

OFFICE OF THE GOVERNOR

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GOVERNOR



STATE CAPITOL
MONTGOMERY, ALABAMA 36130

STATE OF ALABAMA

2016 State of the State Governor Robert Bentley February 2, 2016

Lieutenant Governor Ivey, Speaker Hubbard, President Marsh, distinguished guests, members of the Alabama Legislature, Chief Justice Moore, members of the Alabama Supreme Court and My Fellow Alabamians.

July 1969, the State of Alabama stood midway through a year of celebration, playing host to a collection of events commemorating our state's 150th birthday. From the Tennessee Valley to the Gulf Coast, festivals, plays, parties and ceremonies marked 150 years of Statehood. Those celebrations paused briefly on the night of July 20, 1969, as Alabamians along with our fellow Americans stood breathless, watching and waiting for man to take that first historic step on the Moon.

With that first giant leap for mankind, America achieved the unthinkable, the incredible, and the unbelievable.

And it was Alabama that made the impossible, possible. The powerful Saturn Five rocket that took man to space, to new heights, was imagined, engineered and built by a brilliant team of scientists right here in Alabama.

It was Alabamians who dared to believe they could do the improbable.

It was Alabamians who challenged themselves to find a way, where there had never been one before.

It was those Alabamians who inspired America and stunned the world when they proved they were worthy of the words of a fallen President, who years earlier challenged us to do things not because they are easy, but because they are hard.

It was their Moonshot. Their one chance to set their aim on a lofty target, to do something no one could have possibly imagined, and to ultimately change the world.

Our great state's rich history is made up a series of Alabamians thinking audaciously and courageously in confronting even the most painful problems and the most overwhelming obstacles.

We are a people who bravely take up arms to defend our nation's freedoms, and a people who courageously, yet peacefully, confront injustice when those freedoms are compromised even among our own fellow citizens.

We are a people who will not be content to see a neighbor in need and not offer an opportunity for help.

Where there is urgency, we respond. Where there is a challenge, we accept. Where there is threat, we protect. Where there is scarcity, we provide.

And where there is need, we create opportunity.

When all children need access to a quality early education, we give them that chance.

When our poorest, most vulnerable and most marginalized seek hope, we will lend a hand.

Where we fall short of providing even the most basic services to the incarcerated, we will rise up and fulfill our obligation.

When access to an education or the ability to learn a viable job skill are hindered, we will clear the path.

And when jobs are needed, we will bring industries along with brighter opportunities to our communities and families.

Last year alone, Alabama added over 52-thousand jobs. Our industries are so convinced that our state is the place to grow, that they invested over 2-billion dollars in creating good, high-skill, well-paying jobs for our people.

As many as 2 thousand new jobs are coming to north Alabama where Polaris is building a 127-million dollar ATV factory at a new production hub in Huntsville.

300 more jobs are coming as Mercedes, the automaker that put Alabama on the world map as an industry contender, is seeing dramatic growth at its Tuscaloosa plant. With its latest expansion, the hands of over 34-hundred Alabamians will proudly assemble Mercedes for the world.

This year skilled Alabamians will proudly deliver the first Alabama-made Airbus jetliner off the assembly line of the 600-million dollar Mobile plant. By the end of next year, 50 of the high-tech jetliners will roll off the line, proudly stamped Made in Alabama.

GE Aviation has chosen Alabamians as the ones who will revolutionize how jet engines are manufactured at two new plants to be built this year.

The Alabama-made Honda Ridgeline truck will make its debut during the Super Bowl this weekend and in showrooms across the country this spring.

And Google decided in June that Jackson County, Alabama is the best place in the world to locate a 600-Million dollar call center.

It is no wonder, then, that Alabama's impressive string of coveted economic development projects have rightfully earned us the title "State of the Year" by Business Facilities magazine.

The world has discovered what I know and what everyone in this room knows - That of all the rich resources Alabama is blessed to have, there is no greater asset than the skilled hands of the men and women who get up every day and go to work – they are our hardworking Alabamians.

Our aggressive efforts to draw industry to Alabama are reflected in the unemployment rate 33% lower than when we first took office.

Not since 2008 has the State of Alabama seen more of our people employed.

And never before have we been so intentional in our efforts to ensure that every Alabamian who wants a job can get a job.

Through a series of job fairs conducted across the state by the Alabama Department of Labor, counties with the highest unemployment rates have seen a marked decrease.

We've brought business and industries directly into the neediest communities to meet face to face with men and women looking for a job.

We've held workshops to teach basic interview and job skills, so men and women in these communities have their best chance to land a good job.

The results have been remarkable, counties have seen double-digit unemployment rates go down and jobs are being filled.

In Alabama the coal industry has suffered tremendously, leaving thousands of Alabamians looking for work, no thanks to the job-killing policies of the Obama Administration.

Over a thousand people poured into a job fair held two weeks ago in Walker County. 54 companies were there meeting with the men and women who need a good job. One of those companies was a Japanese auto supplier, which days before, had announced it was bringing 300 jobs to the area.

This is how we put Alabamians back to work.

And I want to commend Alabama Labor Commissioner Fitzgerald Washington for his innovative and tireless efforts to connect our people with good jobs.

In schools all across our state, teachers and principals have challenged themselves and their students to aim higher, to work smarter and to strive to meet higher standards.

Alabama's students have risen to the challenge, and the results are astounding.

Alabama's high school graduation rate jumped an impressive 17-percent in the last four years. Today Alabama's high school seniors are graduating at a rate of 89-percent, up from 72-percent just four years ago.

This is a testament to hardworking teachers, principals and support staff who encourage and help our students meet their education goals and graduate.

And I appreciate their hard work. That is why in the balanced-Budget I will present, I will include a pay-raise for teachers, AND school support personnel, as well as all state employees – with NO STRINGS ATTACHED.

25-Thousand businesses in Alabama are small businesses and many of those are owned and operated by men and women who have bravely served our country. Alabama has and always will be a state that takes great pride and great care of our men and women who proudly call themselves Veterans.

With over 420-thousand Veterans in Alabama we want to make sure we give them every opportunity to succeed. Our Veterans have given so much, yet they ask for so little.

Working with the Alabama Small Business Commission and the Alabama Veterans Network, we have developed a way for customers to identify a Veteran-owned business. Simple stickers displayed in Veteran-owned businesses statewide are aimed at helping us know that small business is owned by someone who sacrificed for our country.

One of those Alabama Veteran business owners is here with us tonight. Clayton Hinchman is the Founder and CEO of USi, an IT company that supports government, private and non-profit clients.

Clayton Hinchman served in the United States Army as an Infantry Officer. He medically retired as a Captain due to the wounds he sustained during an improvised explosive attack while he was conducting a night raid to kill or capture Al Qaeda in Iraq.

He is a West Point graduate; he has been awarded the Purple Heart and The Bronze Star.

He's also an Alabamian.

Tonight Clayton represents all the men and women who not only served our country, but the Veterans who are now helping our economy grow.

And tonight, Clayton, all our Veterans, and our men and women serving in the Military, deserve our thanks and our support.

The men and women who so bravely defend our nation, do not risk their lives, nor their livelihood so that our Freedoms can be easily ignored.

Our Founding Fathers did not dedicate themselves to chart a course for Democracy so that 200 years later our Constitution could be circumvented or worse, neglected by the power of any one person.

I have twice taken the Oath of the Office of Governor. Twice I have sworn to uphold the Constitution of the United States and the Constitution of Alabama.

It is my solemn duty, as one called by God to this office, and elected by the people I serve, to support the Constitution, and the principles that laid the very foundation for our nation, not to find a way around them, should I ever disagree.

We are all endowed by Our Creator with certain, specific rights. Our Constitution serves to protect those rights. It guarantees individual rights and serves to stop any government – especially our own – from taking them away.

The right of the people to keep and bear arms, guaranteed by our Second Amendment, shall not be infringed, not by any government, not by any individual, and not by any stroke of a Presidential pen.

The United States of America remains, as it has been since its foundation, a national government with limited, enumerated powers.

And the Tenth Amendment guarantees not only the limits of those powers, but the broader powers of each one of the fifty states.

The Powers delegated by the Constitution to the federal government are few and defined. Those which are to remain in state governments are numerous and infinite.

In declaring our nation's independence our great country dedicated itself to liberty, and equality and declared its sovereignty over other nations.

In turn, that same sovereignty belongs to the states, to Alabama, and must be recognized by the federal government.

By abandoning sovereignty, we abandon democracy.

And worse we undermine a state's reserved right to protect life and liberty of our citizens.

The threat of terrorism on U.S. soil is as real today as any time since 9-11. Radical Islamist carry out carefully planned attacks on innocent lives from Paris to California - and our people, finding little comfort from our federal government, wait and worry for our safety.

The federal government's Refugee Resettlement Act has failed America and its citizens.

The outdated program – which pre-dates any recent acts of radical terrorism - allows refugees from the most radical nations to enter countries including the U.S. with little known about them.

Among those refugees are those who would commit the most violent, deadly and extreme acts of terrorism. When 130 people were slaughtered, in Paris at the hands of radical Islamic terrorists, among those killers was a refugee from a terrorist nation.

My number one concern is always for the safety and security of the people of Alabama. Following those attacks my administration immediately took a long hard look at the federal government's Refugee Resettlement process.

What we, and dozens of other states discovered, is unsettling and alarming.

From the moment a refugee from any country sets foot on American soil, in our borders, we have found the State of Alabama is completely excluded from knowing the first piece of information about that person.

No past health status is divulged. No names. Very little background. Virtually nothing is known about refugees, once they are here.

Many have entered our state, from terrorist nations. Some, single-adult males, leaving no trace, have out-migrated to other states, their whereabouts still unknown.

That, my fellow Alabamians, is absolutely unacceptable.

We simply cannot have a federal program that greatly impacts states yet does NOT allow states access to critical information.

The federal government shall not, and cannot be allowed to ignore states or their governments. And in Alabama we will not stand by while our citizens are placed at risk. We will not place our people in harm's way.

I have made my deep concerns well known to the Obama Administration. And those concerns have fallen on deaf ears.

In an effort to reform the Refugee Resettlement Act, my administration filed suit last month against the federal government demanding the involvement of the states in this critical program.

By filing suit, my goal is to completely reform the Refugee Resettlement Program.

For the safety and security of our citizens, we must ensure an outdated, archaic and dangerous process that excludes the states is eliminated.

In addition we will ask the Legislature to introduce a joint resolution in this session calling on Congress to reform the Refugee Resettlement Act.

My gratitude goes to the resolution sponsors, who will join me in this fight. They are State Representative Connie Rowe and State Senator Clyde Chambliss.

Please join me in thanking them.

And in the meantime, you can rest assured that this administration will always place the safety and security of our people first.

Even if the federal government does not.

Lead by Secretary Spencer Collier, the Alabama Law Enforcement Agency works tirelessly to protect our people, whether it is increased security measures at large gatherings, or identifying and investigating potential terrorist threats, our men and women in law enforcement will always stand to protect the people of this state.

One year after its full implementation, ALEA has become one of the most efficient and effective agencies in the state. At a time when the threat to our own safety and security is at risk, I am convinced the men and women in Alabama's Law Enforcement will work tirelessly to keep Alabamians safe and secure.

And just as we must adequately fund our military to protect our nation, we must adequately fund ALEA to protect our state, and our people from harm.

In Alabama we will always support the men and women who serve and protect and put their own lives on the line every day for our safety.

I will do everything as Governor to protect those who cannot protect themselves. And protect our rights guaranteed by the Constitution.

I will always firmly uphold these truths which are self-evident, that all men are created equal.

They are the most vulnerable, the most helpless, the most abused and the most oppressed.

They are the elderly, the ill, and especially the unborn – everyone has been endowed with the right to life.

Everyone has been endowed with the right to pursue happiness.

And no one may rightfully deny us those things.

No man, no government, no state should impede someone's ability to make a better life, for themselves, for their families and for their children.

I was born the youngest of six children to parents who lived in a small house on a piece of land in rural Alabama.

My family didn't have electricity or indoor plumbing until I was around six-years-old. I didn't even own a toothbrush until it was time to start school.

Neither of my parents had even a high school education.

By any standard I could have been one of the statistics that has become too common in this country and especially in this state.

I could have been the child of a family not able to afford an education, not able to gain the skills needed to hold a well-paying job, not even able to support a family.

But I was given two things every child needs and deserves; unconditional love and opportunity. And thankfully, I accepted both.

All children, their parents and all our people must be able to find *their* opportunity in Alabama.

While good jobs are coming, industries are growing and education is improving – we cannot continue to ignore persistent problems.

Alabama is the sixth poorest state in the country.

While we rank number one in football teams and economic development accolades, our state consistently falls dead last in virtually every quality of life ranking from infant mortality to obesity.

While we excel in job recruitment, on average we have more people in poverty than the country as a whole.

Too many Alabamians are under-educated, under-trained, unhealthy and unable to break the cycle of poverty and the cycle of dependence.

It drains our state resources, it drains our hope and it stymies our state's growth.

Year after year, Alabama continues to find itself in 48th, 49th or 50th place.

I'm not OK with that.

And no one in this room should be satisfied with last place, especially when it comes to our people.

If we are ever going to go from being a good state to a great state, we first must resolve to reverse the problems that have plagued Alabama for decades.

Poverty does not discriminate. In Alabama, it knows no race, no region, and no political party.

The poverty rate is in double digits in Winston County just as it is in Dallas County.

So hear me on this: Every person in this room, Democrat and Republican, represents the poor, the uneducated, and the unhealthy.

Whether adults or children, urban or rural, black or white –we are all Alabamians.

It's time we take a hard look at our problems, own them, and work toward a solution.

To care about Alabama is to care about her people – every last one.

I wanted to be the Governor of this state because I wanted to help people and to make their lives better.

I also want Alabama to be known as the best state in the nation.

Together we have a chance, an opportunity to fundamentally change those things that hold our state back, that stand in the way of greatness.

It's time we do the impossible.

The improbable.

The unbelievable.

It's time we shoot for the Moon.

In the Year 2019, The State of Alabama will celebrate its 200th Birthday. Fifty years after Alabamians made history with the Lunar landing.

That same year I will have completed my service to this state as its 53rd Governor.

I want to leave this office, able to say with confidence that Alabama is truly a great state.

Today we launch an ambitious course of action aimed at fundamentally changing Alabama, opening doors of opportunity, clearing the path to prosperity and solving decades old problems.

Today we launch Alabama's Great State 2019 Plan, our strategic three year course of action.

Alabama's Great State 2019 Plan sets its sights on educating and training our people, while connecting and constructing basic opportunities for all our citizens.

This bold course of action will guide us over the next three years. It will address long-standing problems from healthcare to prison reform with cost-effective, common sense solutions.

Specifically focusing on Alabama's approximately 55 rural counties, we are directly addressing obstacles that stand in the way of our state's potential for greatness, in education, healthcare, access to technology, job growth and economic opportunity.

Once again in Alabama, we will do what we've never been done before, not because it is easy – but because it is hard.

And we begin with some of our state's youngest citizens, in one of our state's greatest success stories.

Alabama's First Class Voluntary Pre-K program is a shining star of success in Alabama.

Through the Office of School Readiness, Alabama's First Class Pre-K is consistently ranked among the best in the nation and serves as a model for other states.

We are working to give young children a 'new, strong foundation' with the opportunity for a good education in a voluntary Pre-K program.

Children who attend Pre-K are more likely to read at grade level quicker, their math scores are higher and they are less likely to need special education services.

We know this program works, we've seen the statistics, but more importantly we've seen the results in the lives of our students.

I'd like for you to meet one of our students.

Miracle Scott is a Senior at Eufaula High School where she is in the National Honor Society and a varsity cheerleader. She has been accepted to, and will attend Auburn University this fall. Twelve years ago, as a 4 year old, Miracle was given a great opportunity when she was enrolled in one of our earliest Alabama First Class Pre K programs.

Today Miracle is an outstanding student, and able to get a good college education. I am proud of our First Class PreK, and Miracle I am proud of you.

Every 4 year old in Alabama should have the same opportunity Miracle has had.

That is why in this year's balanced budget I will present, we are doubling the amount of funding for First Class Pre-K program.

By the year 2019, we will be able to tell every parent in Alabama, there is a Pre-K classroom available for your child.

Education is the basis for the future growth of Alabama's economy.

We must build a solid foundation for our children, set them up to succeed so they are better prepared for post-secondary education and to join the workforce.

Industries have told us they need more highly trained, educated workers than we have.

Yet, the number of Alabama students who are choosing to go to college is declining.

Our goal by the year 2019 is to significantly increase the number of low-income students who are prepared to enter and succeed in post-secondary education.

Modeled after the GEAR Up Program launched last fall by UAB, Alabama's own FUTURE Scholarship Plan, will identify 7th graders beginning in the state's poorest counties.

Through Alabama's Community College System, those students will receive tutoring, summer-help programs, visits to college campuses and financial planning to make sure they not only want to go to college, but that they can and will succeed.

By the time they graduate high school, after they've met strict criteria, kept their grades up, and tapped into all available financial aid, we will pay their two-year college tuition.

Offered as a last dollars incentive, the FUTURE Scholarship Plan will not only educate and train our students, it will produce a pipeline of well-trained, well-educated talent for industries so those businesses can expand and grow.

We will be able to fund these scholarships and this plan through money we save by the streamlining measures we have already put in place in the community college system.

The money we save through consolidation and by finding efficiencies will pour back into the system to help students get a good education and be better prepared for the workforce.

Launching as a pilot program, by the Year 20-19 our goal is to expand the plan statewide.

The results will be a well-trained, well-educated new generation of Alabamians.

For the first time in Alabama, we will allow business and industry to drive our workforce development system.

This year we will restructure, streamline and clarify Alabama's Workforce System to improve how we train workers for Alabama's businesses.

The new Alabama Workforce System will be driven by business and industry demand and what skills and talents those industries need.

In turn Alabama's K-12 system, community colleges and 4-year institutions, AIDT , ATN and private training companies will all work together to not only educate, and train but to also create a talent-supply chain of hardworking Alabamians to business and industries.

Essential to economic growth, job creation and the overall quality of life in Alabama is access to technology for all our citizens.

Today over 1-million Alabamians do not have access to even the slowest and most basic high-speed wireless technology. Technology is growing at lightning speed, changing the way we educate, deliver healthcare, and even start a business, yet our communities and rural areas cannot tap into the potential that Broadband access would bring.

We are embarking on an ambitious plan to provide rural and under-served communities access to broadband – high speed, high capacity - technology.

Working with private sector providers, we will first begin by cutting the bureaucracy that stands in the way of providing broadband access.

We will first work to provide the infrastructure needed to provide broadband.

Private providers will then be able to provide access and offer it at a more affordable and manageable cost to our communities.

Promoting a robust broadband network will lead to a stronger education system, increased capabilities for healthcare, a more efficient connected law enforcement and enhanced economic development opportunities.

We cannot talk about fundamentally changing Alabama without addressing what has become a very difficult and growing problem in our state.

For decades, Alabama's prisons have become increasingly overcrowded, dangerous to both inmates and our corrections officers and incredibly costly to taxpayers.

But that's going to change beginning now.

Alabama is about to embark on a complete transformation of the state's prison system.

Led by Department of Corrections Commissioner Col Jeff Dunn, we will permanently close the doors to decades old facilities where maintenance costs have skyrocketed and increased staff are needed.

These outdated prisons will be consolidated and replaced by four, newly constructed state of the art facilities.

And by building a brand new female prison facility, the State of Alabama will permanently slam the door shut on Tutwiler Prison for Women.

Funded by an adequate bond issue, we will begin this process within the year.

The consolidation and closing of outdated facilities will produce immediate savings for the state with less operational costs, and higher efficiencies in staffing and maintenance.

These larger, more efficient facilities will meet all necessary standards and, along with Prison Reform measures put into place by the Legislature last year, it will drastically lower Alabama's prison overcrowding.

The money we save with the more efficient prisons will in turn be used to pay off the debt of the construction.

This innovative concept will not only provide more secure, safer prisons, it will also ensure the safety of our citizens, and corrections officers.

Alabama's prison system will go from being an outdated, inefficient overcrowded system to being the best. And Alabama will become the model for the rest of the nation.

In 65 of Alabama's 67 counties, there is an undeniable shortage of doctors. Alabama ranks 40th in the number of physicians per capita and we rank last in the number of dentists.

It is no wonder then that we see rising rates of preventable and manageable disease, especially among rural, low-income counties.

The majority of Alabama is rural, yet rural physicians make up less than 10-percent of the physician workforce.

Under Alabama's Great State 2019 Plan, we will increase the number of doctors serving rural areas, especially in the state's poorest counties.

Those who are classified as rural health care providers must be able to adequately support their practice and make a decent living.

To make this possible, we will increase funding for medical scholarships and loan forgiveness for medical students who commit to serving a period of time in one of our underserved communities. This applies to physicians, physician assistants, advance-practice nurses and dentists.

We will also work to create a state tax-credit of up to 5-thousand dollars and working with our Congressional delegation we will push for a federal tax credit of up to \$50-thousand dollars for those classified as rural healthcare providers.

It's the first step toward reversing alarming health problems that have not gone away in Alabama. Having a doctor in a small, rural community, changes a community and it saves lives.

Dr. John Waits is proof it can be done.

Bibb County hasn't had local labor and delivery services at its hospital in nearly 20 years.

Women in the area have to drive 30-45 minutes so they can safely deliver a baby. Dr. Waits has worked as a family doctor and obstetrician for the past 12 years at Cahaba Medical Care in Centreville. Last November he helped open Bibb Medical Center's first Labor and Delivery hospital.

And not only that, he also helps train future doctors who will follow in his footsteps.

Dr. Waits, we thank you.

In this year's budget we will increase funding to lay the foundation for 12 new residency programs across our state similar to the Bibb County model.

Primary care doctors are critical to improving the health and well-being of the chronically sick, and the chronically poor.

Greater access to good healthcare can be achieved. Our communities need it and our people deserve it.

No pageant, no festival no celebration will better commemorate Alabama's 200th birthday in the Year 2019 than for our people to be living a more prosperous, and healthy life.

In 2019, let's commemorate our state's humble beginnings by celebrating greater opportunity and access to a good strong education, quality healthcare and game-changing technology for all Alabamians.

There is no better way to mark the 50th anniversary of the time Alabamians set their mind to achieving the impossible, than for Alabamians to once again prove WE CAN DO THIS.

In 1961, when President Kennedy challenged America to travel to space, no one knew how to land on the moon because no one ever had. Alabamians figured it out.

Once again we accept an impossible challenge, and like our scientists in 1969, once again WE WILL SUCCEED.

This is our Moonshot.

This is our Great State.

God Bless you all. And may God continue to Bless the Great State of Alabama.

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"I believe in Alabama, a state dedicated to a faith in God and the enlightenment of mankind, to a democracy that safeguards the liberties of each citizen and to the conservation of her youth, her ideals and her soil. I believe it is my duty to obey her laws, to respect her flag and to be alert to her needs and generous in my efforts to foster her advancement within the statehood of the World."

The Alabama Creed