



2019

# State of the State

Governor Gretchen Whitmer

## Michigan: The Home for Opportunity

February 12, 2019

### Acknowledgments

Lieutenant Governor Gilchrist; Speaker Chatfield; House Democratic Leader Greig; Senate Majority Leader Shirkey; Senate Democratic Leader Ananich; members of the cabinet; my daughters, Sherry and Sydney; my husband, Marc; and my fellow Michiganders: Good evening.

I am grateful for the opportunity to speak tonight about the growing challenges we face in Michigan, the steps we are going to take to address them, and my priorities for the next year and beyond.

As you can imagine, over the past few weeks, I've gotten a lot of unsolicited input about what I should say tonight, and what I should focus on as governor. Someone even suggested, after the recent record-breaking cold, that I should, quote, "fix the damn weather."

I guess the cat's out of the bag, now you know my campaign slogan for 2022.

Joking aside, I want to thank all of the dedicated public servants who showed up for work in dangerous conditions to keep the rest of us safe.

I also want to express my deepest gratitude to the Michiganders who keep us safe every day in the Armed Services, and all of the veterans who have risked their lives to serve the United States of America.

One of those veterans — and one of Michigan's greatest leaders — was Congressman John Dingell, who passed away last week at the age of 92.

From his courageous service in World War II to his model leadership over 59 years in the U.S. House of Representatives, Congressman Dingell devoted his life to serving the people of Michigan. He will forever be remembered as "The Dean" of Congress – not simply for the length of his service, but for his crucial role in passing some of the most monumental laws of the past century. He was the epitome of what I think we in Michigan know: YOU DON'T HAVE TO BE MEAN TO BE STRONG. And those who live by this creed can get things done.

I extend my deepest and most heartfelt condolences to Congresswoman Debbie Dingell and the entire Dingell family for their loss. We are a grateful nation and a proud state.

I want to welcome the public servants who are either new to state government or who are in new roles.

Like Secretary of State Jocelyn Benson, Attorney General Dana Nessel, and all of the dedicated members of my cabinet – which by the way – is the most diverse cabinet in Michigan history.



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And the new leader of our state's highest court is also here tonight: Chief Justice Bridget Mary McCormack.

Today, for the first time in Michigan history, our Governor, Attorney General, Secretary of State, and Chief Justice are all women.

Not to overlook our U.S. Senator and a record FIVE members of our U.S. House delegation.

Finally, I want to congratulate the 52 members of the legislature who are embarking on their first term in office.

I remember the excitement I felt as a 29-year-old freshman lawmaker. I sat where you are as a House member, and eventually as a senator, and watched three governors give the State of the State address. Back then, it never dawned on me that I would deliver this speech one day. I am eager to work with you on behalf of the people we serve.

We have to work together. Because, as I have said before: Michigan's problems are not partisan problems. Potholes are not political. There is no such thing as Republican or Democratic school kids or drinking water. Our challenges affect us all. And they will require us all, working together, to solve.

Despite our challenges, Michigan's greatest strength is — and always has been — our people. It's no accident that Michiganders are a diverse, persevering, and innovative group. Just think about the people who built our state:

Dutch immigrants who settled in West Michigan to work the land.

Finns who came to mine in the UP.

African Americans who came north for jobs in the auto industry.

People from the Middle East who made Dearborn one of the country's most vibrant, flourishing Arab-American communities.

People from around the world came here for good-paying jobs, a high-quality education for their kids, and the right to live and worship freely.

The diverse people who built our state saw Michigan not just as a potential home, but as a home for opportunity.

### **Michigan's Growing Challenges**

That is our legacy. Michigan has been a home for opportunity for 182 years.



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Of course, our predecessors overcame some big obstacles along the way. And now, it is our turn to ensure Michigan is a home for opportunity today and for future generations.

There are some wonderful things happening in our state. There are also some serious challenges.

Today, Michigan is confronting two major crises.

The first is our failing infrastructure.

Last year, the American Society of Civil Engineers gave Michigan infrastructure an overall grade of D-plus. Our roads fared even worse—a D-minus—with just 18 percent of Michigan roads in “good” condition. Another recent study found that Michigan has the worst roads in the country. The worst.

Let’s be honest: we don’t need studies to tell us this. The evidence is impossible to ignore.

Just a few weeks ago, I-75 was suddenly shut down in Oakland County because of dangerous potholes that flattened and destroyed tires sidelining dozens of cars. The potential consequences of course can be far more serious than a flat.

Right now, we have crumbling bridges with hundreds of temporary supports holding them up. Buses of school kids and families travel over them—and under them. Chunks of concrete have slammed through windshields.

By one estimate, the vehicle damage from our roads costs the average motorist \$562 a year in repairs. We’re paying a road tax that doesn’t even fix the damn roads. That’s money that could go toward childcare, rent, college tuition, or retirement savings.

And while it’s hard to imagine things getting worse, that is precisely what will happen if we don’t act boldly and swiftly. Because over the next decade, the share of Michigan highways and trunk lines in poor condition will more than double—worsening the severity of the danger and costing drivers across our state even more.

It endangers our lives. And robs us of our time and our hard-earned money.

It hurts our businesses’ bottom lines. It jeopardizes our edge in mobility. And limits our economic potential. Because no one will invest in a state that doesn’t invest in itself.

And let’s be clear: Incremental fund shifts, like we’ve seen in recent years—don’t fix the problem. They only slow our decline.

And I didn’t run for governor to manage the decline of our state. I ran to make sure this state is one where our kids stay and families thrive.



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Solving this crisis will not be easy. We didn't get here overnight. This is a challenge 30 years in the making—the result of underinvestment across multiple administrations. We need to act now, before a catastrophe happens or the situation becomes truly unrecoverable.

And we all have a role to play.

So to everyone at home: Share your stories about what the infrastructure crisis means to your families. Take a picture of your damaged car or repair bill and post it with the hashtag #FTDR.

I'm sure you know what that stands for by now.

Michigan businesses: Quantify how it's impacting your bottom lines and share it with us using #FTDR.

And to the legislature: When you're home in your districts, talk with local leaders and identify infrastructure priorities in the areas you represent.

And then, let's come together and pass a budget that actually fixes the damn roads!

Of course, you can't navigate any road if you're looking at your phone. So in addition to better roads, we need safer roads, too.

Car crashes are the number one killer of our young people.

I recently met Steve Kiefer, who told me about his son Mitchel – a 2016 graduate of Detroit Catholic Central, and a member of the state championship hockey team. Mitchel was a freshman at MSU when he was tragically killed by a distracted driver on I-96. The family formed the Kiefer Foundation to carry on Mitchel's legacy and end distracted driving – and they're already making important progress.

I've got to tell you, there is nothing more amazing to me than parents who channel the loss of their child into a cause that helps other people's kids.

Today we are joined by Mitchel's parents, (gesture) Steve Kiefer and Paula Kiefer, as well as Mitchel's brother and sisters, Blake, Julianna and Alexa.

I know the Kiefers and I believe it's time for Michigan to join the 16 states that have passed hands-free laws to keep our roads and our kids safe. So let's make it happen.

We also face serious problems with our water infrastructure.

Last month, Flint's water showed the lowest levels of lead and copper contamination since the start of the crisis four years ago. That's good, but our work is not done.



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We are home to 21% of the world's fresh water and yet too many families in Flint and across our state don't have access to clean drinking water.

Contamination from old pipes is not the only aspect we must address.

Over the past year, toxic chemicals known as PFAS have been found in our lakes, our rivers, and our water systems in more than 70 communities spanning both of our peninsulas.

This problem may not have commanded the same kind of national attention as the situation in Flint. But it is just as urgent.

It is time to step up our efforts to protect the health and safety of all Michiganders.

From our roads to our water, infrastructure is the crisis we see — we see it in on our commutes, in our communities, and in our homes.

The second crisis is harder to see, but we all know it exists: it's the crisis in education and skills.

And, like infrastructure, it impacts every one of us — our employers, our workers, and all of our children.

Today, third graders in Michigan rank in the bottom ten in the country in reading. The bottom ten.

Since 2014, among states measured every year, Michigan has experienced the worst decline in childhood literacy. And the decline has been consistent across every racial and economic group in our state.

Let's be clear: This is not happening because Michigan kids are less talented. It's not happening because our kids are less motivated. It's not happening because our educators are less dedicated. It is happening because generations of leadership have failed them.

In the past 25 years, Michigan has seen the lowest growth in the K-12 education spending of any state in the nation. During that time, our per-pupil funding revenue has actually fallen by 15 percent. And in the last decade, as our literacy crisis has grown, our predecessors have repeatedly raided K-12 education funding to fill gaps elsewhere in the state budget.

Despite these challenges, we have incredible educators like Marla Williams – who is here tonight — Marla is a special ed teacher at Davison School in Detroit, where she is known as a tireless advocate for her students.

In class, Marla ensures that her special ed students have all the same opportunities as their peers. But her work doesn't stop when the bell rings at the end of the day. She goes to their birthday parties. She visits them when they're sick. She has even taken some of their laundry home and washed her students' clothes herself. She changes lives for the better every day.



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That's because she – like so many Michigan educators – knows teaching is more than a career, it is a calling.

I want to send a message to all of the devoted educators across Michigan: You're not failing us. We have been failing you.

Our educators deserve our support — not a funding crisis that undermines their work, weakens our schools and hurts our kids. We know that potential is universal, but right now opportunity is not.

Our students are not broken. Our teachers are not broken. It's our system that's broken. We can't fix it overnight. And greater investment alone won't be enough.

But we're going to do it, because nearly two million kids are counting on us.

Our education crisis compromises our workforce — this at the moment when the skills we need to compete for good-paying jobs are rapidly changing.

At the Detroit Auto Show last month, I met with auto executives who said their number one challenge was attracting enough talent. They used to need auto engineers. Today, they need software engineers and developers and skilled trades people, too.

The skills gap poses a serious economic challenge for us. And part of the problem is we have failed to prioritize talent and ensure everyone has a path to skills.

The vast majority of today's jobs require some form of postsecondary education, whether it's a degree or a skills certification. But, as of 2016, only 44 percent of our workforce has such a credential. Simply put, that's not good enough for Michigan to compete.

I don't accept it. None of us should.

As I said, these challenges affect us all. They make Michigan a harder place to get ahead. A harder place to raise a family. A harder place to run a business.

And they are even tougher to solve because pressures on our state government have been building up for years. Departments that are understaffed, that lack diversity, and suffer from low morale. Outdated technology and IT challenges that impede both state employees' ability to do their jobs and Michigan residents' ability to access government services. Severe budget constraints that prevent badly needed investments in our roads, infrastructure, and more.

Over the past month, the LG and I have visited every department in person.

I met state employees who have served the public for decades and never even met a governor.



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I listened and learned about the obstacles they try to navigate on a daily basis to serve the people of our state.

I promised I will do everything I can to support them. Because while many focus on what happens here at the capitol . . . the real work of state government — protecting the public, educating our kids, working with business — is done by the 48,000 people of our state workforce.

And they don't get the gratitude they deserve.

People like Eric Oswald — who's with us today. Eric was a Colonel in the Air Force when he retired in 2017, and he was “looking for a new challenge” when the Flint Water Crisis hit. So he stepped up again to serve his state — this time as the DEQ's Director of the Drinking Water and Municipal Assistance Division.

Eric said he sees the same qualities in his fellow state employees that he saw in the military: hardworking public servants committed to the mission of protecting and serving others.

They deserve our thanks and support. And I'm proud to be in their ranks.

These challenges aren't the fault of any one politician or party.

I spent 14 years in the legislature, so I know how tough it is to keep the government funded and functioning. But I also know this: turning a blind eye or passing phony fixes won't solve problems.

In fact, they make it harder. Filling potholes instead of building roads. Pretending that little increases can fix an education crisis. Playing a shell game with the state budget. Ignoring the potential of hundreds of millions of dollars from lawsuits against the last administration. Giving sweetheart deals to political insiders. Spending \$1.3 billion on the last day of the lame-duck session in December.

A government that doesn't work today can't get the job done for tomorrow. And that ends now.

As a state, we must make the bold choices so we can build a stronger Michigan. And we need to work together.

## **A Government That Works for Everyone**

I recognize that the tone starts at the top.

And that's why I took a number of steps during my first month in office to make sure Government works. So our employees, our businesses and our people can trust us.

My first act was an executive directive so state employees know how and are empowered to alert us of imminent threats to public health, safety, or welfare.



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Valid concerns about public health and welfare will be acted upon.

I also established stronger ethics rules for the executive branch, including a ban on the use of private email accounts to conduct state business.

For too long, our government has been plagued by a lack of transparency. We have consistently ranked the worst in the country. We have the power to fix that: let's expand FOIA to my office and to the legislature.

It's time to ensure that the sun shines equally on every branch of state government.

I also signed an executive directive banning state government from discrimination on the basis of sexual orientation or gender identity – without any exemptions.

Now Michigan government is on the right side of history. Because nobody should ever be fired because of who they are or who they love. It'll help build and attract a talented, top-notch workforce. That's precisely why the business community has pushed to extend these rights to the private sector as well.

If we want Michigan to be a home for opportunity . . . it should be opportunity for all, in all workplaces. We need to expand the Elliott-Larsen Civil Rights Act to include protections for our LGBT community.

And I also mean equal opportunity for women.

Today, women in Michigan's workforce make 78 cents for every dollar that men make for doing the same job. Women of color make even less. It is time for that to change. That is why I signed an executive directive prohibiting employers in state government from asking women applicants about their salary histories. This ensures past discrimination doesn't hurt a woman's future earnings.

Those same protections extended to all Michigan women would cut the poverty rate among working women in half. Think about that. It would cut the poverty rate among working single moms by even more. Michigan women's annual income would increase enough to pay for, on average, nearly 14 months of rent or more than 18 months of child care.

That's how we build a stronger economy. That's making Michigan a home for opportunity for women.

Opportunity: also means a level playing field for small businesses from Marquette to Macomb to Muskegon Heights.

I've opened up contracting opportunities for small businesses in designated opportunity zones across our state. That means small businesses in geographically disadvantaged communities will have a level playing field. Let's keep Michigan dollars in Michigan.



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Let's create more opportunities for companies like Open Systems Technologies in Grand Rapids, where I recently met president and CEO Meredith Bronk — who is with us tonight — and several women small business owners about leveling the playing field for entrepreneurs across our state.

When we were in Grand Rapids we were joined by former Lieutenant Governor Brian Calley — or, as the newer legislators might know him, Rep. Julie Calley's spouse.

As the leader of the Small Business Association of Michigan, Brian has offered incredible support . . . It's proof that, if we can put the election behind us, we have a great opportunity to work together and build a stronger economy.

### **A Stronger, Healthier Economy**

A strong economy also requires a concentration of talent. And, as I said earlier, we must ensure that every Michigander has opportunity through a path to skills that lead to a good job.

Today's jobs, and jobs on the horizon, demand greater education and training than ever before. Right now, Michigan is one of only 9 states in the country and the only state in the Midwest that hasn't even established a formal goal for post-secondary attainment. That changes tonight.

I am announcing a new statewide goal of increasing the number of Michiganders between the ages of 16 and 64 with a post-secondary credential to 60 percent by 2030. It's aggressive. But great expectations lead to great results.

To get there, we need to start thinking differently about what it takes to succeed. We used to think about careers in terms of ladders. One way up. But, today, it's more like rock-climbing.

There are many paths to a good life, and we need to help people find the one that works for them. That's why, tonight, I'm announcing three paths for workers and students across our state.

The first is for Michiganders who have already started their careers.

As workplaces evolve, many people will need to acquire new skills to advance—or even just to keep the jobs they have now. There are also displaced workers across the state who are looking for new opportunities. That's why we are launching: Michigan Reconnect.

By training adults seeking an in-demand industry certification or associate degree, Reconnect is a path for working Michiganders to up-skill. It will also connect Michigan businesses to qualified candidates for the growing number of jobs that are currently unfilled.

This initiative is modeled after a similar effort that Tennessee's former Republican governor, Bill Haslam, launched last year. And it is already surpassing expectations.



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The second path is for graduating high school students who want to continue their education, but who decide that a four-year college or university isn't for them. A four-year degree isn't for everyone, but everyone needs skills to get a good job.

For them: the MI Opportunity Scholarship, will guarantee two years of debt-free community college for all graduating high school students who qualify. The scholarship will be officially launched this spring and available to students in the fall of 2020. And it will make Michigan the first Midwestern state to guarantee community college for all.

The third path is for graduating high school seniors who are . . . as my friends in the trades like to say, "just not skilled trades material." I'm talking about a path for students who do want to pursue a four-year degree, but who can't afford to do so.

A study last year found the average cost of tuition, fees, and room and board at a public four-year school in Michigan is almost \$22,000 a year. That's the 10th highest in the country. And it's a complete barrier for a lot of people in our state.

That's why the MI Opportunity Scholarship will provide two years of tuition assistance at a four-year, not-for-profit college or university for students who graduate from a Michigan high school with at least a B average.

Real Paths. Real Opportunity. Together, these paths will go a long way toward closing the skills gap, making Michigan's economy more competitive, and creating real opportunity for everyone.

If you're willing to put in the work, you will have a path to succeed.

But a strong Michigan requires more than a singular commitment to better skills.

It also requires a commitment to the health of our workers, families, and communities. That is why we are taking several important steps to protect and improve public health.

Last week, I announced the creation of a new agency that will bring sharper focus to addressing Michigan's water safety and environmental challenges.

The streamlined Department of Environment, Great Lakes, and Energy will be tasked with ensuring that every Michigander has access to safe and clean drinking water. It will be charged with safeguarding our Great Lakes, and taking action to protect our state from the harmful effects of climate change. The agency will include the new offices of the Clean Water Public Advocate and the Environmental Justice Public Advocate.

We're going to make state government more efficient and more responsive to our environmental and public health challenges.



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The new department: “Eagle” has gotten bipartisan support from Michigan businesses and leaders, including Candice Miller — who’s with us tonight — as well as former Snyder administration DEQ Director Heidi Grether, and Dr. Mona Hanna-Attisha.

I also joined Michigan in the U.S. Climate Alliance, with a bipartisan coalition of governors from 20 other states that have committed to reducing greenhouse gas emissions consistent with the goals of the Paris Climate Agreement.

Two weeks ago we had wind chills: 50 below zero. Last week it was over 50 above. That’s a 100 degree swing – and a reminder that climate change and extreme weather are already putting Michiganders at risk.

As a state, we must take that risk seriously. We cannot and will not wait to act.

Everyone in my administration is also committed to ensuring that all Michiganders have access to quality health care they can afford.

During my time in the state Senate, I worked across the aisle with Governor Snyder, and Leader Shirkey and Leader Ananich, to expand Medicaid and provide coverage to 680,000 Michiganders through the Healthy Michigan plan.

As governor, I am committed to defending Healthy Michigan, and we are already doing so in two important ways.

First: Last week, I sent a letter to the Trump Administration about my concerns that new work requirements slated for next year may hurt Michiganders. I wrote that I intend to work with the legislature to find ways that both promote work and preserve coverage for people who need it.

Second: we have joined 19 other states to defend the Affordable Care Act in court. Hundreds of thousands of Michiganders’ health care is on the line, and I want to commend the Attorney General for leading on this vital issue.

## **A Budget That Addresses Our Problems**

The policies that I have outlined tonight will strengthen the foundation for Michigan’s economic future.

Next month, I will propose a budget for our state. My budget will offer a real solution to fixing our roads and rebuilding our infrastructure. It will give our frontline educators the tools they need to address our literacy crisis. And most of all, it will reflect my unwavering commitment to making Michigan the home for opportunity.

The people of Michigan voted for people they believed could solve problems.



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There are legislative districts in our state where I won by double digits, and voters also supported Republican legislators. Let's prove to them – and the country – that divided government doesn't have to mean gridlock.

I am eager to engage with any and all people of good faith about ideas and priorities, including your ideas on bringing down car insurance rates. I am committed to this state and to solving problems, therefore, I will reject anything presented as a “solution” that doesn't really solve a problem — or creates a new one.

I will not sign anything that resembles the budget gimmicks and band-aids that have failed us in the past. I will veto bills designed to cut out the public's right of referendum. And I will stay faithful to the mission of fixing the roads, improving skills through education and training, and cleaning up our water. And I'll work with everyone who wants to do that.

And one more thing: I pledge to continue the new culture that Governor Snyder created in Lansing over the last eight years: Budgets got done before the break. And that was a good thing. Because just like every other workplace, we shouldn't go on vacation until we get the job done.

I would love to see a show of hands from my friends in the legislature — how many of you agree with me? I hope the press is taking pictures of those hands.

Let's make it happen—and let's do it together.

### **“Foundations of Faith in Michigan's Future”**

Some will doubt our ability to find common ground; to make the bold choices needed to ensure Michigan will always be a home for opportunity.

When you look at the dysfunction in Washington, that skepticism is understandable. Extreme partisanship, shut downs, and trade wars all put Michigan's economy at risk. Those things are out of our control.

Let us stay focused on what we can control. And let us strive to see the humanity in one another along the way. Because, when we do, it's a lot easier to find common ground.

You may know I am centered by my family and love for Michigan. . . the place I hope my kids will make their lives.

Garlin Gilchrist is an engineer who moved back to Detroit with his wife Ellen to build a life for themselves, their twins Garlin and Emily, and a new member of the family due in June.

Lee and Stephanie Chatfield are parents to five kids 8 and under. Four sons and a daughter. He, like I used to, lives next to his parents and he is guided by his faith.



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Jim and Andrea Ananich expanded their family through adoption a few years ago and they - like lots of Flint families - were worried about mixing baby Jake's formula. Jim's a teacher and has an affinity for giving nicknames.

As dads of young kids . . . I bet they could get some pointers from the other two leaders:

Mike Shirkey's got 12 grandkids. He's rarely spotted around town after hours because he likes to hightail it home to Jackson to have dinner with his wife, Sue.

And Chris Greig, has three sons, loves tennis and when she gets home "Chef Bob" always has something amazing.

We all have families. We all care about our kids' and grandkids futures. We all want what's best for our communities and our state.

It's important for us to remember that the enemy is not the person across the aisle. The enemy is apathy. The enemy is extreme partisanship. The enemy is self-interest.

When we stand together as Michiganders — or Michiganians, for those of you who insist — we can get the job done for the people of our state.

We can build bridges and ensure that Michigan is the home for opportunity for generations to come.

After my inauguration, I received messages of support and encouragement from people across our state.

One of them was the granddaughter of Governor G. Mennen "Soapy" Williams. A former labor leader sent me a Soapy Williams-era bowtie with green and white polka dots, and his commemorative coin from the opening of the Mackinac Bridge.

Holding that coin between my fingers was a moving experience — especially when I read the inscription on the back. It says: "Built by the will of a great people, upon foundations of Michigan's faith in her future."

More than 60 years later, we are still a great people. We still have the will. We still have faith.

The question is: do we have the wisdom to put partisanship aside and get the job done for the people we serve?

I think we do.

So let's get to work.

Thank you.