-income housing — although we certainly need that, too — but more of everything.

Sadly, we know that government decisions are one of the major drivers in the price of a home. Not just taxes and fees, but every requirement placed on a builder — including the time it takes to make those decisions — increases the cost of a home.

Tonight, I'm calling on us to change it. We can build more and do it in a way that does not diminish the quality of life. Smart density, in the right places, paired with improved infrastructure from wise investments, and a renewed emphasis on single-family starter homes — remember those? — will make certain that Utah does not become like California and that future generations will be able to call this state home.

That's why I am excited to work with Niko Fillmore's dad and Ruthie Whyte's dad, the League of Cities and Towns and other stakeholders on significant legislation to ensure that we increase supply and reduce the cost of housing.

Water

Of course, even good jobs and good homes won't mean much if we are not good stewards of this beautiful place we get to call home. And any discussion of stewardship in a desert climate must start with water.

We find ourselves in the greatest drought in the western United States in over 1,200 years. Earlier this month, a report predicted that in just five short years the Great Salt Lake will completely disappear. Let me be absolutely clear. We are not going to let that happen.

Last year, your parents and grandparents in the Legislature passed 12 major water conservation bills and \$500 million in new funding. And even more important, the people of Utah responded by saving billions of gallons of water in our time of need. I want to thank Ella Mauchley's grandpa and Zach Wilson's dad for their dedicated efforts on water legislation.

Now, you have heard me ask our fellow Utahns to unite in faith and prayer in asking God to help deliver us from drought. I have been mocked both at home and abroad by clever comedians and pundits in the media. But, as a man of faith, I make no excuses for my beliefs. I believe there is real power in people of all different faiths and backgrounds uniting together and pleading for help from a higher authority than our own.

I am grateful — and thank God every night — for the impressive amounts of snow we have received so far this season. Miraculously, the Great Salt Lake has already risen more than it did all last year!

A few months ago, before the first big storm, I asked my team to include \$5 million in my budget proposal for flood mitigation. I didn't want to be the person to show up for a prayer meeting without my umbrella. It's too soon to know, but I sincerely hope we need that money.

So, whether you believe in God or karma or the whale at 9th and 9th, I ask again that we join together to ask for relief from this drought, all while "knowing that here on earth God's work must truly be our own."

You see, I believe that God *CAN* fill the lake. But if not, then we must.

We have to maintain a continued focus on water conservation and agriculture optimization. To that end, I am proposing another \$500 million in water conservation investment in addition to new policy changes that will reduce our per capita use.

And, if I might ask, please look beyond those that would demonize our farmers. Our farmers and ranchers are the backbone of our nation and state. They do some of the most difficult work imaginable and deserve our respect. I promise they will be a huge part of the solution, just like you and me. Let's continue to help them modernize their operations so that we can both save water and increase food production.

Social media

When it comes to our well being as a state, one of the biggest challenges facing young people is the proliferation and danger of social media. The research is now proving what most of us instinctively already know — social media and focus-destroying apps are negatively affecting the mental health of us all, but especially our youth, in profound and debilitating ways.

Beginning in 2009, mental health issues among students exploded. Emergency room visits for self-harm by young people between the ages of 10-19 skyrocketed. For young women, the number more than doubled — and that was before the pandemic.

If these types of numbers were associated with any other disease, we would be focusing every resource and effort to fix what is broken. But somehow because it is technology related, we have done almost nothing as a country.

This is unacceptable. In Utah, we're done waiting for someone else to solve the problem. To the social media companies who have been reckless in protecting our youth, Utah parents are putting you on notice. If you insist on fighting us, be assured that we are more than ready for a fight and we will win. Or you can join us and be part of the solution.

With this in mind, I am pleased to announce that we are working closely with Tanner Teuscher's dad, Kapri Cullimore's dad and yes, even Landon McKell's dad on legislation that will prevent social media companies from collecting data from our kids, limit the use of cell phones in the classroom, and empower parents to reduce this toxic technology in our homes.

Family

And speaking of our homes, it's been said that "good homes are still the best source of good humans," and I agree. Getting upstream of our biggest social issues and costs, inevitably starts with stronger families.

As you may remember, last year from this podium I proposed the creation of a new Office of Families. I am pleased to report back that the Office of Families is now operational with my talented, former opponent in the 2020 governor's race, Aimee Winder Newton, leading the charge.

In Utah, we haven't forgotten the simple truth that when families win, we all win — economically as well as socially.

There is no guesswork here. The data shows that married, family-connected Utahns earn more, produce more, save more, and contribute more than their counterparts. And young people who get at least a high school degree, get a job, marry and have kids — in that order — are far less likely to experience poverty than those who don't.

And yet, not every home is perfect. White picket fences are nice, but not always the norm. My administration's singular focus will be on the simple principle that, no matter the situation, every Utah child deserves a home filled with love and support. And I do mean every child.

Thanks to the leadership of my best friend and your first lady, Abby Cox, Utah is taking on a bold new goal. Over the coming weeks, you will hear the details of a significant plan to support current foster families and to recruit new families to open their homes and their hearts to Utah's most vulnerable children. We believe that with your help, Utah can be the first state in the nation to have no children waiting for a foster family.

Imagine that. Instead of children waiting for families, Utah will have families waiting for children — and a list of thousands of Utahns who will help those families with child care, meals, car rides and anything else they need to succeed.

And if Utah truly believes in supporting life, we must always show our commitment with more than words. That's why I am also proposing this session a first-of-its-kind tax credit for all children — the born and the unborn. We must also expand postpartum Medicaid coverage to 12 months.

And we have to do more to support victims of domestic violence and to reduce this insidious evil. I'm grateful to Maggie Hulse's aunt, my tenacious Lt. Governor, for her tireless work in this space. I also want to thank the parents of Benji Pierucci, London Weiler, Elyssa Ivory Anderson, Cio Cordero, and Sara Lisonbee for their indispensable work to prevent domestic violence. Please join me in supporting their legislation this year.

Taxes

One of the most important ways we can support your families, especially during difficult economic times, is to return more of your tax dollars.

Over the past two years we've already had a record \$300 million tax cut. We have more money in savings than ever before. We are one of the few states with a AAA bond rating and consistently recognized among the best managed and fiscally responsible states. And, thanks to the people of our great state, we have the best economy in the country, which means we can do even more.

My philosophy is simple. I believe that Utah families can spend this surplus better than we can. And so I am proposing an historic \$1 billion in tax relief for Utah families. While almost all of the levers of inflation are outside our state's control, we can and must enable Utahns to keep more of their hard-earned dollars to combat the rising cost of living.

Quality of life

We can do all of these things while finding more ways to simply serve Utahns and make their quality of life better:

With your help, we can begin to implement a bold vision to build a statewide network of trails for Utahns of all ages and abilities.

We can do more to support skills-based learning for those who don't choose to pursue a college degree and freeze tuition costs for those who do.

We can fund more mental health resources and crisis interventions in our communities.

We can modernize our IT infrastructure to improve the service we provide our citizens.

And may we always remember that sometimes the best bill is one that doesn't pass at all.

I am confident that we will accomplish all of these objectives and many more during this legislative session if those of us in elected positions keep our eye single to our children and grandchildren.

Conclusion

Now, before we conclude, I want to return to that "pursuit of happiness" thing. I hope you're not surprised to learn that experts have determined that happiness can't be found chasing shiny objects like money, power, pleasure, and fame.

Instead, real happiness comes from four simple but profound pillars: faith, family, friends and work that serves others. It comes from finding real meaning in life, knowing why you are here and what you would die for³.

There are so many of you who already understand this, but let me conclude tonight with just two brief examples.

A young man was working his evening shift at a soda shop when a customer's credit card was declined. Feeling an almost unexpected desire to help, he decided to pay for the large drink order with his own money — his entire wages for that shift — ensuring that he basically worked for free that night.

Well, his dad was understandably proud and shared his son's kind act with a few others. Soon, Good Samaritans all over the state began donating to this young man — almost \$1,000 in all — because that's what we do in Utah.

Now, it would be a great story if it ended there, but it didn't. You see, this young man took that \$1,000 and used it to buy gifts on an angel tree for kids in need. That's why I have faith in our state's future: because young people like Phin Biesinger, who is here tonight, will make it so.

Another young man in our state, just 25 years of age, recently achieved his lifelong dream of following in his father's footsteps and becoming a law enforcement officer. And while serving and protecting the people of Provo would be more than enough giving back for most people, he decided he could give even more.

Last Saturday, he was elected as the youngest member of the Utah House of Representatives. Welcome Rep. Clancy. Your dad would be proud.

To the older people in this room, remember that Utah is the youngest state in the nation and I think we'd benefit from, in a sense, acting our age.

For we must never forget the qualities of youth: "Not a time of life ... but a state of mind, a temper of the will, a quality of imagination, a predominance of courage over timidity." We would all be better off being curious like the young people around us. Like my grandma who, at age 90, decided she wanted to learn how to paint. She painted this for me as a reminder of home. Today is her 94th birthday and I want to be young like her.

Legislative friends, remember that our time in these positions is often brief. Rather than spreading fear, let's build more and tear down less. Let's renew again our determination to focus on doing the big things, the hard things that matter. Let's "make no little plans. [For] they have no magic to stir men's blood and probably will not themselves be realized."

And, finally, to the young people who have joined us: I have an important and heartfelt request to make of you.

³<https://www.deseret.com/2022/3/20/22983593/perspective-harvard-scholar-arthur-brooks-on-the-secrets-to-happiness-family-faith>

I, and your loved ones and the elected officials seated around you, are committed to doing our part to defend and protect your God-given right to freely pursue happiness.

But tonight, I am asking you — begging you — to embrace that pursuit. Unlike any generation before you.

While we can protect your right to pursue happiness, we can't do the pursuing for you, even if we wanted to. Your challenges are different from the ones we faced, but I believe that each of you is uniquely prepared to face these challenges.

So stand up a little straighter and feel free to smile a little bigger. We can do this.

In such a pursuit, I am confident that you will find happiness that is not some light or fleeting thing. You will find deep and lasting happiness that flows not just from freedom itself, but in rising to make good on your responsibilities. From meeting your rendezvous with destiny head on, as the baton of leadership in this state inevitably passes to you.

I truly believe that there has never been a better time in the history of the world to be alive than right now. And there has never been a better place to live than right here, in Utah.

Your future is brighter than ever because we have the power within us to make it so. I trust the people sitting next to you — and more importantly — I trust you.

I trust that you will turn from the fears that would paralyze and that you will keep the faith. I trust that you will show the world what it looks like to aggressively pursue real happiness in our modern world. I trust the State of our State — which has never been stronger than it is today — will one day reach even greater heights in your capable hands.

You've got this.

May God bless the great state of Utah and the young people that make it great.

Thank you.