

The Lives We Touch

The State of the County

March 11, 2025

Good evening and thank you for being here tonight. I'm excited to be here with all of you to reflect on the past year and look ahead to the future of Dutchess County. As we talk about the State of Dutchess County, I am proud to say that the state of our county is resilient, hopeful, and full of opportunity.

Before we begin, I'd like to thank Dr. Dwight Bonk and Mr. K for hosting us here at John Jay High School. As a proud John Jay alum, it means so much to me to be here. And thank you to East Fishkill Supervisor Nick D'Alessandro for hosting us in your great town.

I'd like to recognize the incredible work of the America Recycles Day Art Challenge winners, who brought their artwork here to John Jay to showcase their creativity and passion for the environment. Their work is a testament to the power of young people to inspire change and make a difference.

Thank you to Ava, Sheriff Kirk Imperati, Reverend Dr. Hunt, the Evergreen Chorus, the RCK High School Step Team for playing a role in tonight's event.

And of course, thank you to Sophia, for that incredibly kind introduction. It's so inspiring to see young people like you, and your classmates in the Renaissance Club, who are so dedicated to their community and future. I know that our future is in good hands with students like you, and I wish you all the best as you embark on your nursing career.

I also want to thank all of the elected officials here with us tonight, but especially my fellow County elected officials: Sheriff Imperati, District Attorney Anthony Parisi, Comptroller Dan Aymar-Blair, Clerk Brad Kendall, Legislature Chairman Will Truitt and all members of the County Legislature for their partnership.

And to my family – Mark, Anthony, Kaela, and my mom, Lois – thank you for giving me the support to do this job.

Tonight is about more than policies and programs — it is about people. Because at the heart of every decision we make, every dollar we invest, and every initiative we launch, there is a life we are striving to improve.

As we look back, I'm proud of the progress we've made together. We reorganized the Department of Behavioral and Community Health, separating it into health, mental health, and veterans' affairs to bring focus to these important areas and better meet the needs of our community. We earned the highest New York Climate Smart Communities Silver Certification, reflecting our ongoing commitment to environmental sustainability and resilience.

We expanded mental health resources, launched new programs for our seniors, and ramped up our outreach with events like the Skilled Trades Fair, Women's Networking Event, and Breast Cancer Awareness Day.

And we're seeing great results: public transit had its highest ridership ever last year, with over 880,000 riders; our OCIS team ranked in the top 10 in the Digital Counties Survey; and our

Department of Emergency Response became the first in the Mid-Hudson Region to be accredited by New York State. These are all great wins — and none of this would be possible without the hard work of our county employees.

We're in a strong financial position today, thanks to Dutchess County's history of making smart, responsible choices. These choices have put us in a position to weather the uncertainty we're seeing at the federal level, without compromising the important programs and services that our neighbors rely on. In fact, just last week, Standard and Poor's confirmed Dutchess County's AA+ bond rating, the highest for any county in New York State. This rating reflects our solid financial performance and conservative fiscal planning.

And we will continue to make decisions that are centered around the taxpayer. We crafted our first budget with the same approach I brought to my small business – and you can trust that County Government is working hard to manage your tax dollars responsibly.

I'm so proud that our 2025 budget continues the tradition of fiscal responsibility, cutting the property tax rate for the 10th year while ensuring that there were zero layoffs within County government.

We'll continue to carefully monitor our finances and make strategic investments in our community to ensure Dutchess County remains a great place to live and thrive, while always keeping your interests at heart.

Over the past year, I've learned so much as County Executive. Nothing brings me more joy than being 'home' here in Dutchess County, seeing the change firsthand, and watching how county government touches the lives of our residents.

But we have the power to do even more, and I'm confident we will. With this momentum, we're turning our focus to new initiatives and continuing to build on the progress we've made, and I'm excited to share our vision for the year ahead with all of you tonight.

As we roll out exciting new initiatives, we're looking out for every part of our community, especially those who've helped shape Dutchess County into what it is today. Our seniors are a huge part of that, and it's so important that they have the support they need to stay active, connected, and live the lives they deserve. This year, we're expanding programs that help our seniors continue to thrive in our community.

We're creating the OFA Ambassador Position, a role designed to serve as a bridge between our seniors, their families, and the wealth of programs and services offered by our Office for the Aging (OFA). This position will be out in the community, connecting with seniors and their families to ensure they know exactly what's available to them, and how to access it. It's all about ensuring our seniors feel seen and heard and that they are supported in every way possible.

That is why I'm so excited to announce our Older Adults Skills Fair — "Putting Your Skills Back to Work!" because we are all about empowering our older adults to continue using their wealth of experience, wisdom, and knowledge to make a difference. Whether it's through volunteering or part-time work, this fair will offer seniors the opportunity to keep their skills sharp and stay connected to their community. It's a chance to continue their journey, to give back, and to stay involved.

We've also been busy making sure that our seniors stay connected to their community in more tangible ways. We hosted close to four thousand seniors at our summer picnics where we came together to celebrate, share meals, and connect with each other. We've visited, and are enhancing our Friendship Centers, providing spaces for social interaction, and provided almost two-thousand trips through Go Go Grandparent, so they can attend appointments and more.

But it's not just about physical connection — it's about providing support when it's needed. We know that some seniors face the challenging issue of hoarding, and it's a tough one to talk about. Our Hoarding Task Force that includes the Department of Mental Health, Family Services Inc., the Office for the Aging, and others, is here to provide much-needed support. This year, we will offer family trainings on how to best intervene in these situations. It's a difficult topic, but it's one we need to address, and we're taking steps to do so with compassion and care.

Just as we're committed to supporting our seniors, we can't forget the veterans who've served our country and helped protect the freedoms we enjoy every day. Our veterans have sacrificed so much, and it's our responsibility to ensure they have the resources and respect they deserve. This year, we're continuing to honor and support our local veterans in ways that make a real impact on their lives.

In April, we will host our first Honor- a-Veteran Ceremony, where we will celebrate the life and legacy of Vietnam Veteran and First Lieutenant Andrew Doro. These ceremonies are a chance to pause and reflect on the sacrifices made, to honor the heroes who walked among us, and to ensure that their memory lives on in the heart of our community.

We recognize that many of our veterans may not always know where to turn for help. That's why our Veterans One Stop continues to serve as a central hub for veterans to access benefits, services, and support. From connecting veterans with healthcare options to helping them navigate housing or financial assistance, the One Stop is dedicated to making sure that veterans – or their surviving spouses – can find the answers they need in one place.

At one of our senior picnics last year, a woman came up to our Veterans Affairs team. She had lost her husband, a veteran, and had been struggling to make ends meet. Our team asked her a simple question – Have you ever looked into VA benefits? She hadn't because she didn't think she was qualified. But after sitting down with our team, she applied for the benefits she was entitled to, and now, she's receiving \$1,600 more every month. That extra income changed her life – it gave her financial security and peace of mind.

That's why we're creating a new Veterans Outreach position – to make sure even more veterans and their families get connected to the support they deserve. This new role will focus on expanding our direct outreach – going into the community, meeting veterans where they are and ensuring they know what's available to them.

We've also recently launched a new transportation initiative - Go Go Veterans – which is already making a real difference in the lives of our veterans. This program ensures veterans have access to the transportation to get to appointments, events, and community gatherings, making sure they don't face the isolation that so many experience.

The truth is, the lives we touch — especially the lives of those who have sacrificed so much for us — are what make our community truly special. Every veteran is a part of our community, and we will

continue to honor their contributions by giving them the care, respect, and recognition they deserve.

We also recognize the bravery and dedication of those who serve us every day right here at home — our EMS professionals, firefighters, law enforcement officers, and public safety dispatchers.

Whether it's a fire, a medical emergency, or an accident, they are the ones who rush in to help without hesitation. Their jobs are unpredictable, and the stakes are incredibly high — but despite the challenges, they answer the call every single day. That's why public safety remains one of our top priorities.

Over the past year, we've made significant strides to ensure our first responders have the resources they need to do their jobs safely and effectively.

Last year, we strengthened support for our first responders by enhancing crisis management and building resiliency through training. We focused on mental health, launched proactive cancer education, and coordinated responses to critical incidents – all at zero cost to the county.

One of the most important steps we took so far this year was the introduction of Supplemental EMS Coverage, which started on January 1st, making sure that every corner of Dutchess County is covered, and every call is answered. We've been hearing great feedback and our dedicated team at the Department of Emergency Response is constantly monitoring these units to ensure they are utilized in the most effective way.

Through our Regional Collaboration, we'll continue to work hand-in-hand with our municipal partners to make sure we're all aligned and working together for the benefit of every resident. This year's regional meetings start this month, allowing us to evaluate our progress and make sure that together, we're delivering the best possible service to every community.

Our Fly Car Grant program awarded nearly \$200,000 to fire departments, rescue squads, and ambulance corps to purchase new equipment, like a Lucas Chest Compression device, that will help them deliver a more consistent quality of care in emergencies, while also adding a recruitment message to the vehicles.

We're also taking a closer look at our EMS data to find ways to prevent future incidents and keep our neighbors safe. We know that falls are a major concern, particularly among seniors, and many calls are for lift assists, where no transport is needed. However, national data shows that half of these calls will result in another one within just two weeks.

That's why we're working closely with our EMS providers to introduce a simple but important step – leaving behind fall prevention resources from our Office for the Aging whenever EMTs respond to a fall or lift-assist call. We'll train EMS providers to be familiar with these resources, helping them make that vital connection to OFA. Then, our team will follow up with the seniors to connect them to the services they need – whether it's a home safety assessment, mobility strengthening, or even home-delivered meals. This is all about helping our seniors stay safe, healthy, and independent in their own homes for as long as possible.

But it's not just about systems and processes — it's about the people behind the uniforms. EMTs and paramedics are on the frontlines, and their work is often the difference between life and death. These first responders are not just healthcare providers; they are our lifelines in critical moments.

Whether it's providing CPR in a cardiac arrest, stopping bleeding in an accident, or stabilizing someone in need of emergency care, they are the ones who keep us going when everything seems uncertain.

We're launching the Paramedic Academy alongside Dutchess Community College, a new initiative designed to provide a full-service path for students who want to take their EMS careers to the next level. We've talked with students in the EMT program at DCC, and we've heard their feedback: They want more opportunities to advance, and the support they need to do it. They want to be the best at what they do, and we're here to make that happen. Through the Paramedic Academy, we're eliminating some of the barriers in their way through scholarships, stipends, and specialized training to ensure these future paramedics are well-prepared and celebrated for choosing this lifesaving career.

We're also focused on Public Awareness, and we've recently launched our educational campaign 'EMS Matters: Essential Care, Saving Lives.' Many people don't realize the crucial role that EMS plays in keeping us safe, and we want to change that. This campaign will also focus on educating the public about when it's appropriate to call 911 and when other medical options might be better suited. It's important that we all understand how to use EMS resources effectively and avoid unnecessary calls, like for a sunburn, that can strain our first responders and healthcare system.

From the very beginning, I've made it clear that EMS is a priority — and let me tell you, we're just getting started! We'll continue to build on this momentum and strengthen the support for our first responders.

But it's important to remember that safety comes in many forms. Public Safety means protecting our neighbors from immediate threats and ensuring they're safeguarded against hidden dangers. We're also working to protect our residents from risks that can leave them vulnerable in ways they may not always see coming.

We are committed to fraud prevention, working alongside the District Attorney, Sheriff, and Comptroller, to protect our residents from scams. While we often think of fraud as a financial issue, it is just as much a safety concern, as it can leave people vulnerable and in need of help. Scammers are becoming more sophisticated, and even the most informed individuals can fall victim.

Just recently, my own mom, Lois, nearly fell for a scam. She received a call claiming my son, Anthony, had been arrested and needed bail money immediately. She called me in a panic, completely convinced it was real. Thankfully, she reached out before taking action, but it was a stark reminder of just how convincing these scams can be. That's why we're making sure people know how to protect themselves and stay informed. By working together with law enforcement, we're strengthening our efforts to stay ahead of scammers and ensure our residents — especially our seniors — have the knowledge and resources to safeguard themselves.

We've also made great progress with the Analysis and Real-Time Crime Intelligence Center, thanks to the leadership of Sheriff Kirk Imperati and District Attorney Anthony Parisi. This is all about making sure our law enforcement agencies have the tools they need to respond quickly and effectively to threats. Thanks to County funding and additional support from Congressman Ryan's Office, the Real Time Crime Center is now up and running and it's already making a difference. With over 70 flock cameras deployed throughout the county, and a unified platform that allows us to monitor real-time incidents and share intelligence, we're improving how we respond to

emergencies and keeping our communities safer. This initiative is strengthening our partnerships and making it easier for law enforcement to work together in real time.

The opioid crisis continues to devastate families and communities, claiming lives at an alarming rate. Between 2019 and 2023, nearly 500 lives were lost to fatal overdoses in Dutchess County. While we have seen a nearly 50% decline in overdose deaths in the past year, even one loss is too many. We must remain relentless in our efforts to fight this epidemic.

In partnership with local EMS providers, we're expanding our response by distributing Narcan Leave Behind Kits to individuals who have survived an overdose, ensuring they and their loved ones have the tools needed to prevent another. This isn't just about harm reduction — it's a critical intervention that gives people a second chance at a path toward recovery.

But prevention alone isn't enough. That's why we are continuing to support and strengthen the Drug Task Force, a collaborative effort between law enforcement agencies across Dutchess County, led by our District Attorney and Sheriff, to get deadly narcotics, including fentanyl, off our streets. The Task Force is not only focused on large-scale drug operations but also on the dealers who knowingly distribute lethal substances in our communities. Through strategic investigations, undercover operations, and intelligence-sharing, we are identifying and dismantling the networks that profit from addiction and devastation.

Additionally, we're working to ensure that those who need treatment are connected to the right resources, so we aren't just punishing crime — we're working toward solutions. The fight against the opioid crisis requires a multi-pronged approach, and we will not stop until our families, our children, and our communities are safe from the grip of addiction.

As we focus on the safety and well-being of our community, it's crucial that we continue to provide the support and resources needed for those struggling with mental health issues. This is an issue that is deeply personal to me, and over the last year, we've made great strides in improving mental health services in Dutchess County.

But we know there is still more to be done.

Time and time again, I hear from parents who are desperate for help — who don't know where to turn when their child is struggling, some as young as 5 years old. They feel lost in the system, unsure of what resources are available or how to access them. No family should have to navigate this alone.

One of the most exciting initiatives we're working on is the Children's Community Residence (CCR), which could provide much-needed mental health services for our youth. This is an area that I am so passionate about because we know that for children struggling with mental health challenges, having a safe, supportive place to heal and grow is critical.

We are in discussions with The Children's Home of Poughkeepsie and the New York State Office for Mental Health about the potential of bringing a CCR program to our community, ensuring that our kids have a place where they can receive the support they need. This effort would aim to provide safe space for healing, with access to education, family involvement, and emotional care, giving kids a better chance to succeed in life.

We are partnering with Family Services to establish much-needed children's mental health services in Northern Dutchess. With \$250,000, we're making an important investment in our children's well-being, ensuring that young people in this region have access to the care they deserve.

We're also investing over \$200,000 to support the expansion of mental health services for adults with a new location in Northern Dutchess. This will ensure that more residents in this area have access to critical resources, no matter where they live.

We've partnered with Access Supports for Living to open a new Mental Health Urgent Care center in Poughkeepsie. This center provides walk-in services and ensures that individuals can access mental health professionals and prescribers without the wait. The goal is to provide rapid care and ensure that anyone in need of mental health services can get connected with the resources they need quickly. Whether it's someone experiencing anxiety, depression, or a crisis, we want to make sure that help is available.

And we're not stopping there.

Our Stabilization Center continues to be a vital resource for anyone in crisis, providing a safe space for individuals to receive support when they need it most. In 2024, we saw a record number of guests at the center, including a significant number of youth under the age of 18. This is a powerful reminder of the need for accessible mental health services for all age groups.

We're also expanding the Mobile Health Unit (MHU), taking both physical and mental health on the road, directly into our communities. This mobile outreach team, made up of healthcare professionals and mental health experts, will have a permanent schedule in all regions of our county. Whether it's providing basic health screenings or helping people access mental health support, the MHU ensures that care is available wherever it's needed most — right in the heart of our neighborhoods.

One of the most important parts of our approach to mental health is community education. We are launching a 988 Helpline Education Campaign to ensure that residents know they can reach out for help through the 988 Helpline — a free, confidential resource for anyone in mental health distress. Dutchess County serves as the call center for the entire region, and we are continuously praised by New York State for the quality of care and support we provide.

Along with all of these efforts, we've seen the amazing work being done by the Empowerment Center, which provides recovery coach services to individuals struggling with substance use. In 2024, over 200 unique individuals found support and connections to treatments, housing, and recovery programs. The Empowerment Center serves as a safe space, offering low-barrier resources where individuals can simply drop in for support from peers, and we're incredibly proud of the impact it's making in our community.

At the end of the day, mental health is not just about treatment — it's about prevention, support, and community. It's about creating a world where people feel safe enough to talk about their struggles, where they know that help is available, and where they are supported in their journey toward healing. The lives we touch through our mental health initiatives are immeasurable, and we are committed to doing everything we can to ensure that every person in Dutchess County has access to the care they deserve.

We also know that mental health and financial stability are closely linked. When people are struggling to make ends meet, it affects every aspect of their lives — physically, mentally, and emotionally. That’s why ensuring that our residents have access to affordable resources is a top priority. This includes everything from housing to essential services, and, of course, childcare.

For many families, affordable, accessible childcare is one of the biggest hurdles they face. Parents too often find themselves competing for a spot, often forced to plan months or even years in advance just to secure care for their child. Long waiting lists are the norm, leaving many parents scrambling for options or forced to make difficult decisions about work and family life. That’s why we must make it our goal to increase the number of childcare slots available in Dutchess County.

And I know this firsthand — when I was a single mom, I opened my own in-home childcare business so I could care for my son while helping other families. I understand how difficult it can be to find childcare, but I also know the difference a safe, nurturing home-based provider can make for working parents.

We’re establishing a new in-home childcare grant program, to help individuals take that first step — whether it’s making safety upgrades to their home, purchasing learning materials, or covering licensing costs. These small, home-based providers are the backbone of our childcare system, and we want to help them succeed.

That’s why we’re also developing a training program to help provide technical support for smaller childcare providers through a partnership with the Mid-Hudson Discovery Museum, Day One Early Learning Community, and the Childcare Council of Dutchess and Putnam. This program will give informal childcare providers the opportunity to experience hands-on learning at the museum, helping them integrate educational activities into their own settings.

We’re partnering with Dutchess County Workforce Investment Board and the Childcare Coalition, the first of its kind in New York State, to offer free babysitting classes to teenagers and young adults. These classes will give young people the opportunity to gain valuable experience and skills while encouraging them to pursue childcare as a rewarding career path.

Workforce retention and recruitment remain top priorities for Dutchess County, and we know that supporting our County employees goes beyond salaries and benefits — it’s about meeting their needs so they can thrive both at work and at home.

That’s why we are launching an exploratory committee to look into the possibility of forming a public-private partnership to expand child care access for County employees. We understand that finding reliable childcare is one of the biggest challenges working parents face, and we want to explore how we can make it easier for employees to balance work and family life. This could help improve attendance rates, reduce stress, and make positions more attractive to potential employees who might otherwise face difficulty juggling family responsibilities.

The committee will evaluate potential locations, costs, and operational logistics to determine if this is a feasible solution to create more slots for our workforce.

Housing is a key part of creating a stable foundation for families. A safe, secure home is where it all begins— it’s a place of security, stability, and opportunity.

We all know that the need for affordable housing is greater than ever, and it's something I take to heart. I've heard the stories of families struggling to find a safe, affordable place to live, and how it affects their lives. Whether it's large-scale projects, or smaller, community-based developments, we know that both are necessary to meet the growing demand.

Just recently, the Woods at Pawling, supported through our HOME program, was completed, adding 80 new units in eastern Dutchess County. Our partnership with Habitat for Humanity created a new single-family home in North East.

And we're especially excited to see the first project funded by our Housing Trust Fund come to life – a 3-unit building in Poughkeepsie that will soon be home to individuals and families. Construction is also underway for Two Cross Street in Beacon, which will bring 18 new units to the area, and we're continuing community engagement around the redevelopment of the Schatz brownfield in the Town of Poughkeepsie, which is expected to add 250 units.

This year, we're launching another round of applications for the Housing Trust Fund, prioritizing smaller projects, especially in our more rural communities. These projects will blend into the character of the communities they serve while providing critically needed housing options.

Accessory Dwelling Units, or ADUs, are another tool to help address the housing shortage. We applaud the 8 local municipalities who, in partnership with Hudson River Housing, have successfully secured funding through New York State's ADU Plus One Program. Together, with the Department of Planning & Development and the Department of Health, we'll work with these communities to make sure we're meeting the needs of each area while maintaining high public health and safety standards. Local community efforts like this, when combined with the County's work, are important steps in expanding housing options for our neighbors.

But we know the challenge doesn't stop with just building more homes. The infrastructure that supports these homes – like roads, sewer, and water systems – is just as important. We need to make sure our communities have the right infrastructure in place to handle the growing demand.

That's why we're launching a project to inventory and map existing water and sewer infrastructure so we can identify the best areas for growth, ensuring that we're building homes where people can truly thrive, not just survive. We need to think creatively and strategically about how to grow our housing stock in a way that makes sense for the future, so that everyone in Dutchess County has a place to call home.

Keeping people in their homes is just as important as creating new ones. That's why we're expanding our Senior Owner-Occupied Rehab Program to all income-qualified homeowners, thanks to a \$225,000 grant from the NYS Affordable Housing Corporation. This means more neighbors will have access to the help they need to make critical health and safety repairs to their homes.

This isn't just about fixing homes – it's about keeping people safe, preventing displacement, and ensuring that the homes we already have remain livable and secure for years to come. By helping homeowners stay in their homes, we're also addressing the larger housing shortage by making sure our existing housing stock remains available for those who need it.

Yet, we also know there are people in our community facing obstacles that make the dream of permanent housing feel out of reach, and emergency housing is the only option. Every person's story is unique, and we're here to help guide them through their journey.

Last year, our Department of Community and Family Services began intensive case management services for those housed at the PODS, our emergency shelter in Poughkeepsie, and the impact has been incredible.

Recently an 18-year-old found himself homeless after his family moved out of the state without him. Thanks to our case management team and community partners, we were able to secure transitional housing and support for him.

Another woman came to the shelter struggling with addiction, and our case manager worked tirelessly to help get her a treatment bed and then drove her to the facility where she's getting the help she needs.

After years of homelessness, a neighbor worked with our team to reconnect with family, and we were able to help reunite her with her loved ones in West Virginia.

And last month, a neighbor arrived at the PODS and immediately engaged with our case management team to create a detailed living plan. Working together with his case manager, he found employment and successfully navigated the rental market to secure his own apartment.

These stories remind me why we do this work. It's not just about providing shelter – it's about helping people find stability and hope. As we continue to work toward a permanent emergency housing support center at Oakley Street, we will continue to provide this extensive case management, helping people overcome their challenges and find their way to permanent housing.

As we continue to improve opportunities for all residents, we're also focused on maintaining a strong, sustainable economy. We are fostering an environment where businesses can grow, create jobs, and thrive.

I'd like to recognize my good friend and City of Poughkeepsie Mayor Yvonne Flowers for a moment –

Earlier this morning, New York State announced that the City of Poughkeepsie won the regional competition for the Downtown Revitalization Initiative and will receive \$10 million to facilitate transformational mixed-use and public-private infrastructure projects. This is a huge win for the City and for Dutchess County, and I couldn't be more excited about the potential it holds for the future of our community.

Please join me in congratulating Mayor Flowers and the City of Poughkeepsie!

Our small businesses are the heart of our local economy, and we've recently launched our Small Business Roundtables to provide a space for business owners to connect, share challenges, and access resources to help them grow and succeed. Our first two roundtables, in the Village of Millerton and the Arlington Business District, were huge successes, and we're excited to continue offering this opportunity for collaboration and support.

As a former small business owner myself, I understand the challenges that entrepreneurs face. Whether it's navigating regulations, finding the right talent, or getting the resources they need to grow, small businesses need a strong support network. These forums are all about coming together to find solutions to the hurdles we face, and to learn how the County can be a partner in those efforts.

Workforce development is also at the forefront of our economic agenda. We understand that creating opportunities for people to find meaningful, well-paying jobs is a crucial part of building a stronger community. That's why we're focused on creating pathways for young people to enter into high-demand fields.

Our Trades Fairs, including our most recent event at Arlington High School, has offered thousands of students the chance to connect with local employers in the skilled trades. These fairs not only give students the opportunity to explore careers they might not have considered, but they also help fill critical gaps in industries that are vital to our economy.

We've also launched our CDL Training Program within the Department of Public Works, which allows people to earn their CDL licenses while getting real-world experience in public service. Eight people have been enrolled in this program since March 2024, and seven have already completed the program and earned their CDL licenses. And they've quickly become valuable members of our team. These programs are essential to creating a workforce that is both skilled and ready to meet the challenges of today's economy.

ThinkDIFFERENTLY, which celebrates its 10th anniversary this year, continues to positively impact our most vulnerable friends and neighbors.

Through our new Think Accessible initiative, we'll be able to recognize businesses and municipalities that are committed to accessibility and inclusion for all. It's not just about meeting legal requirements — it's about making sure that everyone, regardless of their abilities, can access the services, spaces, and opportunities they need to succeed.

To celebrate our 10-year milestone, we're excited to announce that the application portal is officially open for businesses and municipalities to apply for the Think Accessible certification. Those who earn this recognition can proudly display a window decal and will be featured on our ThinkDIFFERENTLY website.

As we work to grow our local economy and create opportunities for businesses to succeed, we also recognize the vital role that agriculture plays in Dutchess County. Our farmers not only contribute to our economy but also help preserve the beauty and character of our community.

This year, we are focusing on strengthening our local food system and supporting farmers in a way that makes their work sustainable and impactful for future generations.

One of the key initiatives we're working on is addressing food security. Our county has made great strides ensuring that fresh, locally grown food is accessible to everyone, especially those who are struggling with food insecurity. We're continuing to work with our Food Security Council to connect farmers with food pantries, local schools, and other community organizations that provide food to those in need.

To further strengthen our efforts, we're working with a consultant on a comprehensive food system assessment to identify opportunities for improvement and enhance food access, sustainability, and economic development.

Additionally, we're rolling out a new initiative to purchase a refrigerated box truck to rescue over 100,000 pounds of food annually from farms and deliver it to food pantries across the county. This will help reduce waste and ensure surplus food reaches those in need.

Since 1999, our Partnership for Manageable Growth (PMG) program has helped preserve over 5,000 acres of vital farmland, keeping it available for agriculture rather than development. This is a critical effort to keep our county's agricultural heritage alive for future generations, while also preserving the character of our rural communities.

As we look to the future, we recognize that many of the farmers in our community are nearing retirement and that finding the next generation of farmers is a key challenge. That's why we're focused on helping connect younger, aspiring farmers with the resources and support they need to succeed. Through our new Connecting Farmers Initiative, or as Gregg likes to call it 'eFarmony,' we're matching retiring farmers with young people, veterans, and others who are interested in continuing farming on protected land, ensuring that Dutchess County's agricultural legacy continues.

We want our young people to learn not only where their food comes from but how to grow it themselves. Through our new Youth Gardening Grant, we'll help schools, municipalities, recreation programs, and non-profits establish gardens where kids will work alongside local farmers to learn hands-on skills that will last a lifetime. By partnering with our Ag Navigator, we'll connect communities with farmers, teaching youth how to plant, grow, and harvest their own food — and even more importantly, how to give back by donating part of what they grow to local food pantries.

Agriculture is a cornerstone of Dutchess County, and through this initiative, we'll introduce youth to the many career opportunities that exist in farming and food production, helping them see agriculture as a pathway to opportunity — all while strengthening our local food system and community.

Our youth are the future of not only Dutchess County's agriculture but of our entire community. This year, we're focused on providing the support and resources that help our young people thrive and become the leaders of tomorrow.

One of the most exciting initiatives is the YOU Drop-In Center Grants, which provide up to \$75,000 in funding to support the creation of safe, supportive spaces for young people to come together. These centers will provide resources like academic support, mentoring, job readiness programs, and mental health services. More importantly, they will give young people a place to connect, learn, and grow outside of school hours.

In addition to providing physical spaces, we're also working on increasing opportunities for afterschool programming. We know how important it is for kids to have structured activities after school to keep them engaged and safe. By evaluating current opportunities, we aim to ensure every child has access to enriching activities that help them build life skills, gain confidence, and form lasting relationships.

We are also focused on empowering young people to make a positive impact in their own communities. Through the Youth and Police Initiative, we are expanding our efforts to change the dynamic between youth and law enforcement. This program creates opportunities for young people to build trust with police officers through training, mentorship, and shared community service projects.

I've seen the impact this program makes firsthand...by fostering understanding and collaboration, we are not only improving relationships between law enforcement and youth, but we are also encouraging young people to become leaders in their communities. This program teaches important life skills like teamwork, communication, and conflict resolution, all while giving youth the opportunity to make a real difference in the lives of others.

We also know that having access to outdoor spaces to play and explore is just as important to a child's well-being as structured programming. When families told us they wanted a new playground at Bowdoin Park, we listened. We gathered feedback, took your input seriously, and later this spring, we'll be installing a brand-new playground at Bowdoin Park. This new play space will give kids a safe, fun environment to climb, explore, and be active — right in one of Dutchess County's most beautiful parks.

In that same spirit, we're expanding our efforts to combat Lyme and tick-borne diseases to ensure that everyone who enjoys our outdoor spaces can do so safely. We're committed to raising awareness about tick safety, and this spring, we'll be introducing new tick safety signage at County parks, helping residents understand the risks and how to stay protected.

We're also raising awareness about the dangers of tobacco and vaping. As part of the Juul Settlement Plan, we're launching a video competition for high school students to help spread the message. We believe young people can be the most powerful advocates for change, and this competition will empower them to take charge of their health. Additionally, we're dramatically expanding our early education efforts to teach kids about the risks of smoking and vaping before they reach middle or high school.

Ultimately, our goal is simple: to ensure that every young person in Dutchess County has the support they need to grow, succeed, and contribute to our community. When young people are empowered, supported, and given the tools to succeed, they create stronger, more vibrant communities for everyone.

As we look ahead, I'm filled with hope for the future of Dutchess County. The work we've done this past year is just the beginning, and the path we're on is one that leads toward a stronger community for all of us. Together, we've made incredible strides, but there's still much more to do — and I know we can accomplish even more in the year ahead.

The work we do is about people — the lives we touch every day. Whether it's supporting our seniors, empowering our youth, or providing opportunities for families and businesses to thrive, every initiative we've launched is centered on creating a community where everyone can succeed.

None of this would be possible without the dedication and hard work of the employees of Dutchess County Government and the Department Heads who lead them. I want to take a moment to thank each and every one of you for your commitment to making a real difference in the lives of our residents. You are the heart of our county, and your tireless efforts are what make this community a better place for all.

As we move forward, let's continue to work together to build a future where everyone in Dutchess County feels supported, valued, and empowered. Thank you for your support, and I look forward to all that we will achieve together in the year ahead.