

GOVERNOR GINA M. RAIMONDO



STATE OF THE STATE FEBRUARY 3, 2021

****AS PREPARED FOR DELIVERY****

Speaker Shekarchi, Senate President Ruggerio, my fellow Rhode Islanders: We come together tonight, united by the love we share for our great state and our belief that our best days are ahead. Each year, we gather in this chamber with the General Assembly, General Officers, judges, cabinet members, local leaders, and so many others. I am missing these colleagues tonight as we have to adapt our traditions because of COVID-19 – just as we have all done so many times this year.

2020 was a year we will never forget. Together, we faced challenges and tragedy like never before. But we got through it. We did what Rhode Islanders have always done: we innovated, and we persevered. And tonight, we allow ourselves to envision a brighter, more joyful, more prosperous time ahead. A time when we can be together again with family and friends – when we can work, learn and enjoy each other's company without so many restrictions.

2021 will be our year of rebuilding.

There's a lot of work to do, but I stand here confident that we have laid the foundation for a stronger and more equitable Rhode Island. And I know that Lt. Governor McKee is prepared to lead our state. He's passionate, he's experienced, he's committed to public service, and he's going to do a great job.

I want you to know that there will be no disruption to our state's COVID-19 response, and Lt. Governor McKee has committed to maintaining the entire statewide response team. I also want you to be reassured, as I am, that we are in a good, stable place. Our weekly percent positive is 3.3% – the lowest

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it has been in over three months. Our hospitalizations continue to decline. We have performed over 2.5 million tests and administered over 100,000 vaccines. By every measure, we're on the right path, and the end is in sight.

Tonight, as we reflect on the past year, let's begin by recognizing the nearly 2,200 families across our state that have lost a loved one to COVID-19. This virus robbed so many of you of the chance to properly say goodbye. To every Rhode Islander who has lost someone: we grieve with you and we pray for you. Tonight, we're lighting the dome of the State House in memory of your loved ones.

2020 was a year of heartbreak and struggle. Every single day I heard from healthcare professionals working overnight shifts without a day off; parents balancing work with virtual learning; waiters, waitresses, cashiers and clerks out-of-work, surviving on unemployment insurance, worried about when, or whether, their jobs would come back; small business owners who wanted to stay open and make payroll but didn't know how much longer they could hold on; Rhode Islanders struggling with addiction; and families devastated by overdose.

And we also know that women have borne the brunt of this economic crisis. Women have lost jobs in record numbers.¹ Women are disproportionately on the frontlines as teachers, nurses, childcare workers, and caregivers.² And moms have carried the load at home during the pandemic.³

But at the same time, our challenges have united and inspired us. Healthcare workers and teachers came out of retirement to join the response. We built field hospitals in a matter of weeks. We established best-in-the-nation COVID-19 testing⁴; provided housing and childcare to frontline workers; successfully set up distance learning; and got kids safely back to the classroom. And now, our mission is to vaccinate every Rhode Islander as quickly as possible.

None of this has been easy, and everyone has sacrificed. To every Rhode Islander who has missed out on celebrating holidays and milestones, who has canceled travel, who has worn a mask every day – thank you. You have saved lives.

While much has been taken from us, the strength and spirit of who we are as Rhode Islanders endures.

When I think about the past year, I think about neighbors checking in on one another, offering to pick up groceries and prescriptions, writing letters and connecting virtually. I think about businesses that changed their operations overnight to produce masks, gowns, and hand sanitizer. I think about all the state employees, and the men and women of the Rhode Island National Guard, who sacrificed so much

¹ The December 2020 Bureau of Labor Statistics Employment Situation Summary by the National Women's Law Center showed that there were nearly 2.1 million fewer women in the workforce in December 2020 than there were in February 2020. nwlc.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/01/December-Jobs-Day.pdf

² An April 2020 New York Times analysis of census data crossed with the federal government's essential worker guidelines found that one in every three employed women work in an essential job. <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/04/18/us/coronavirus-women-essential-workers.html>

³ A USC study found one-third of working mothers in two-parent households reported they were the only ones providing care for their children during the pandemic, compared to one-tenth of working fathers. <https://news.usc.edu/171617/covid-19-women-job-losses-childcare-mental-health-usc-study/>

⁴ Rhode Island leads the nation in tests per 100,000 people. <https://coronavirus.jhu.edu/testing/states-comparison>

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to serve on the frontlines. You inspire me and give me hope. It's because of you – because of your relentless community spirit – that I stand before you tonight more confident than ever that the state of our state is strong because the people of our state are strong.

Rhode Island is prepared to meet this moment. I know that because of the work we have done together over the past six years to make our state stronger. We have made investments in Rhode Islanders – in skills and education, job creation, infrastructure, healthcare, equity and sustainability. On this foundation, we will build back better. And we'll make sure that no one is left behind. It will take all of us to rebuild this economy, and that means everyone must reap the rewards.

Six years ago, on a frigid, snowy day, I stood on the State House steps and vowed that, together, we would ignite Rhode Island's comeback.

At that time, we were stuck in the wake of the Great Recession.⁵ Many believed our problems were too big to solve. Our system was too broken. As a result, we had lowered our expectations and allowed more than a bit of cynicism to creep in. But on that day, we committed to a fresh start.

Rhode Islanders stepped up and became part of the solution – committing to do things differently, to believe that change is possible, and to harness that same eternal optimism of our founders as we charted a new course.

We rolled up our sleeves and we got to work.

When we started, we didn't have any of the job creation tools we needed, so we designed them from scratch. And I want to especially thank my colleagues in the legislature for your partnership in those early weeks of my administration and every day since. Together, we went from having one of the highest unemployment rates in the nation⁶ to having more jobs than ever before.⁷

We worked with businesses to give Rhode Islanders the skills they need to get actual jobs in growing fields.⁸ And when COVID-19 hit, we supercharged this model to help 7,000 Rhode Islanders who had been laid off during the pandemic get back to work.⁹

⁵ Rhode Island had the highest unemployment rate in the nation for eight consecutive months in 2013 and 2014. On the day Governor Raimondo took office, Rhode Island ranked 48th in short-term and long-term growth.

www.governor.ri.gov/documents/press/RIcomeback02182015.pdf

⁶ In January 2015, Rhode Island had the 9th highest unemployment rate of any state.

https://www.bls.gov/news.release/archives/laus_03172015.pdf

⁷ In the February 2020 jobs report, Rhode Island reported a record-high 508,500 jobs.

<https://dlt.ri.gov/documents/pdf/lmi/mar20eb.pdf>

⁸ As of February 2021, the Real Jobs RI program has worked with 1,946 businesses and served 12,363 Rhode Islanders

<https://dlt.ri.gov/documents/pdf/realjobs/ProgReportRJRI.pdf>

⁹ As of February 2021, 7,176 Rhode Islanders were either enrolled in – or have already completed – a Back to Work RI training program.

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The year we took office, Rhode Island saw just \$84 million in commercial real estate investment.¹⁰ But by the end of our first term, we had record growth and over a billion dollars in new investment.¹¹ The long-empty Route 195 land in Providence is now a hub of innovation, with two million square feet of new development underway, creating thousands of new jobs.¹² We've also cut thousands of pages of unnecessary regulations¹³ and started the state's first small business loan program. And more than half of these loans have gone to minority- and women-owned businesses.¹⁴

And I'm especially proud that we're building an economy that works for workers. In partnership with labor, we've increased wages for childcare and home care workers – jobs held primarily by women of color.¹⁵ We've guaranteed paid sick and family leave. Today, nearly every Rhode Islander has health insurance.¹⁶ We've codified Roe v. Wade. And we've raised the minimum wage four times. Let's keep going. Now, more than ever, hardworking people need a raise.

Over the last six years, we went from having the worst infrastructure in the country¹⁷ to more road construction than ever before,¹⁸ creating thousands of good, union jobs in the process. We've also grown our green economy,¹⁹ built the nation's first offshore wind farm, and put Rhode Island on a path to be the first state powered by 100% renewable energy by the end of this decade.²⁰ Rhode Islanders can be proud that we're leading the way in the fight against climate change.

When it comes to our future, nothing is more important than our kids. Education is about equity. It's how we ensure every kid, in every neighborhood, gets a fair shot to realize his or her potential. Together, we've made record investments in K-12 education,²¹ and we've gone from crumbling school buildings to a billion-dollar, once-in-a-generation investment in school construction.

¹⁰ <https://naiop.org/en/Research-and-Publications/Reports/Economic-Impacts-of-Commercial-Real-Estate-2016>

¹¹ <https://www.naiop.org/en/Research-and-Publications/Reports/Economic-Impacts-of-Commercial-Real-Estate-2019>

¹² <https://www.195district.com/resources/common/userfiles/file/Agenda/2020%20Agendas/12.16.20/2020%20year%20end%20presentation.pdf>

¹³ As of 2018, Governor Raimondo has cut over 8,000 pages of onerous business regulations.

<https://www.ri.gov/press/view/34428>

¹⁴ To date, 150 small businesses have received loans through this program, 77 of which (51.3%) are minority and/or women-owned.

¹⁵ 87.5% of home care workers are women, and 52.7% of home care workers are people of color. 95.6% of childcare workers are women, and 41.5% of childcare workers are people of color. <https://www.bls.gov/cps/cpsaat18.htm>

¹⁶ 96% of Rhode Islanders have health coverage, the third lowest uninsured rate in the country.

<https://healthsourceri.com/healthsource-ri-extending-open-enrollment-period-to-help-more-rhode-islanders-get-health-coverage-for-2021>

¹⁷ In 2015, the Federal Highway Administration ranked Rhode Island's bridges the worst in the nation.

<https://www.fhwa.dot.gov/bridge/nbi/no10/defbr15.cfm>

¹⁸ <https://www.wpri.com/news/local-news/providence/drive-like-you-work-here-ridot-encourages-work-zone-safety/>

¹⁹ <http://www.energy.ri.gov/cleanjobs/>

²⁰ <http://www.energy.ri.gov/documents/renewable/The%20Road%20to%20100%20Percent%20Renewable%20Electricity%20-%20Final%20Report%2012-31-20.pdf>

²¹ Governor Raimondo has overseen an influx of \$223 million to the public school system.

<http://www.rilin.state.ri.us/housefiscalreport/Budget%20Analyses/2020%20Session/FY%202021%20Governor%27s%20Budget%20Analysis%20Section%20VI%20Special%20Reports/FY%202021%20Budget%20Analysis%20-%20Education%20Aid.pdf>

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We quadrupled the number of public Pre-K classes and made all-day Kindergarten a reality for every child.²² We became the first state in America to teach computer science in every public school.²³ We increased the number of high-quality career and technical training programs in our high schools by 60%, and we opened the Westerly Education Center.²⁴ Later this year, we'll cut the ribbon on another education center in Woonsocket – replicating the successful model that has already provided skills for new jobs to over 3,000 students.²⁵

We took bold steps to make community college tuition-free for every high school graduate. At the time we did that, few states had taken this path. Now our country looks to us as a model. And since we started offering that scholarship to young people in Rhode Island, the two-year graduation rate at CCRI has tripled, and we've seen a 500% increase among students of color.²⁶

Last year, during this address, I stood here and warned that this program was set to expire, and if that happens, we would be pulling the rug out from under thousands of Rhode Islanders at the worst possible time. But tonight, I have good news. The Speaker and Senate President and a dozen of their colleagues have committed to removing that expiration and making this program permanent. So tonight, on behalf of thousands of CCRI students and graduates, and the countless more who will follow in their footsteps, I want to thank our legislative leaders for keeping this promise to Rhode Islanders and giving students a shot at the American Dream.

Rhode Island was founded on the principles of inclusion, acceptance and equality. We believe all people deserve to be treated with dignity and respect and should have the same opportunities for success – no matter your race, religion, gender, ethnicity, who you love or where you come from.

These principles have guided our determination to appoint judges who look like the people they serve. I'm proud to have appointed highly-qualified, talented judges at every level of our court system, including the most diverse group of judges in state history.²⁷ And, for the first time ever, the Rhode Island Supreme Court is now multi-racial and majority-female.

For too long, our state's name was dragged down by a word so closely associated with the ugliest time in our history. We can't change our past, but we must acknowledge it and commit to a more inclusive future. Last year, the people of Rhode Island came together and made history, voting to finally remove the word "plantations" from the official name of our great state.

This is the Rhode Island we have built together over the last six years.

²² In the 2020-2021 school year, Rhode Island offered 1,848 public Pre-K seats across 100 classrooms in 16 communities. When Governor Raimondo took office during the 2014-2015 school year, Rhode Island offered 306 public Pre-K seats across 17 classrooms in 8 communities.

²³ <https://www.gettingsmart.com/2016/11/all-kids-coding-rhode-island/>

²⁴ https://www.ride.ri.gov/Portals/0/Uploads/Documents/Students-and-Families-Great-Schools/Educational-Programming/Career-and-Tech/Approved_CTE_Programs_AY_2019.2020_ptm_final.pdf?ver=2019-12-23-135322-443

²⁵ <https://www.westerlyedcenter.org/page/about-us/>

²⁶ <https://www.ccri.edu/marketing/pdfs/Promise%20summary%20deck.pdf>

²⁷ Governor Raimondo has appointed people of color to eight court vacancies, including several history-making appointments. Every person of color currently serving on a state court in Rhode Island was appointed by Governor Raimondo.

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This is the foundation we have laid for a bright future – for a Rhode Island that brings everyone along. We have to keep up that fight.

Monday marked 11 months since the first case of COVID-19 in Rhode Island. For the past 11 months, we have traveled a difficult path, but we’ve held on to hope – just as our state flag inspires us to do.

I will always have hope in Rhode Island. This is the state that gave my grandfather hope when he first arrived from Italy as a teenager and taught himself English at the Providence Public Library. It’s the state where for many years my dad, a Navy veteran and the first in his family to attend college, was able to support his family with a good job in manufacturing while he hoped for an even brighter life for his kids.

This is where my brother, sister and I grew up and rode the waves together at Sand Hill Cove Beach. It’s where Andy and I were married, and Ceci and Tommy were born. It’s where I started my business, and where I’ve had the honor to serve as your treasurer and as your governor. I’m forever grateful for the trust you placed in me these last ten years. Rhode Island is – and always will be – my home.

It is very difficult for me to leave Rhode Island. If I am confirmed as Commerce Secretary, it will be a privilege to serve in President Biden’s cabinet as we rebuild America and lift up those who have been left behind – a continuation of the work we have done together these past six years.

Thank you, Rhode Island. Thank you for embracing me, embracing my family, and embracing change.

Thank you to my incredible team for your talent, your energy, your passion for public service, and your total commitment to building a stronger Rhode Island.

And thank you to Rhode Islanders in every community for believing in our vision. You have made me a better person and a better governor.

At my first inauguration, I promised you that I would wake up every day focused on expanding opportunities for families in Rhode Island no matter what obstacles were thrown in our path. I promised that I would go anywhere and work with anyone who wanted to do what was right for Rhode Island.

Although I will be working in Washington, the countless Rhode Islanders I have come to know will always be at the top of my mind. Every small business owner, every Promise student, everyone who had the courage to train for a new job, every woman breaking down barriers, every single Rhode Islander stepping up and giving back. You have my commitment that I will continue to wake up every day focused on making life better for you, and for all our fellow Americans.

Many years from now, we will look back at this year and everything we overcame together. I hope what we remember is the strength, determination and fortitude that carried us from some of the darkest days into a brighter, more prosperous, more equitable future.

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I'd like to end tonight with a special message for girls and young women across Rhode Island. This world needs you. We need your voice. We need your ideas. We need you to lead.

When I was first asked to serve as Commerce Secretary, I was unsure. But it was the women in my life – my mother, my sister, and even my teenage daughter – who gave me the push I needed. They told me it was okay to be nervous, but that I had to look within myself and summon the courage to lead.

So, to all the young women out there, I want to leave you with their words. Look within yourself, and summon the courage to lead. There will be plenty of times when you're unsure. In those moments, we need you to push aside your doubt and fear, and to say yes. Know that you can be anything you want to be. You are strong and smart and capable.

And I'm looking forward to the day when one of you is our governor.

Thank you. God bless you. And God bless Rhode Island.