

## **The State of the County Address**

**March 3, 2026**

Good afternoon, everyone.

Thank you, Chairwoman Yvette Valdès Smith, for your warm welcome. And thank you to all of the members of the Legislature present. It is a pleasure to join you here in the Legislative Chambers.

Please join me in thanking all of our program participants: Sheriff Imperati and his dedicated color guard, Caroline, Father Mike, and Mia. I am grateful to have you as part of today's address. It warms my heart to have you here with me.

I would like to also recognize my fellow County elected officials: Sheriff Imperati, Comptroller Dan Aymar-Blair, District Attorney Anthony Parisi, County Clerk Brad Kendall, and all the members of the County Legislature. I appreciate your partnership and support as we work together to serve the people of our great county.

It is work that is done collaboratively — partnerships among county departments and agencies and elected officials; with our local municipalities; with state and federal governments; and with community agencies and local businesses — all for the benefit of the people who call Dutchess County home. I thank all of you here today who are taking part in this great work.

This address highlights several of our priorities for the coming year. But let me be clear: This is just a small glimpse of all the work our county government is doing for our neighbors every single day.

I would love to highlight everything we do; but if I tried, this address would go on for days, and I think we all prefer speeches that are short and sweet. That's why each year we reflect on the work of the Executive departments and share highlights in our Annual Report; at more than 60 pages, it is still just a sample of our work.

And while we chart a course for the year ahead, we also know that life has a way of interrupting even the best laid plans. County government is always pivoting —evaluating circumstances that are emerging and adjusting priorities, ready to act when the curveballs get thrown at us.

When the federal government shuts down and SNAP food benefits are held up, we act, working with Renee Fillette of Dutchess Outreach to mobilize distribution of locally sourced fresh food resources to food pantries.

When the Governor's Office calls and offers \$20 million to lead a statewide childcare pilot program, we act, stepping up to help create a statewide model that builds on the collaborative work of the Dutchess County Early Learning and Child Care coalition.

When storm forecasts shift and blizzard conditions threaten public safety, we act, making decisions and communicating in the best interest of public safety.

That is the reality of county government: We plan with purpose, but we must also always be ready to meet the moment, ready to make decisions that are thoughtful, impactful, and fiscally responsible to best serve our neighbors when they need us most.

And that is exactly what we are doing. Every day.

It is our strong fiscal foundation that makes every decision, every action possible. And when situations arise unexpectedly, our actions depend on the health of our fund balance. Our fund balance is what gives us the flexibility to make thoughtful changes over time, protects our strong AA+ bond rating and provides a cushion if the economy turns.

Our most recent reported unassigned County fund balance totaled \$104 million, which includes \$2.7 million in unrestricted opioid settlement funds and \$11.4 million in Community Benefit funds. When you remove those set-asides, our unassigned fund balance stood at just under \$90 million.

However, the \$90 million balance does not include the various financial actions taken last year. When we close the books for 2025, we will account for \$43.5 million that was used from fund balance, including \$9.6 million appropriated over the course of last year and \$33.9 million used to balance the 2026 Adopted Budget. While we expect some offsetting year-end savings for 2025, we will not know the final fund balance number until the 2025 Annual Financial Report is completed at the end of April.

I want to be clear: The Legislature's decision last year to rely more heavily on fund balance to cover 2026 operating costs, rather than eliminating the clothing sales tax exemption and increase an ongoing revenue source, has added structural pressure to next year's budget process. We will have a large budget gap to close. With some big costs already coming from the fund balance this year for employee contract settlements, we must confront this reality by having fiscal restraint as any new ongoing budgeted costs are considered.

I know it is tempting to use fund balance as the first option to pay for new costs, especially when the alternative is raising taxes.

I was elected to represent the people of Dutchess County, and I take that responsibility seriously. When I talk with residents, I hear the same thing again and again: It's getting harder to afford to live. Childcare costs, electricity, groceries – everything is going up. I understand that pressure, the same inflation costs that strain household budgets strain our County operations, too.

I oversee a \$653 million organization that delivers programs and services our residents rely on every single day. And just like everyone else, County government is facing rising costs – state mandates, electricity rates, maintenance, and especially, labor costs – with health insurance, and pension costs that continue to climb.

Our challenge is to balance these realities, to protect taxpayers while continuing to provide the essential services that keep this county running and our residents safe.

As we navigate these fiscal challenges, I never forget my days as a single mom, sitting at my kitchen table trying to figure out how to pay the bills. As County Executive, every decision I make is grounded in that experience, thinking about how it affects your budget, your family, your life, and how our decisions keep Dutchess County a place where you can stay and raise a family.

Of all property taxes collected, only 10% funds County government. And of that 10%, approximately 70% is mandated by New York State, leaving just 30% for “discretionary” services like Sheriff’s law enforcement; the District Attorney’s Office and Drug Taskforce; Emergency Response and the E-911 Center; road maintenance and snow removal; park upkeep; capital projects; planning and economic development; and other essential services.

And it is the County workforce: the men and women working day in and day out to provide these services to residents.

Our local economy remains strong, with unemployment at 3.2%. But that strength brings its own challenge: a highly competitive labor market. Our Human Resources team is doing a great job working with departments to use every tool available to attract people to County government, leveraging the NYS HELPS program to streamline hiring with the elimination of civil service exam requirements for key positions and creating targeted outreach for innovative opportunities like our CDL training program in Public Works.

Even with these efforts, recruiting and retaining the staff we need, especially in entry-level positions, is still difficult. Too many applicants simply cannot accept the low salaries being offered. Yet these are essential roles that our neighbors rely on every day. When we can’t fill them, our existing employees are stretched thin, and it is very stressful.

That’s why I’m pleased to share that we are close to finalizing an agreement with our largest union, CSEA – a multiyear contract that provides fair, meaningful cost-of-living adjustments for all CSEA employees. Most importantly, this agreement lifts up our lowest-paid workers, giving the largest percentage increases to those earning the least, so every County employee who serves this community can live and thrive in this community.

I thank CSEA President Andy Calamari and the entire negotiating team for their partnership and dedication. Together, we have crafted an agreement that strengthens our ability to attract talented people to public service.

This CSEA agreement marks the third contract we’ve completed, following agreements with the Dutchess County Police Benevolent Association and the Dutchess Staff Association. We are now beginning discussions with the Correction Officers union, DCSEA.

The CSEA contract settlement will require a projected \$12 million from our fund balance this year and will have a significant impact on the development of the 2027 budget, but having a stable and motivated workforce is a priority.

Our County employees are the heartbeat of everything we do. They are the ones answering 911 and 988 calls; they are clearing the snow; protecting children and families; prosecuting criminals; rehabilitating probationers; supporting our veterans; walking alongside those on the road to recovery; caring for our seniors; and so much more. They are the true public servants who keep this County moving forward and they set a standard for New York State, like our 988 mental health professionals who last week were honored for having the best answer rate of any 988 center in the state. We are so thankful for our dedicated workforce.

When I first took office I also met with our department heads, leaders with many years of service who oversee and carry out the mission of our County. Several were already eligible to retire; but they were willing to stay on to help me transition, and as I always say, you don't know, what you don't know! I am so thankful to them. We recently announced two upcoming retirements. Heidi Seelbach, Commissioner of Finance, is retiring after 15 years with the County. She has been a true steward of tax dollars, saving taxpayers millions over her career. We are so thankful for her work. We also thank Ron Hicks for his 14 years serving as Assistant County Executive for Economic Development. Ron has been a remarkable advocate for this County, and his work will have a positive impact for years to come.

Please join me in thanking Heidi and Ron for their dedicated service.

Across County government, we are using technology to work smarter. Our goal is simple: handle increasing workloads, save taxpayer dollars, and continue delivering strong, reliable services to the people of Dutchess County.

Managing a growing workload with limited staff and resources isn't easy, and we are grateful to our department heads who have sought to find smarter, faster ways to get the job done, while supporting our employees.

This year, the Department of Finance is moving forward with new software that allows residents to pay their taxes online, making it more convenient for taxpayers and reducing time spent processing paper checks.

The Department of Mental Health has introduced new contract management software that improves outcome tracking, and next year, they will add an Assisted Outpatient Portal to meet New York State requirements with less paperwork, freeing up staff to spend more time helping patients.

Last month, the County partnered with Dutchess Community College to train employees from 12 departments in Lean Six Sigma. This training gave them hands-on tools to look at how we do our work, identify what might be slowing us down, and come up with better, more efficient ways to get things done.

Using that training, these teams are focused on improving our processes for purchasing, contracts, and how we bring employees into County government. As their work continues, we're excited to put their ideas into action to make County government run even more smoothly.

Our fellow elected officials are also working to improve efficiency. County Clerk Brad Kendall continues to lead modernization efforts that expand e-filing and e-recording systems and make records more accessible and up-to-date for residents, attorneys, and businesses. Over the past two years, Brad's efficiencies have saved significant tax dollars while still enhancing service.

I have also been proud to partner with Sheriff Kirk Imperati and District Attorney Anthony Parisi to harness the latest technology to establish a Real Time Crime Center here in Dutchess County. The Real Time Crime Center allows law enforcement to monitor video feeds utilizing Flock safety technology and respond to active crime situations as they are unfolding, stopping criminals in their tracks. I am grateful for this partnership, and I know our efforts continue to enhance public safety here in our community.

Comptroller Dan Aymar-Blair has also been an important partner with reports and audits that validate how tax dollars are spent and provide new viewpoints for improvements, savings, and efficiencies.

Thank you all for your partnership.

Throughout County Government, artificial intelligence, or AI, can be a game changer for us, saving time and easing the burden on our limited staff.

In April, our Office of Central and Information Services will again host the Hudson Valley Artificial Intelligence Summit, in partnership with Marist University. The summit explores how AI can support the County workforce, as well as local municipalities, organizations and business, as we all seek to improve how we deliver services to our community.

Our Department of Community and Family Services will put AI to work by using EVA, an AI-powered call system that has been successfully used to safely and securely answer calls about temporary assistance benefits and guide people through the intake process.

EVA can communicate in 65 languages, making our services more accessible and getting people through the necessary steps more quickly, saving as much as 12-15 minutes per call. DCFS carries an average of 11,000 SNAP cases each month and gets a lot of calls about them, nearly 7,000 calls last month alone. So saving time will make a big difference in getting applications completed faster and improving client satisfaction.

And to guide how we integrate AI into our work, I am creating a County AI Committee. The committee's first task will be to develop a countywide AI policy to make sure we use this technology responsibly, with strong standards for ethics, security, accountability, and transparency.

Technology and innovation help us stretch our resources, but when it comes to families and childcare, it is all about people.

High-quality childcare gives our children a strong start in life. It helps working families and strengthens and expands our workforce. As a former childcare provider, I know this firsthand. I opened my own in-home childcare business when I was a single mom, a way to care for my son while helping other parents go to work and provide for their families. I loved giving parents the peace of mind that comes from knowing your child is safe, supported, and well-cared for.

But today, it's harder than ever for families to find that same peace of mind. Childcare slots can be scarce, and the cost puts enormous pressure on household budgets.

As a member of the Dutchess County Early Learning and Child Care Coalition, we focus on strategies to expand access to high-quality early learning and build a strong early childhood educator workforce. We know that the quality of a child's earliest experiences shapes their brain development, laying the foundation for learning, behavior, and well-being throughout life.

And our work is gaining statewide recognition. Dutchess County has been selected as one of only three counties in New York for an exciting pilot childcare initiative that moves us closer to the Coalition's vision: a universal system where every child has access to early learning, and where every childcare space is staffed by skilled professionals who can provide enriching, developmentally appropriate experiences.

Focused on children ages 0–3, Gov. Hochul's proposed budget includes more than \$20 million for Dutchess County to implement research-based strategies that advance these goals and serve as a model for the entire state.

This pilot requires a \$2 million match from the County, which we will need to factor into the 2027 budget; but we know that this is a critical investment for our community.

As the state finalizes the funding and program details, we expect the pilot to lead to a Request for Proposals that expands childcare access and affordability. The plan we will submit to the State will highlight our priorities: addressing childcare deserts, reaching underserved populations, and meeting the needs of today's workforce with childcare hours beyond the traditional 9 a.m. 5 p.m.

We hope to move beyond the typical attendance-based funding model and instead support comprehensive early learning programs that prioritize robust training and competitive compensation, the key ingredients for attracting and retaining skilled educators.

And we will build on our partnership with DAY ONE's teacher apprenticeship program, which gives providers the hands-on training that strengthens children's academic, social, and emotional development with proven results in achieving and surpassing childhood milestones. We are also continuing the pilot we launched last year with the Child Care Council and the Mid-Hudson Discovery Museum, leveraging the museum's resources to support in-home caregivers.

This pilot is a big undertaking, and we are grateful to our Department of Community & Family Services and our community partners for taking up this new challenge. The State chose Dutchess County for a reason. As my friend Gerry Laybourne of DAY ONE said, *“We are truly set up for success, thanks to Dutchess County’s early leadership in supporting innovation and the many partners who have come together through the Early Learning Coalition. This is an extraordinary opportunity for us to demonstrate what’s possible when state investment meets local innovation and determination.”*

You are right, Gerry. We are ready, and we are excited to move forward, because childcare touches every part of our lives. It helps our children thrive; supports parents and caregivers; strengthens our economy; and is foundational to a healthy, resilient society. It is something every family deserves access to.

People also deserve access to safe housing.

When I took office, the County had already taken decisive steps to confront one of the most urgent challenges facing our community: homelessness. A comprehensive plan was in place, to create a permanent emergency housing center at 26 Oakley Street to replace the existing nearby PODs – aging, temporary units that were never meant to be a long-term solution. New York State fully supports this plan and awarded us a \$13 million grant to fully cover the construction cost.

The new Housing Support Center at 26 Oakley Street will enable us to continue our successful model of helping people with comprehensive case management, mental health support, and substance use services – real tools that have helped nearly 80 people move toward stability, independence, and permanent housing, in the last 16 months. This is not just an emergency shelter; it is about restoring dignity, rebuilding lives, and creating pathways forward.

Other efforts to address homelessness include working with any municipality who would like to create homeless beds in their community, as we implement a \$200,000 grant that the Legislature added to the 2026 Budget.

And while we strive to help each person in our care, we must at the same time expand available housing stock, so they have affordable, sustainable, and permanent options to move on to.

The cost of housing continues to be one of the biggest challenges to economic stability. That’s why expanding the supply of affordable homes, for both renters and buyers, is essential to improving affordability across Dutchess County.

Our Housing Trust Fund is already making a meaningful difference. To date, we’ve dedicated \$14.3 million; and of that, \$12.3 million has been awarded to create or preserve nearly 370 affordable homes. We’re excited to see many of these projects moving from plans to reality.

This past summer, we celebrated our very first completed project: three new homes in the City of Poughkeepsie, where families are now settling in and building their futures.

Later this year, three additional projects in Beacon and the City of Poughkeepsie will be completed, adding 38 new or preserved homes, 29 of which will be affordable. Also in Poughkeepsie, construction is underway on the Wallace Campus Project, which will bring 187 more affordable units to the community. And construction just began on Locust Hill in the Town of Rhinebeck for another 80 affordable units, 67 of which are supported through our Housing Trust Fund.

Additionally, through our HOME Investment Partnerships Program, a three-family home rehabilitation will be completed on the City of Poughkeepsie's north side; and Habitat for Humanity is set to begin construction on a new five home development in the Town of Poughkeepsie.

As we prepare to launch the third round of Housing Trust Fund applications in April, we're prioritizing small-scale projects – 10 units or fewer – that blend naturally into the character of our towns and villages, especially in rural areas. We are very excited that the Powder House Road duplex project in Amenia, funded in second round of Housing Trust Fund, will break ground this year, demonstrating the type of project that can make a positive impact in our rural communities where centralized infrastructure does not exist. Projects like these not only meet critical housing needs, but they also create opportunities for local small businesses to be part of the housing solution.

I am thrilled to announce a brand-new initiative: our Own-and-Rent Duplex Program. This program will open a pathway to home ownership, while also expanding affordable rental options. Through the Housing Trust Fund, we will support the purchase and rehabilitation or development of two-family homes. In return, buyers will live in one unit as their primary residence and rent out the second. It's a smart, sustainable model that strengthens neighborhoods and builds generational stability.

And I'm excited to be partnering with Community Housing Innovation (CHI) to spread the word about their first-time homebuyer program, where they provide counseling and up to \$50,000 in assistance for income-qualified buyers to help with down payments, closing costs, or needed repairs when purchasing a single-family home in Dutchess County.

And while building new homes is essential, helping our neighbors stay in the homes they already have is just as important. Through our Owner-Occupied Property Rehabilitation Program, as well as our partnership with Rebuilding Together, we're helping low- and moderate-income residents make critical repairs – from roof replacements to boiler upgrades – ensuring their homes meet health, building, fire, and safety standards. Last year, we doubled the applications for the Program expanding from a seniors-only program to all families that are income-qualified. When homes fall into disrepair or become uninhabitable, it only deepens the housing shortage. This program is a win-win: It keeps people safe and preserves our local housing stock.

Housing stability is essential and so is safety. Knowing help will come when we call is an essential service, and we must work together with our municipal partners to be sure that happens.

As we all know, our state and our nation are facing an EMS crisis. Volunteerism is declining, and communities that have long relied on volunteers are feeling the strain.

We are incredibly grateful to all those who continue to step forward, giving their time, talent, and resources to keep our neighbors safe. To each of you, we say thank you for your selfless service.

Emergency Medical Services has been a cornerstone of my administration, and we've taken purposeful action that is delivering real results and saving lives.

Through our Fly Car Grant Program, we've awarded more than \$330,000 to local fire departments, rescue squads, and ambulance corps, providing life-saving equipment like automated chest compression devices, AEDs, and trauma bag supplies. These Basic Life Support vehicles make a critical difference when every second counts, getting an EMT to the scene to start patient care quickly before an ambulance arrives.

We're also working to strengthen the EMS workforce, because EMS careers matter. We're supporting students interested in this heroic career path through programs like Beacon Volunteer Ambulance Corps' Youth Squad and Pleasant Valley Fire District's Braveheart: Girls in Emergency Services Academy. These programs introduce high-school students to EMS careers and provide training and mentorship. I've seen these young people in action; they are impressive!

This past fall, Dutchess County BOCES launched a unique two-year EMT program giving high-school students the ability to earn state certification at age 17. We've invested nearly \$100,000 in new, state-of-the-art equipment, including mannequins and training simulators for the Dutchess Community College EMS programs. We have even convinced New York State to include DCC's Paramedic program in the new SUNY ReConnect initiative, so adult learners, 25 and older, can complete their Paramedic Associate Degree absolutely free.

With social media and other advertising, we've helped our neighbors identify when to call 911 and when not to – how to know the signs of a real medical emergency – so we can ease pressure on the EMS system and allow responders to focus on life-threatening emergencies.

And when those emergencies do happen, we're making sure people are ready to help. For cardiac emergencies, we are launching HeartSafe 2.0, investing \$100,000 to provide AEDs and training to local youth sports leagues and recreation programs, allowing for immediate access to lifesaving tools when our communities gather.

Most importantly, we've helped ensure that every time someone calls for an ambulance, no matter where they live, help is on the way. Since launching our historic supplemental EMS coverage last year, which now includes one Basic Life Support ambulance, one Advanced Life Support ambulance, and one Advanced Life Support fly car, they have responded to nearly 3,000 calls and transported over 800 patients. And we are saving lives.

One such critical call came just few weeks ago: On February 4th, the East Clinton Volunteer Fire Department's Rescue Squad was dispatched for a 56-year-old man who fell. The 911 caller reported the man had hit his head and was experiencing chest pain. As a life-threatening Priority 1 call, our Dutchess County ALS Fly Car was dispatched to the scene. East Clinton's Rescue Captain quickly arrived on scene and determined that the patient's blood pressure was dangerously low. As East Clinton members moved the patient from the home into their ambulance, the patient became unresponsive. Recognizing cardiac arrest, our Dutchess County Fly Car paramedic provided Advanced Life Support care, defibrillating the patient and giving vital medications to restart his heart and get him to the hospital. The patient regained consciousness on the way to the hospital and has since been released. Thank you to the East Clinton Rescue Squad and our Dutchess County Fly Car paramedic for saving the life of our neighbor.

This story shows how we are helping real people. Without both East Clinton's Basic Life Support primary care and the County's Advanced Life Support supplemental care, this story could have had a very different, possibly tragic, ending.

New York State has finally taken notice of the EMS crisis, requiring counties to develop and maintain comprehensive EMS plans. Through continued regional collaboration efforts, we will identify system vulnerabilities and offer solutions to further improve prehospital care. It's a big challenge, especially with no funding attached; but thanks to our proactive work, Dutchess County is well ahead of the curve. Thank you, commissioner Beale.

There is good news as we develop this countywide plan: Northwell Health, the largest health system in New York State, is continuing to expand their presence in Dutchess County. We are in discussion with Northwell leadership about how they can be part of our comprehensive planning, potentially providing EMS resources for communities across Dutchess County.

And we have even more ahead. We're exploring how to redirect non-emergency calls, using nurse navigation and emergency telehealth systems to help alleviate non-emergency and unnecessary calls for ambulances.

We will continue our collaboration with municipal leaders, fire departments, and rescue squads to ensure sustainable, long-term EMS coverage is available countywide.

While strengthening emergency services is critical, we are equally committed to building a stronger, more vibrant economy, one that creates real opportunities for every resident of Dutchess County. Our economy is growing, and that growth is bringing new jobs, new investments, and new possibilities, from workforce development programs to high-tech innovation.

Marist University is boldly expanding access to high-quality healthcare. In continued partnership with Nuvance, now part of Northwell Health, Marist is strengthening the pipeline into healthcare careers and strengthening workforce development through a new leadership training program for current healthcare professionals.

Marist is also exploring how to develop its Science and Health facilities for expanded state-of-the-art programs, helping attract highly talented students and faculty to our region and ensuring our community has access to well trained healthcare professionals for generations to come.

I always love to highlight the success of the Dutchess Community College's aviation and mechatronics "pipeline-to-jobs" programs, so we are excited that DCC is launching two more pipeline initiatives for HVAC and automotive at the Fishkill campus. We'll partner with DCC to pursue grant funding for these programs, helping our local workforce gain the skills to take advantage of the high-paying HVAC job opportunities ranging from residential homes to global manufacturers with highly specialized needs like IBM's Quantum Data Center that operates at ultra-cold temperatures of -460 degrees.

IBM has made Poughkeepsie a global hub for quantum computing, strengthening high-tech employment and driving long-term economic growth for us. And they continue to invest in Dutchess, with ambitious plans to build *Starling*, the world's first large-scale, fault-tolerant quantum computer. here by 2029.

Across the county, we're seeing many other major investments and new ventures, like the Hudson Company investing \$10 million to transform a vacant and blighted site in Pine Plains into a 50,000-square-foot headquarters, showroom, and manufacturing space for custom-milled reclaimed wood flooring, paneling, and beams.

One of the largest real estate companies in the United States, Lincoln Property Company, is in contract to buy the 300-acre iPark 84 industrial complex in East Fishkill, which will bring significant investment and new businesses to undeveloped sections of iPark 84.

Empire Additive Solutions, a locally owned, advanced manufacturing facility, is coming to East Fishkill to support medical devices, orthotics, prosthetics, robotics, and instrumentation customers.

As these companies invest and need skilled employees, we are making sure our high-school students know about all of the trades career pathways with our Skilled Trades Fairs events, held across the county and attracting hundreds of students. Our next one will be in May with Dutchess County BOCES.

Our tourism industry also continues to be an important economic engine. Destination Dutchess reports post-COVID visitor spending has increased by 20% to a record-high \$811 million.

Two transformational projects will further enhance Dutchess County's appeal to visitors.

After nearly a decade of planning, One & Only has broken ground on its \$500+ million destination project near the Culinary Institute of America in Hyde Park. And the long-anticipated Soho House project at Grasmere estate has received its final approval from the Town of Rhinebeck Planning Board and will add new hospitality and economic activity to northern Dutchess.

Tourism provides more than 10,200 jobs in our local economy, and these new hospitality investments will create even more new jobs and opportunity.

And to fill those jobs, we'll help these companies tap into a skilled and ready workforce: our older adults. Last year, we introduced the Older Adults Skills Fair, and we were overwhelmed by the fantastic response, as we connected more than 500 older adults ready for new opportunities with organizations and businesses looking for skilled employees or volunteers.

Everyone knows that I have a soft spot for our seniors. I care deeply about them, so it breaks my heart when anyone tries to take advantage of them. These are people who have spent their lives contributing to our community, raising families, building businesses, volunteering, showing up for their neighbors. And yet, there are still people out there who try to scam them out of their hard-earned savings.

We all know someone that has fallen victim to fraud. A friend of mine recently told me about how her parents got a call saying a loved one was in danger. Someone even showed up at their front door to collect money to help. They handed over \$9,000 because they thought they were protecting their family. And, of course, it was a scam.

This is how these criminals operate. They prey on fear, on quick decisions, and on the deep love our seniors have for their families. But here in Dutchess County, we're fighting back.

In partnership with our Office for the Aging, the Department of Community & Family Services, Sheriff Kirk Imperati, and District Attorney Anthony Parisi, we are forming an Elder Justice Task Force, focused entirely on protecting our older adults. This task force will expand education about the tricks scammers use, strengthen investigations into suspected fraud, and ensure that those who target our seniors are prosecuted to the fullest extent of the law.

This work builds on the strong collaboration already happening with the Office for the Aging and our Adult Protective Services team in the Department of Community & Family Services. Together, they make sure older adults know they're not alone and that Dutchess County is looking out for them.

And we're also tackling one of the biggest vulnerabilities scammers exploit: loneliness. Many scammers deliberately seek out isolated seniors, strike up conversations, build trust, and then drain their savings. That's why our "Friendly Calls" program has been such a gamechanger. Since launching in 2023, more than 360 vetted volunteers, speaking nearly a dozen languages and dialects, have been connecting with seniors who just need a friendly voice on the other end of the line. It's simple, it's human, and it's making a real difference.

We're also meeting seniors where they are. Our OFA Ambassador, Mary Reedy, has been incredibly busy since I announced her role last year. She's out in communities across the county, hosting mobile office hours, helping seniors and their families who can't easily get to Poughkeepsie, and making sure no one misses out on services.

And this approach doesn't stop with our seniors. We have more than 13,000 veterans here in Dutchess County, and many of them face the same challenges: work schedules, medical appointments, family responsibilities, and transportation barriers. Finding time to get to our Office of Veterans Services in Pleasant Valley isn't always easy. So, we're bringing those services to them through "Operation: Mobile Outreach."

Our new Veterans Services Officer, Beth-Anne Canero, has been traveling to town halls, American Legion and VFW posts, libraries, nursing homes – wherever our veterans are and at times that work for them including evenings. She helps veterans one-on-one, navigating the maze of benefits and paperwork, and making sure they receive every single service benefit they've earned. It's personal, it's hands-on, and it sends a clear message: In Dutchess County, our veterans are never alone.

Our Mobile Health Unit is also helping people access health and mental health services with expanding schedule of stops in communities across Dutchess County. And be sure to mark your calendar for our annual Health Fair at the Dutchess Community College on Saturday, May 2<sup>nd</sup>!

Meeting people where they are, making government accessible, and showing our neighbors that we see them, we value them, and we're here to help – that is our goal every day. Our work is about people, and it is the heart of why I do this job.

I hand out my business card all the time, with my cell phone number, because I want people to know that I am here for them, that we are here for them. When people call, I listen. Sometimes they just want to share their thoughts. Often, they need help. I can't solve every problem – and believe me, that frustrates me – but I can listen. I can help them see their challenges in a new way. I can connect people to resources.

Because what most people want from government is simple: They want us to be there for them.

That is what government should be.

And while we have plans and priorities for the year ahead, we also know that circumstances can change. Resources shift. Challenges appear. Opportunities arise. But no matter what comes our way, we will continue to act with fiscal responsibility, with purpose, and with compassion.

The state of Dutchess County is strong, and we are working for you every single day.

Thank you, and may God bless Dutchess County.