

The Office of Governor Ned Lamont

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Speeches

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Governor Lamont's 2022 State of the State Address

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2022 State of the State Address
Governor Ned Lamont
State Capitol, Hall of the House of Representatives
February 9, 2022

Mr. President, Mr. Speaker, Senator Kelly, Representative Candelora, members of the General Assembly, Lt. Governor Susan Bysiewicz, my fellow state officials, honored guests, and the people of the great State of Connecticut.

It is very nice to see so many of you back in the flesh! Three years ago today, I stood before you as a new governor. Today, the state of the state is better off than it was three years ago, but we still have a long way to go.

Three years ago, we were standing at the edge of a fiscal cliff, facing a \$3.7 billion budget deficit, and today we are deciding what taxes to cut or school programs to grow, thanks to our third consecutive year of budget surpluses.

For decades, governor after governor has increased taxes and fees; in the land of steady habits, it seemed inevitable. But, it was a habit I was hell-bent on breaking.

For three years, we've held the line against broad-based tax increases. This year, my budget cuts taxes for working and middle-class families. We're also holding down the costs of healthcare, childcare, and college tuition, making Connecticut more affordable for everyone.

Outside observers were accustomed to downgrading our ratings and even the outgoing budget director said Connecticut was in a chronic fiscal crisis.

Over the last three years, our budgets have been balanced and on time, resulting in rating upgrades that have caught the attention of businesses and families ready to move to Connecticut.

Thanks, in part, to our bipartisan efforts, we have begun to change the narrative from “fiscal crisis” to “fiscal turnaround.” Unlike Washington, we did it together. That is the Connecticut difference!

And rather than borrowing from the future, we are investing in the future!

For years, we’ve fretted about our outstanding pension obligations. Our budgets were the first in history to pay down billions of dollars against pension debt. And we’re delivering strong double-digit investment returns that continue to reduce our unfunded pension liability.

So how does that affect you? A) Hundreds of millions of dollars of annual budget savings for years to come, and B) hundreds of thousands of retirees who can sleep easier knowing that our pension promises of the past will be kept.

And, in the event of a recession, we have fully funded the budget reserve, a.k.a. the rainy day fund, which means Connecticut will not be forced to cut services or raise taxes. We can all sleep easier!

We’re better off for getting our fiscal house in order. We’re investing in our kids and giving them better opportunities at the starting line of life. We’re investing in teachers, counselors, and after-school programs to help our kids get back in the game after a long Covid winter.

Speaking of teachers, how about one big shout out for the greatest educators in the nation! Connecticut’s teachers showed up every day for our schools – recognizing the importance of in-person schooling and keeping our schools open when many others in the region did not – thank you!

For the first time in my life, we have tens of thousands of great jobs ready to be filled. They’re in need of trained applicants. This is a once in a generation chance to give all our kids, regardless of background, the opportunity of a lifetime!

Our budget invests ten times more money than ever before in workforce development – with a hyper focus on trade schools, apprentice programs, and tuition-free certificate programs where students of all ages can earn an industry-recognized credential in half the time, with a full-time job all but guaranteed.

This investment will train over 10,000 students and job seekers this year in courses designed by businesses around the skills that they need.

This isn’t just about providing people with credentials, this is about changing people’s lives.

A stay-at-home mom whose husband lost his job earned her pharmacy tech certificate in three months and now works at Yale New Haven Hospital.

A man who was homeless was provided housing, transportation, a laptop, and training. He’s now a user support specialist for a large tech company.

These are just two examples of opportunities that completely change the course of someone’s life.

We are working with our partners in the trade unions to develop programs for the next generation of laser welders and pipefitters. Building on the amazing partnership between Hartford Hospital and Quinnipiac University, we are also ramping up our next generation of healthcare workers.

I want students and trainees to take a job in Connecticut, and I want Connecticut employers to hire from Connecticut first! To encourage that, we’re expanding a tax credit for small businesses that help repay their employees’ student loans. More reasons for your business to hire in Connecticut, and for graduates to stay in Connecticut – that’s the Connecticut difference.

We are training the workforce to get our state moving again, and these 21st century jobs require a 21st century transportation system.

The president's infrastructure bill, with full backing from our congressional delegation and bipartisan support in the U.S. Senate, will pump more than a billion dollars a year into Connecticut, which means you won't recognize this state five years from now.

Union Station in New Haven will be our central transportation hub. That starts this year with express trains that'll cut your roundtrip commute to New York by about an hour.

The promise of two-way rail service between Bridgeport and Waterbury is already resulting in hundreds of new apartments from Shelton to Beacon Falls, bringing the Valley back in all its glory. Don't forget the recently announced major distribution facility with over 1000 good-paying jobs on the Waterbury/Naugatuck line.

Clean wind energy is our renewable future. It will revitalize our ports. And the infrastructure money will further upgrade our seaports and airports.

Late last year, I stood at Tweed Airport to watch the first flight of a new airline that's made Connecticut its east coast hub. Bradley Airport is offering more nonstop destinations than before the pandemic and is about to cut the ribbon on a new state-of-the-art transportation center.

We are making the biggest investments in our roads and bridges, in generations, certainly since Ike – and I like Ike – allowing us to speed up our commutes, decongest our choke points, strengthen our Eisenhower-era bridges, and give you another reason to call Connecticut home.

Businesses are taking a second look at Connecticut, with 28 major employers having recently relocated their headquarters to the state or expanded their footprint here. That's because we have lower taxes than many of our neighbors, more affordable housing, great schools that are open and safe, and a highly educated workforce.

Infrastructure in the 21st century isn't only the concrete and steel used to connect Old Lyme to Old Saybrook, it is about the fiber-optic cable and Wi-Fi used to connect Connecticut to the rest of the world.

The infrastructure funding will also extend broadband to those rural and urban areas cut off by the digital divide. We already added free Wi-Fi to many town greens, schools, and libraries so you can do everything from Brooklyn, Connecticut that you can from Brooklyn, New York.

Telehealth, e-learning, and telecommuting are not just nice to have – they are a 2022 necessity. This is as much about fairness and equality as it is convenience and efficiency.

Very recently, we have been hit by some of the most severe storms in our history. Hurricane Isaias knocked out power, and Hurricanes Ida and Henri dropped torrential rain bombs causing historic flooding.

Our infrastructure investments allow us to make a down payment on flood control, moving our electric substations out of harm's way.

We are making a big investment in hardening our electric grid against future threats – be it storms or cyber-attacks. A stitch in time saves nine!

Our electric grid will soon be carbon free, and our transportation system is soon to follow. Our budget provides for hundreds of electric charging stations as our state transitions to an all-electric fleet.

We are beginning our conversion to all-electric school buses and city buses, reducing air pollution in some of our most distressed communities, where there is a disproportionately higher rate of asthma. That's what we mean by environmental justice.

We are doubling down on our town squares and our urban centers, featuring transportation hubs, great public schools, and affordable housing so you can afford to live where you work and rely on public transit instead of a car.

Working alongside members of the General Assembly, including my friends in the Black and Puerto Rican Caucus, we are making historic investments in our towns and cities. That's resulted in one of the first reductions in property tax rates in decades, including for example a twenty percent rate reduction in Bridgeport.

Our working families and middle-class households deserve a break, especially from Connecticut's most regressive tax.

Property taxes relentlessly come due in good times and bad, and they hit the middle-class especially hard. This year I'm proposing meaningful property tax reform worth nearly \$300 million dollars.

The current property tax credit is too limited, so we're going to double the number of families who can claim it.

We're also going cut taxes on automobiles so no one is struggling to pay more for a Honda in Hartford than a Hummer in Harwinton. That's going to reduce car tax bills in more than 100 towns, often by hundreds of dollars per car!

We're also going to eliminate the income tax on pension and 401K income for most households. Stay in Connecticut and watch your grandkids grow up in your living room rather than waving to them from a Zoom room in Delray, Florida.

We promised three years ago that to attract a 21st century workforce, we needed a 21st century workplace that better meets the needs of the modern family. I always believed that working families deserved a raise. After two years of Covid I believe we all have a better appreciation of how essential our essential workers are.

Thanks to most of you, Connecticut is well on its way to a \$15 minimum wage, which will continue to grow with inflation, plus an additional tax cut for working families worth up to \$1,200 a year.

Now more than ever, we understand the importance of being able to securely step away from the job you need, to care for the ones you love. After years of trying, we passed one of the most ambitious paid family and medical leave programs in the country. I know what that new security means to parents and kids.

And as a guy who comes from small business, I have a real appreciation for how important it is to keep a great employee on the job, especially in this competitive environment. Paid family and medical leave levels the playing field, allowing small businesses to provide the same level of support as the big guys do.

You get a lot of grief if you are a dollar short and a day late, let's give a shout out to Andrea Barton Reeves and her amazing team who delivered paid family medical leave on time and under budget!

Stay in Connecticut or move to Connecticut! We are the most family-friendly state in the country. After two years of Covid, too many women have dropped out of the workforce. We need you back!

The jobs are there and we are doing more than ever before to help you keep working and raise your family. Connecticut kept quality childcare centers open and affordable. Beth Bye, take a bow! Childcare workers, take another! Thanks for all you do.

Our budget is providing tens of millions of dollars to help the next generation of entrepreneurs start their own business, with a special emphasis on distressed communities.

We recently moved up 11 places in CNBC's ranking of the Top States for Business. Maybe that's why in 2021 alone, business registrations increased four-fold – totaling 47,584 new businesses launched in Connecticut!

They used to say the best social program is a job. Even better than that is a good-paying job at a business that you helped start, in the community where you live, hiring and serving your neighbors! That is the future for our families, not to mention reinventing our local communities.

Health insurance should not be a deterrent for those young entrepreneurs with a dollar and a dream.

Last year our budget created Covered Connecticut to provide nearly 40,000 more people no-cost healthcare through Access Health, and we are also offering big savings in healthcare for everyone. Go to [AccessHealthCT.com \(https://accesshealthct.com/\)](https://accesshealthct.com/), the number one health exchange website in the country. Thank you to Director James Michel and Chairman Charlie Klippel.

Subsidies help, but we must address the underlying cost of healthcare. That's what former Comptroller Kevin Lembo reminded us. That's why I'm proposing legislation to make prices more transparent, safely re-import lower-cost prescription drugs from Canada, and cap run-away prices on prescription drugs here at home.

Three in ten Americans report cutting pills in half, skipping doses, or swapping out drugs to save money – that stops now.

Two years ago, we were in the early innings of Covid when we launched the Reopening Committee, led by medical, business and labor leaders alike, as we reopened our state safely without looking back.

Our construction sites and manufacturing facilities never closed, neither did our parks or beaches, our restaurants and stores reopened quickly, our essential workers were heroic in continuing to provide daycare, healthcare, food, and freight.

Together, we decided on tax cuts for working families, increases in nursing and group home rates, compensation for essential workers who contracted COVID, and \$20 million in hazard pay bonuses for essential workers in state government.

I'm proposing to nearly double that hazard pay budget. I hope employers in the private sector follow our lead in providing hazard pay bonuses to our amazing frontline workers.

I appreciate the authority you have granted me to keep the state safe during the pandemic. But I am most appreciative of each and every one of the residents who stepped up and did the right thing – for themselves, their families and their communities. We got hit hard and hit early, but in each successive wave we did better and better.

A very special shout out to outgoing COO, Josh Geballe, who helped lead our effort from dawn to dusk. He deserves a break, but believe me, he isn't going far.

Now two years later, we have the tools and the experience to keep ourselves safe. We're one of the best vaccinated in the country and recently distributed millions of masks and rapid tests, nearly overnight.

Omicron was a curve ball, but our hospitals stayed above water and vaccines lessened the severity of the virus. I have asked you, the legislature, to weigh in on the last few executive orders, which allow us to move quickly in the event of another Covid variant.

Before you do, working with my neighboring governors, I believe it's time to end the statewide school mask mandate and enable each and every board of education to decide what is best for their schools.

From a public health perspective, you have earned this freedom and you can do that safely. Our Department of Public Health will provide clear guidance. We know how to live safely in a post pandemic, but never completely Covid-free, world.

Public safety is just as important as public health. While Connecticut remains one of the safest states in the country, certain crimes are up.

Many of the car thefts and other street crimes are a symptom of a population reeling after two years of Covid-hell. Free summer learning camps and clinics, and in-person schools relieved some of the stress for a lot of kids.

But for others, long COVID is playing out in a national trend of fentanyl poisoning as well as vandalism in our schools. Hate crimes have been spray painted on synagogue walls. Suicide and domestic abuse have brought violence into the home. Here and across the country, gun sales and shootings are on the rise.

Last May, I was at a ball field in Bridgeport to show my support for young baseball players who the day before were forced to hit the ground when shots rang out nearby - thankfully no one was injured. Two teams of kids lay belly down on a field, not sure when it was safe to get up.

I was there because the community chose to rally the next day. They understood what the sound of gun fire, while playing an innocent game of baseball, could do to the psyche of these kids, especially if it went unanswered.

We have more damn guns on the streets than ever before. Get these illegal guns out of our communities – let our kids be kids!

Our budget calls on James Rovella, our commissioner of public safety to create a special illegal gun unit, working with our neighboring states, to track down those big gun traffickers.

You can't be tough on crime if you are weak on guns!

And I want more cops on the beat. Our ten largest cities and towns alone are training and hiring nearly 400 new cops in the next two years. We've made sure they have the budget to do it.

As I have done with our state police, they are adding more female recruits and creating a more diverse police force. Community policing that is of, by, and for the communities they serve.

Those preventive measures only work if the Judicial Branch continues to speed up criminal cases so people who pose a risk to the community and themselves are kept off the streets. Please vote early on the outstanding new judges I'm nominating and support the funding I have proposed for new prosecutors and public defenders.

As important as responding to crime is preventing violence before it happens. That's another reason we are investing hundreds of millions of dollars in education, workforce development, and mental health.

It's not just summer programs and keeping schools open during non-school hours. Many of our schools have also added counselors, since so many of these kids need a shoulder to lean on.

We gave many of our high schools the opportunity to vote on how to spend \$20,000 of rescue funding. At Enfield High School, when asked how they would invest that money, the student council said their top priority was more confidential counseling. These are high school kids. More confidential counseling. Think about that for a moment.

Our budget doubles down on community solutions. Project Longevity in New Haven, Bridgeport, and Hartford has received more funding to help reduce violent crime. In Waterbury, the Police Athletic League is letting more police and kids to get to know one another.

These programs give the kids a friend, some hope, and a purpose. That's the best anti-crime strategy of all.

At the end of the day, what matters most in all of this is trust – trust in your law enforcement, trust in the courts and trust in your government.

I will hold anyone accountable who breaches that trust, starting in my administration. I have zero tolerance for any ethical malfeasance. We hold ourselves to the highest standards. If you see something, say something, and if you don't get the response you deserve, give me a call.

Over the last three years, we were faced with unprecedented challenges. The types of challenges where people turned to their government for leadership, for answers, for guidance. They did so because their lives and the lives of their loved ones depended on it – in ways not seen since the world wars or the great depression. Connecticut stepped up – meeting its moment in history when it mattered the most.

I am immensely proud of the state agencies, who for many months worked 24/7 at the Emergency Operations Center as the state responded to the pandemic.

I'm also proud of the first responders, doctors, nurses, teachers, non-for-profits, childcare providers, and other essential workers who despite the risk to their own health and safety, put their communities ahead of themselves. Retired teachers and nurses coming out of retirement to pitch in and cover for their sick colleagues. That, my friends, is the Connecticut difference.

Your vote makes a difference. Four years ago, hundreds of voters in New Haven waited for hours in the pouring rain, clutching a soaked ballot in order to cast their vote. The last two elections, voters turned out in force because they could vote absentee.

Following the lead of Secretary of the State Merrill, let's make easier absentee balloting a reality not just during a pandemic. Make it easier for voters to vote. I like people knowing they have a stake in the election, that their vote makes a difference.

Three years ago, I said I wouldn't let the state be defined by a constant fiscal crisis. While there is much more work to do, over the past three years we have turned that fiscal crisis into a Connecticut comeback.

Budget deficits have become record-breaking surpluses, our budget reserve fund is now overflowing, and we are able to pay down our pensions, borrow more money at less cost – and return millions of dollars to middle-class families for the first time in a generation.

Just as I wouldn't let the state be defined by a chronic fiscal crisis, I will not allow it to be defined by a Covid crisis. Despite the intense headwinds of a global pandemic, we have made significant progress with more jobs created, more families moving into our state, and more opportunity for all.

That's the Connecticut difference, and we're going to keep making it every day.

May God bless each and every one of you and the great State of Connecticut.