

State of the Budget Address of Governor Janet Mills  
Tuesday, February 14, 2023, State House, Augusta, Maine

Introduction

Mr. President, Madam Speaker, Mr. Associate Justice, Mr. Attorney General, Madam Secretary of State, Mr. Treasurer, Members of my extraordinary Cabinet, Members of the 131st Legislature, esteemed guests –

We come together for the annual, time-honored tradition of a Governor’s Address to you, the peoples’ representatives, on the same day as another time-honored tradition – Valentine’s Day.

I know one of these time-honored traditions is more fun than the other, but I am grateful for your willingness to be here this evening. And I know that you do it out of a sense of duty and responsibility for our state.

And I am grateful for the love you have for the people of Maine and for the honorable pursuit of public service that, despite our varied ideological beliefs, unites us in pursuit of a common, noble cause: to improve the lives and livelihoods of Maine people.

As my Valentine’s Day gift to you, when you leave the Chamber you will find chocolate lobster treats from our friends at Wilbur’s of Maine in Freeport – a treat I hope that tastes that much sweeter in the wake of our victory in Congress to pause the unfair right whale regulations imposed by the Federal government on our lobster industry.

So, we raise a chocolate lobster toast to our lobster fishermen. Right, Billy Bob?

Okay, so –

“As we look to the future, it is my pleasure to report that Maine's budget is in a stable and secure position. We have taken a cautious approach to budgeting during these uncertain times and have made investments in key areas, such as education, infrastructure, and healthcare, to support economic growth and stability.”

Well, at least that’s what ChatGPT tells me I should say.

In all seriousness, though, that’s not far off from my own words.

State of the Budget

Our state stands on a solid fiscal footing, and we are prepared to weather whatever economic challenges may come. The state of our budget is strong.

Fiscal Outlook

We approach the end of the 2023 Fiscal Year in the black, with a substantial surplus. Like surpluses before it, with your bipartisan support last month, we are returning money to the people of Maine

to provide some small measure of relief from high energy prices. Those checks are in the mail now, and by the end of next month, every eligible Maine taxpayer should receive one.

Looking forward, our revenue outlook for the next two fiscal years is also strong.

According to the independent, nonpartisan Revenue Forecasting Committee – comprised of experts in the economy – the State can anticipate a total of \$10.5 billion in revenue over the next two years.

That is \$1.1 billion more than the current baseline budget.

On top of that, for the following two Fiscal Years – 2026 and 2027 – the Revenue Forecasting Committee projects approximately \$11.6 billion in revenue.

These strong revenue projections did not just happen by themselves.

They are the direct result of a strong economy, created by Federal support and deliberate policy and financial choices we have made in State government to fuel our recovery from the pandemic and create the conditions necessary for sustained economic growth.

### The Economy

And today, despite years of pandemic-driven turmoil and even with the possibility of a recession still on the horizon, our economy remains strong.

Since 2019, our Gross Domestic Product – an important measure of economic growth – grew by 10.1 percent, the 9th best growth rate in the nation and the best in New England. In fact, Maine has experienced more economic growth over the last four years than it did in the entire preceding fifteen years.

Wages are up substantially. Even when adjusting for inflation, Maine people are earning about eight percent more than they were just a few years ago. Nationally, new businesses are starting at some of the fastest rates on record. Last year alone, nearly 14,000 new businesses registered with the Maine Secretary of State's office.

Our unemployment rate stands at 3.8 percent, down from 4.1 percent a year ago.

Our State's credit ratings are in good shape, reaffirmed during the pandemic when other states experienced downgrades.

Our Unemployment Trust Fund remains solvent, while other states had to borrow from the Federal government and then repay that money with interest.

And, with your help, we built up Maine's Rainy Day Fund to a record high of more than \$900 million.

We have become a top destination for people relocating in New England. Between July 2019 and July 2021, we boasted the 7th highest in-migration rate in the nation.

In 2021, we experienced the largest population gain from net migration since the 1950s. In the last two years, a net 34,237 people moved here – about 31,000 coming from other U.S. states.

This is all welcome news, but Maine is not without its challenges – even with our strong influx of new people, we face an alarming shortage of workers and high costs.

Right now, as elsewhere across the nation, there are two job openings for every unemployed person in Maine.

“Help Wanted” signs hang in the front window of shops and factories across the state – and the shortage is taking its toll.

Some schools have canceled classes because too many teachers and bus drivers are out sick. Police and firefighters are working extra shifts to fill gaps in coverage. Shops and restaurants are closing early, some closing altogether, because of staff shortages.

How do we address it?

Well, my guiding belief as Governor is that the foundation of Maine’s economy is our people.

And I firmly believe that if we are to build a stronger, more prosperous state where opportunity is available to all, then we must invest in the people of Maine.

That is why my budgets and my Jobs Plan have focused on investing in health and education and in the infrastructure working people need – including housing, child care and broadband.

### Maine Jobs & Recovery Plan

Two years ago you enacted my Maine Jobs & Recovery Plan, investing nearly \$1 billion in Federal American Rescue Plan funds to improve the lives of Maine people and families, to help businesses create and fill good-paying jobs, and to build an economy poised for future prosperity.

Since that bill took effect, we have delivered direct economic relief to nearly 1,000 small businesses and we have supported more than 100 infrastructure projects around the state to create jobs and revitalize communities.

We have invested \$300 million to support our workforce, in everything from job training, to business supports, to housing, to child care. These critical investments are helping tens of thousands of people acquire skills and find good paying careers in health care, in the trades, in teaching, and in paid apprenticeships for all sorts of employers so that people with skills may quickly enter and remain in our workforce.

Our investments are also connecting 6,000 high school students with paid, hands-on work experience with Maine employers through the Maine Career Exploration Program. Since last fall, more than 2,000 young people have signed up to gain skills and mentoring so they can discover good careers right here in Maine – and provide some extra help to Maine businesses at the same time.

There are more slots available. So, if there is a teenager in your family who would like to explore a career, please ask your school about this program.

In addition to job training, the Jobs Plan has invested in child care, housing and reliable broadband – the things people tell us they need to enter and remain in the workforce.

### Previous Budget

The new biennial budget proposal complements the budgets we enacted in the last legislative session. Lest anybody forget, we actually got a lot done in those budgets, you and I! –

We achieved 55 percent state funding for education for the first time in Maine history, putting funds directly into classrooms to benefit Maine kids regardless of their zip code.

We became the second state in the nation to provide universal free food in the public schools, erasing the shameful divide between the have's and have not's.

We delivered two-years free community college to recent high school graduates, driving enrollment up by a record 12 percent and restoring the dreams of higher education that so many young people gave up on during the pandemic.

We fully restored municipal revenue sharing to five percent, sending nearly \$700 million of our revenues to the towns to reduce the property tax burden and to fund services like fire and police.

We provided significant tax relief, reducing income taxes for retirees and property taxes for seniors.

Bipartisan progress on issues critical to Maine people became the foundation for the biennial budget proposal before you now.

### Health Care

I have long said that we cannot have a healthy economy if we do not have healthy people.

It's pretty hard to hold a job, support a family, or pay attention at school if you are sick or suffering.

Having health care enables you to shape your future and contribute to your community and to our economy – as it did for one woman who approached me at the polls last November to tell me that MaineCare expansion allowed her to get much needed heart surgery that saved her life.

Over 100,000 more Maine people receive treatment for accidents and illnesses, prescriptions and procedures, and – now – dental care just through the Medicaid expansion.

And now, independent of Medicaid, we're also providing dental care to hundreds of Maine veterans who could not otherwise afford to see a dentist through a partnership between my administration and Northeast Delta Dental, supported by members of Maine Masonic Lodges and others. If you know a veteran who could benefit, please contact the Maine Bureau of Veterans' Services.

We established CoverME.gov to help 63,000 people get health insurance through the Affordable Care Act. – People like Pamela Gray of Gorham, a cancer survivor who is now getting the health care she needs thanks to affordable coverage through CoverME.gov.

Together, we have reduced our uninsured rate from 8 percent in 2019 to 5.7 percent in 2021 – the largest decline of any state in the nation.

And we have made sure Maine people will not be charged more or be denied coverage based on a pre-existing condition.

But there is more we can do to make Maine a healthier state. I propose we focus on some of our most vulnerable – and valued – residents.

Last year, I signed an Executive Order creating the Cabinet on Aging to mobilize State government to keep making strides in taking care of older Mainers.

This year, I am proposing \$144 million in federal and state dollars combined to expand and improve services that will allow older Mainers to age safely in their homes and communities, with home-delivered meals, and with programs that reduce abuse, neglect and exploitation.

We are also investing in the health and wellbeing of people with disabilities.

I am the grandmother of a beautiful, loving child with autism. I understand the difficulty that parents of children with disabilities face on a day to day basis, especially when it comes to finding consistent help to support the needs and strengths of their child.

My budget proposes \$84 million in state and federal funds to improve access to services for people with intellectual and developmental disabilities, including those in urgent need of comprehensive residential care through "Section 21," and eliminating the waitlist for day and work support services, known as MaineCare Section 29.

Maine can do better by people with disabilities. Many of the individuals on the waitlist are children whose parents have reserved a spot years in advance, anticipating the more intensive services those children will need as they grow into adulthood.

When it comes time to move these children into adult services, our system of care right now leaves these families with abrupt and burdensome transitions.

Carrie Woodcock, Executive Director of the Maine Parent Federation, described her experience of caring for her child with a developmental disability as “episodic,” saying that it was so much work to keep up with her child’s case that she became fluent in filling out eligibility paperwork.

That’s not right. And it’s why my budget proposes a fundamental reform in how we deliver these services.

We are proposing a “lifespan waiver” that flips the system to focus on the services individuals need, not on the bureaucracy that provides those services. With a lifespan waiver, people can get services that are tailored to their preferences, age, and needs, along with help finding a suitable job and a plan for their future that can be updated as circumstances change.

I ask you to approve this initiative. Individuals with disabilities and their caregivers deserve the peace of mind of a system of adaptable and individualized supports.

## Education

Education remains a central piece of this budget. We recognize that education is a great equalizer in our society and that every child, regardless of where they live, deserves a world-class education that will prepare them for a successful adulthood. And we recognize, and applaud, the talented support staff and the educators who step into the classroom every day with our students.

Two years ago, we met the state’s obligation to pay 55 percent of local education costs – for the first time since the voters told us to do so in 2004. My budget proposal includes \$101 million to continue this commitment, investing directly in our schools, teachers, and staff and helping our communities hold the line on property taxes.

Two years ago, you passed – and I signed – nation-leading legislation spearheaded by Senate President Jackson to ensure that no child in Maine goes hungry during the school day. My budget continues this crucial program to ensure that no child has to try to learn on an empty stomach.

Last year, we worked together to make two years of Community College free for recent high school graduates impacted by the pandemic. We believed that it would not only help students pursue higher education debt-free but that it would make ready a trained workforce in much needed sectors of our economy.

Students like Elisabeth “Tip” Ackerman, who was able to go back to school because of this initiative. Tip will soon graduate with a degree in early childhood education and will help fill our need for more child care workers.

And students like Zim Cunningham, who says that while he struggled academically in high school, he is now excelling at Washington County Community College and will soon enter the workforce, without college debt, trained to become a powersports and small engine technician.

And students like Margarida Celestino, who last year told her advisor that she would have to drop out because she needed to earn money. Free community college has allowed her not only to stay in school, but to enroll full time, instead of just picking up one or two classes whenever she had enough saved up.

Because of our initiative, Maine's Community Colleges experienced record enrollment last year and, now, students like these can spend less time worrying about how to pay for college, and more time focused on earning the credential or degree they need to succeed in Maine's workforce.

Free community college is working. Let's keep it up for another two years!

My budget also includes \$71 million for the University System, the Maine Community College System, and Maine Maritime Academy, which includes a 4.5 percent across the board increase – along with \$10 million to boost the Maine State Grant Program, increasing the maximum grant award to \$3,000 to help more Maine students afford the cost of college.

If you approve that increase, we will have doubled the Maine State grant award over the past four years.

### Transportation & Infrastructure

This biennial budget also proposes one of the largest investments in our roads, bridges, and other multimodal infrastructure in history.

For years, we have been playing catch-up when it comes to upgrading the critical infrastructure on which Maine people rely every day to go to work, to go to school, or just to get around.

A lack of resources has forced the Maine Department of Transportation to operate in what Commissioner Van Note calls “MacGyver Mode” – stretching each dollar as far as it can go to fix problems when and as they arise.

MaineDOT – and all of state government – should always aim to get the most value out of every dollar. But addressing problems only when they become critical costs us more over the long term and makes our roads, bridges, and highways – and the people who travel over them – much less safe.

In 2020, the American Society of Engineers gave Maine a “C-” for our infrastructure, and a “D” for our roads. The *average* age of our bridges is about 55 years!

That's unacceptable. And it's dangerous. And it's costing all of us in repairs and wear and tear on our cars and trucks each year.

The good news is, in 2021, the United States Congress – with the support of our Congressional Delegation – passed and President Biden signed the Bipartisan Infrastructure Law, which makes available historic levels of federal funding for infrastructure projects.

Now, much of this new funding requires a matching contribution from the state, so my budget proposes making \$400 million available to MaineDOT to leverage hundreds of millions of additional dollars in federal funds to make long-term investments in our roads, bridges, highways, and in our iconic villages and downtowns, making them safer for vehicles, pedestrians and bicyclists as well.

If you approve my proposal, these federal dollars, along with our state match, will allow MaineDOT to pave more than 3,000 miles of road, reconstruct 271 miles of highway, and fix 302 bridges – on top of many other worthy multimodal projects.

Pothole season will be here soon. So, as my friend Gretchen Whitmer of Michigan likes to say, “let’s fix the damn roads.”

### The Environment

Protecting our environment is always a priority. And I am especially proud of the important, bipartisan progress we have made over the past four years.

Together, we have reinvigorated the Land for Maine’s Future Program, which has already conserved 37 new projects, preserving working farmland, working waterfront, working forests and the largest deer wintering areas ever.

We have led the nation in combating PFAS contamination, which is devastating many communities in Maine – forcing some schools to switch to bottled water, leaving farmers in financial shambles, and fishermen and hunters questioning whether the wildlife they harvest might be contaminated.

In all, with your help, we have dedicated more than \$100 million over the past two years to address PFAS – funding environmental testing and remediation, creating a Trust Fund to assist farmers, installing more than 300 drinking water treatment systems, and establishing temporary standards to protect drinking water.

Now I am asking you to approve an additional \$6 million in State and Federal funds to further strengthen our ability to detect and mitigate PFAS, including sampling and continued testing of wells, soils and wildlife.

### Climate Change

Of course, one of – if not the – greatest threat to our environment is climate change, which United Nations scientists have called “a code red for humanity.”

In 2019, I stood before the United Nations General Assembly and told the world that Maine will not wait to act.



Our environment, our people, and our infrastructure remain at serious risk from climate change – and it is our communities that are on the frontlines of this battle.

Communities that are reeling from storms that are growing more severe and more frequent, damaging more infrastructure and threatening our safety.

Just two days before Christmas, a winter storm battered our coast, with heavy rains and high winds that caused extensive flooding and power outages.

We have to make our communities more resilient to the impacts of storms like these.

So our Community Resilience Partnership is providing grants and assistance to more than 130 communities across Maine to reduce their carbon emissions, transition them to clean energy, and protect them from rising seas and extreme weather events.

For example –

We provided \$41,000 to the Town of Paris to install a solar array on the roof of the police station, with the goal of integrating battery storage and ensuring that the police station remains operational during power outages.

The City of Rockland is using a \$50,000 grant to re-design the piers and seawall of its downtown waterfront which is increasingly vulnerable to more powerful storm surges.

I am proposing \$3 million more to continue this important work and ensure that our communities are better prepared to protect our people from the impacts of climate change.

### Energy Prices

Fighting climate change also requires us to embrace clean sources of energy, which will also help us rein in outrageous energy prices.

Whether it is the cost of heating fuel or electricity, the price of energy in Maine is getting to be simply unaffordable and it discourages people from staying here and businesses from coming here.

We know what the problem is: it's the stranglehold that fossil fuel companies have on our state and on our people.

We are the most heating oil dependent state in the nation, with nearly sixty percent of our homes relying on heating oil or kerosene to stay warm. The national average? Just four percent.

The electricity from our grid, which we share with the rest of New England, is overly reliant on natural gas – and the price of natural gas has shot through the roof, in large part as a result of Russia's invasion of Ukraine.

Every year, Maine people send more than \$4 billion out-of-state to line the pockets and the profits of big fossil fuel companies, money that could be better spent here at home, while our families and our environment remain at their mercy.

Enough is enough.

We are making unprecedented strides to embrace renewable energy; to weatherize more homes and businesses; and to install more efficient heating and cooling technologies, like heat pumps.

And it is working. Maine is now among the nation's leaders in energy efficiency. In 2019, I set a goal of installing 100,000 new heat pumps by 2025. Today, we are well on our way, with more than 82,000 new heat pumps installed.

Maine people are recognizing the value of these measures – not only for their wallets, but for our environment and for our economy.

The Washington Post recently asked a woman named Marianna from Freeport if she missed her propane furnace after installing a heat pump. Her response?

“Oh, hell no.”

She went on to say that her heat pump is comfortable, quiet, and a really good system.

“I'm excited our state is so forward thinking,” she said, “and we have to be, because we live in a drop-dead gorgeous part of this country and we're invested in keeping it that way.”

To that I say, hell yeah, Marianna!

To bring down the cost of electricity for Maine people, to protect our environment from harmful carbon emissions, and to create new and exciting jobs that attract young people to Maine, we have to loosen the stranglehold fossil fuel has on our state.

We must diversify our energy sources.

In 2019, I signed into law a bipartisan bill requiring our state to achieve 80 percent of our electricity from renewable sources by 2030. The resulting low-cost energy contracts saved Maine ratepayers more than \$68 million last year.

Today, 48 percent of our electricity comes from renewable sources. We expect that to be 53 percent by the end of this year.

The time has come to be bolder: I am announcing tonight that I am directing my Energy Office to draft legislation requiring that 100 percent of our electricity come from clean energy by 2040.

By accelerating our pace toward 100 percent clean energy, we will reduce costs for Maine people, create new jobs and career opportunities that strengthen our economy, and protect us from the ravages of climate change.

## Housing

Something else that has become unaffordable is housing: it's just too scarce and too high priced for too many.

More competition within the housing market has driven up rents and home prices, here and around the country.

When combined with higher interest rates, home affordability has soared out of reach for far too many.

The problem cuts across nearly every facet of our society, contributing to homelessness and limiting our ability to expand our workforce.

Bath Iron Works, one of the largest employers in Maine, recently said that their main problem is not actually finding workers, but, instead, finding those skilled workers places to live.

The company hired 400 people in 2021 and 2022 who needed to relocate to take the jobs. When all was said and done, a quarter of those people – 100 of them – could not take the job because they were unable to find housing.

That is unacceptable. But it is all too common a story I hear when traveling the state.

MaineHousing has told us that we need more than 20,000 new housing units to meet demand.

That's why we've made the largest investments in housing in our state's history: signing the long-overdue senior housing bond; enacting the affordable housing tax credit; renewing the historic rehabilitation tax credit, and committing \$50 million to housing through my Jobs Plan. All combined, these actions have resulted in more than 1,500 new residential units that are built or on their way to being built, with hundreds more in the pipeline.

But we have our work cut out for us.

In my budget I propose an additional \$30 million to build more housing, especially in rural Maine.

\$15 million of that funding would recapitalize the Rural Rental Program established in my Jobs Plan.

In 2021, we dedicated \$20 million to that very popular program – and now there are more than 130 units of affordable housing being built in towns from Norway to Madison to Presque Isle.

The other \$15 million will build on another Jobs Plan program to leverage matching Federal housing tax credits. With the money we have provided already through the Jobs Plan, we have added more than 325 affordable housing units in communities from Hartland to South Portland to Bridgton.

I ask you tonight to approve this funding so we can continue to ensure that Maine people are adequately housed.

I also understand there is a bill before the Legislature that espouses the concept of “housing first.” Housing First has proven to be a very successful and cost effective approach to addressing the needs of people experiencing chronic homelessness, many of whom are struggling for stability while suffering from acute mental illness and/or substance use disorder.

This bill would create a path to ending chronic homelessness in Maine by expanding the Housing First model statewide.

Under this legislation, Maine would provide permanent supportive housing for hundreds of Maine’s citizens, providing communities across Maine with a desperately needed resource to address chronic homelessness and reduce health care and public safety costs.

The time for this legislation has come. Tonight, I call on the Legislature to send that bill to my desk. I will sign it.

I am also aware that Senate President Jackson and Speaker Talbot Ross and this Legislature have established a Joint Select Committee on Housing.

My Administration will work closely with Committee Chairs Senator Pierce, Representative Gere, along with Republican Leads Senator Pouliot and Representative Bradstreet, as you work to address homelessness, build and preserve workforce and affordable housing, and support reasonable zoning and land use changes that will expand housing opportunities across our state.

Housing is not a partisan issue. It is an issue that cuts to the core of our identity, because a home is not simply where we live. A home is where my late husband, Stan, and I raised our five daughters, where we gathered for holidays and sat around the table with loved ones, where we laid our heads to rest at night, knowing we were safe and together.

We can and will work together across the aisle to make sure that every person in our state has a safe, secure and affordable place to call home.

### The Opioid Crisis

Many of those who are unhoused are struggling with substance use disorder.

The scourge of addiction continues to reach into every corner of our state – rural and urban – robbing us of friends, family and loved ones, diminishing our sense of community, our workforce, and our future.

Since 2019, we have taken significant actions to respond to this crisis, addressing the three legged stool of prevention, interdiction, and treatment. We began by expanding Medicaid, which has provided substance use disorder treatment to more than 25,000 individuals in Maine, leading them back into productive lives.

We sharply increased access to the life-saving overdose medication naloxone, distributing more than 276,000 doses, which have been used to reverse more than 7,100 overdoses that otherwise would have been fatal.

We increased access to treatment and recovery, adding 140 residential treatment beds and detox beds. And I have directed the Department of Health and Human Services to invest another \$2 million to further increase the availability of those beds across Maine.

In the Maine State Prison System, we provided substance use disorder treatment to more than 2,200 incarcerated individuals, a nationally-recognized strategy that has reduced assaults, self-harm, and overdoses – and a strategy that should be expanded to every county jail in Maine.

And last year, working closely with Democrats and Republicans, we enacted one of the best Good Samaritan laws in the country to encourage people to call for help if they witness an overdose.

This work is good. It is important. It is necessary. But it is not enough.

Last year alone, there were more than 10,000 overdoses in Maine. Out of those, 716 were fatal.

In December alone, there were 928 overdoses, with 75 people dying – the highest number of deaths of any month on record.

This is a crisis.

And, right now, it's driven by the ever-increasing prevalence of fentanyl, the highly lethal and highly addictive synthetic opioid often mixed with heroin, cocaine, methamphetamines and pills consumed by unknowing users.

In Maine, as in the rest of the nation, fentanyl is now not only the leading cause of overdose. It is responsible for nearly 80 percent of all drug deaths.

Eighty percent.

Last year law enforcement officers seized more than 36 pounds of fentanyl in Maine, nearly 60 percent more than in 2021. That's "pounds!" – It's enough fentanyl to kill every man, woman and child in the State of Maine and then some!

The prevalence of fentanyl, along with methamphetamines and now xylazine, contributes to deadly traffic accidents, police involved shootings and the health, safety and academic performance of

our children. It is sneaking into every community and stealing the lives and livelihoods of valued citizens.

What can we do?

First of all, I am announcing tonight that we will increase the State's purchase and distribution of naloxone by 25 percent – a strategy that has contributed to a 93 percent survival rate among those who experience an overdose. We start by saving lives, pure and simple.

Then, with non-taxpayer funds committed by Attorney General Aaron Frey, we will double the number of trained individuals who join law enforcement on calls related to substance use and who can lead people to treatment and recovery services.

Last December alone, these “OPTIONS liaisons” responded to dozens of calls with law enforcement officers and got nearly 100 people into treatment.

“OPTIONS” is working and by expanding it we will save more lives.

Attorney General Frey, thank you for helping us provide this life-saving program to more people. As part of this budget, I am also proposing an historic \$237 million in combined State and Federal funding for substance use disorder and mental health services, to include an increase in rates paid to providers.

This will allow, for example, a 48 percent increase for methadone treatment and an 8.2 percent increase for intensive outpatient services, to complement an increase in recovery residences and a 24/7 drop-in center.

And recognizing that the pandemic has taken a toll on the mental health of Maine people – including our children – our budget strengthens Maine's mental health system, proposing rate increases starting at 15 percent in crisis residential services, 30 percent in school and community-based services, and other improvements as part of our commitment to end the 30-year old AMHI consent decree.

I ask you, please, approve all these much-needed investments.

Look, there is not a person in this room who has not been touched by the scourge of substance abuse disorder. People like:

The family of Hannah Flaherty of Eustis, only 14 years old, a straight A-student who had no history of drug use and who was loved by her community, who died after ingesting what Hannah evidently thought was cocaine. It was pure fentanyl.

Then there was the 11-month old baby girl in Corinna who overdosed on some fentanyl that her parents had lying around. She was saved by naloxone and by the heroism of first responders. Police found traces of fentanyl in her crib and on her teddy bear.

And, then, of course, there was three-year old Hailey Goding of Old Town, whose mother is serving 19 years in prison for the fentanyl overdose death of that little child.

### Child Welfare

We must acknowledge that the drug epidemic is jeopardizing the safety, security and welfare of our youngest children as well as our adults, our families and our workforce. Prevention programs in our schools and communities are also key. But we must protect children at risk, first and foremost. Substance use disorder is identified as a risk factor in 53 percent of cases when a child is removed from the home.

To improve the safety of our children, we must recognize that Maine's drug epidemic is a grave threat to the safety of our children.

And tonight I am announcing a series of new actions to address both.

First, we will partner with the Maine Child Welfare Action Network to develop a new, comprehensive plan to keep children safe by keeping families strong – by ensuring kids have healthy food, safe housing, and child care, and by supporting parents with job training and education, and mental health and substance use services.

If we keep families healthy, then we can keep children safe.

Second, I am directing the Department of Health and Human Services to embed a clinical expert in substance use disorder in every child welfare district in Maine to better recognize the influence of substance use, to navigate the risks to children, and to steer parents into treatment.

We know this strategy works because we have done it before, providing experts in domestic violence to help caseworkers identify and confront abuse in the home and combat its profound effects on children in particular.

Third, I have directed the Department of Health and Human Services to engage recovery coaches with lived experience to assist parents struggling with substance use disorder.

Remembering that “the opposite of addiction is not (simply) sobriety but connections,” these people can share their own experiences with parents and walk with them along the road to recovery, while making sure the children are protected.

Lastly, I want to expand the number of Family Recovery Courts in Maine. These specialty courts work with families whose children are at risk because their parents are struggling with substance use disorder. I will engage with the Chief Justice, the Attorney General, and others to expand these courts and promote them aggressively as an effective means to get parents into treatment, to closely monitor their progress, and, ultimately, to reunite them with their children only when it is appropriate to do so.

This approach recognizes that the safety of our children is deeply intertwined with the safety of our families and our communities – and that each of these is threatened by the growing prevalence of dangerous drugs.

It also complements the significant action undertaken by my Administration and the last Legislature to improve the child welfare system – enacting bipartisan legislation to strengthen the Office of the Child Welfare Ombudsman; investing more than \$30 million to bridge the gaps in the child welfare workforce; and improving our policies and practices in child welfare.

To date, we have increased caseworker positions by 29 percent, we have increased the number of resource (or foster) homes by 31 percent, and we have replaced an outdated child welfare information system.

We have created a new unit to respond 24/7 to emergency reports of suspected abuse or neglect. And we improved our intake systems for reports of abuse and neglect, including launching an online reporting system for school personnel, medical professionals and law enforcement who suspect a child is at risk.

Tonight I also ask the Legislature to approve my request for nearly \$15 million for foster care and adoption assistance so that we can support those who care for children in state custody.

I welcome the Legislature's continued oversight of child welfare. Every death of a child in any way connected to the child welfare system should be scrutinized for ways to improve and strengthen our system while preserving the ability of the state to put behind bars anyone who caused that child's death.

As we talk about ways to improve our child welfare system, we must also have a robust debate about all the ways we can improve the overall wellbeing of all children and families.

I pledge to you that my Administration will not shy away from any good, effective idea to ensure that every child in Maine is happy and healthy. We cannot and shall not rest in this fight.

### Court System

To that same end, we need the assistance of the courts who are facing an unprecedented backlog of cases stemming from the disruption of the pandemic.

In this budget, I am proposing \$15 million to allow the courts to hire additional marshals and clerks, which will enable the courts to operate safely and more efficiently.

To build on this investment, I am also announcing that I will also propose an additional four district court judgeships to relieve the backlog of cases and to allow the courts to prioritize the most urgent matters such as domestic violence, serious crimes and child protection cases and intensive but effective specialty courts such as Family Recovery Courts.



And I know the Legislature is concerned about our Constitutional obligation to provide legal counsel to low-income Maine people.

I am too.

I have proposed funding for ten new public defenders, building on the five positions established during the last legislative session. I ask you to approve these positions.

And to complement this effort, I have written to dozens of law firms around the state asking them to designate one or more attorneys to join the roster of counsel available to accept indigent legal cases. It is good for the firms, good for the courts, and good for the people.

This problem will require a comprehensive effort, inside and outside of government, including, first and foremost, reducing the backlog in our courts, as the rising number of cases discourages many lawyers from accepting court appointed matters.

I look forward to working with the Legislature throughout the budget writing process to discuss what steps we can take to strengthen our legal system and the delivery of justice to all Maine citizens.

### Conclusion

My friends, this budget proposal is strong. It is balanced. It lives within our means. It does not raise taxes. It makes meaningful investments in the things people rely on every day – while maintaining our record high Rainy Day Fund to protect us against an economic downturn.

18-time baseball All-Star Yogi Berra said, “If you don’t know where you’re going, you might not get there.”

Well, we know where we are going – and this budget is our blueprint to get there.

You know, I have never wavered in my fundamental belief that the people of Maine are our greatest asset.

We have weathered long winters, terrible storms, wars, floods, famines, recessions, and, yes, pandemics.

We’ve taken to deep coastal waters to haul lobsters; we’ve worked the fields of the County to harvest potatoes; and we’ve ventured far into the Maine woods to fell trees.

Some have traveled “from away,” braving the daunting prospect of change and, in some circumstances, even risking life and limb – to come to this beautiful place we call home.

In each of these acts is unshakeable courage, a spirit of independence and self reliance, a fortitude that is as fearless as it is inexhaustible.

That is the inherent character of Maine people.

Our job, our responsibility, is to foster that character. If we provide the human infrastructure – a strong health care system, good schools, housing, roads, child care, broadband – then the people of Maine will do the rest.

And that is what this budget does – it carries forward what we promised to the people of Maine. With it, we will unlock our vast potential.

I look forward to working with all of you in the coming months to enact a strong, bipartisan budget that is worthy of the people we serve and that addresses our most pressing needs.

It is always a privilege to be here in this historic chamber with you.

Happy Valentine's Day, from me to all of you!

Thank you.

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