



STATE OF THE COUNTY 2021

Presented by Linn County Supervisor Stacey Walker
April 29, 2021

Good morning. My thanks to the League of Women Voters for organizing this event. These regular interactions with government are an invaluable public service, and serve as another bridge between the people and their representatives in office.

I would also like to thank all of you for tuning in today. I know there are a million and one things you could be doing, but you chose to tune in for this event.

It is hard to articulate just how challenging this past year has been. The global pandemic has fundamentally changed our way of life. Extreme weather events and a shuttered economy has brought enormous pain and suffering. We here in Linn County are used to being resilient, but these events pushed many to the brink.

Darwin taught us that the secret of survival is adaptation; being willing to change and adjust to the things we cannot control. We're still here today and the state of the county is strong because we have been able to adapt to this season of great challenge. We have maintained continuous operations of the government, providing critical services to residents while navigating unprecedented circumstances. With the leadership of Dawn Jindrich and Sara Bearrows, the Board of Supervisors developed a budget that endured unforeseen emergency expenditures, yet still funded all of our departments and agencies, all without raising the levy rate. We have maintained a healthy fund balance and our Aaa bond rating.

In sum, our services increased, but your county taxes did not.

And perhaps one of the greatest challenges to our budget, to our community, our country, and our world is that posed by the novel coronavirus.

It came about in the final month of 2019, and quickly developed into a global health emergency. The world's health community rallied and gave us their best advice. Best practices were established in every developed country. Here in America, each state pursued its own strategy with differing measures of success. The states that acted swiftly undoubtedly saved lives. The states that doubted the science or played politics with the disease suffered the most.



Right now, Iowa:

- Has the [seventh highest](#) number of reported cases per capita in the country
- and the [second highest](#) COVID-19 test positivity rate in the nation.

These are not necessarily encouraging numbers, but thanks to the heroic work of public health officials around the state and in this county especially, we are vaccinating our residents with great speed and diligence, ensuring that no one is left behind. We are making a concerted effort to reach marginalized communities, including minority communities that have well-founded concerns about their disparate treatment by medical professionals; an unfortunate history that spans the generations. We're reaching out to the elderly, to the resource-limited, to populations of immigrants and undocumented individuals. We know that this virus is no respecter of race, religion, or creed. We are made safer when everyone in our community is granted access to the vaccine.

The heroes of this crisis are many, and must never be forgotten. They are our frontline workers, our nurses and doctors, gas station clerks and grocery store workers. They're the truck drivers and factory workers. Our teachers and our farmers. And of course, the women and men in government service and of our Linn County Public Health Department. I have never seen a more dedicated group of public servants in my life. They have poured their heart and souls into pandemic recovery efforts. When actors at the highest levels of our government were defiant - insisting that this global pandemic was not serious, or worse, even a hoax - these public health experts remained diligent, putting their years of training and expertise to good use to save this community.

To save this community. They are our heroes.

Under the direction of Dr. Pramod Dwivedi, Linn County Public Health became one of the most trusted sources of information, and was consulted by corporations, school districts, and governments across the state for advice. These women and men are world class, and they deserve all of our praise and admiration. Their work is not yet done, and neither is ours. We honor these heroes by doing our part to mitigate the spread of the virus and keep one another safe. We must continue to wear our masks, wash our hands, and respect social distancing until this pandemic comes to an end.

Another group of individuals who deserve our praise are all of the Iowans who came together in emergency recovery efforts after the extreme weather event over the summer.

On August 10, of last year, Linn County was hit by a derecho. This storm system developed quickly and blew across the state with wind speeds in excess of 140 miles per hour. In other words, we were hit by a Category 4 hurricane and Linn County caught the worst of it.

At [\\$7.5 billion](#) - the costliest thunderstorm in U.S. history destroyed homes, devastated our tree canopy, and set off a chain reaction of an untold number of humanitarian crises. And while some aspects of the state and local response were laudable, we must be clear and brutally honest about the fact that there were systematic failures across the board. Government - and the officials who run it - should take responsibility for these failures. Those who don't, are not fit to serve.

A big part of taking responsibility is taking the time to learn so that we do better in the future. We need to enhance our response capabilities, and they should include the necessary humanitarian initiatives required to protect the most vulnerable members of our community. And while it's important to have plans, we cannot be limited by them. On more than one occasion, when people needed critical resources, we were prevented from accessing them because some officials believed the contingencies didn't allow for their deployment. Managing emergencies requires officials to do whatever it takes to help those in need. When people's lives hang in the balance, we cannot hide behind the rulebooks. We cannot shrink from our duties.

The pandemic, the derecho and hard economic times brought to light the systemic inequities that have always existed in our community. For generations, these inequities have been ignored and deprioritized. The people in which they afflict have been pushed to the margins, literally living in substandard housing in communities where white flight has taken with it wealth and resources long ago. When the larger community suffers even in the slightest, our vulnerable communities are decimated.

I find myself going back to the question: who is it we want to be? It's a challenge I've put before this community time and again since coming to office. The great majority find it a worthy cause to explore. The few who are perplexed or disgruntled tend to be those unaffected by systemic harm, and if they are, they may not even know it. Sometimes it's about the messenger. Because a Black man talks about these things, it's easy to see these critiques only through a racial lens. But the problems we face cut much deeper than race.

Homelessness in this state is [up 14.3%](#) since last year.

389,000 Iowans are struggling with [hunger](#). 139,000 of those individuals are children.

And the greatest predictor of one's SAT score and future success is their zip code. We have an emergency of poverty in America. We have a wealth gap in America. We have an opportunity gap in America.

Again, these indicators cut much deeper than race. Black people are homeless; white people are homeless. Black people are struggling with hunger; white people are struggling with hunger. Black people need jobs, and white people need jobs too. At their core, these are economic issues and everyone is sharing in the pain. It is in our common interest to

work together to give all people a chance to succeed; a chance to share in the basic pursuit of life, liberty, and happiness. A rising tide will lift all ships.

Homelessness, hunger, and poverty. All of these issues can be alleviated—all of them, through government action at the local, state, and federal level and through community partnerships. This has been the case for generations; what stands in the way is ignorance and political will.

A deficit of political will has plagued our politics since the beginning, but it was on full display this past summer. After a series of high-profile killings of unarmed Black Americans sparked an entire Movement for social change, many of our elected leaders here in local government failed to meet the moment with courage.

In fact, they showed us exactly how government should not respond to its people crying out for change. While Black people across this country were being killed by police, the demonstrations in this community were peaceful, no property was destroyed, and every demand for change that was made, was forward-looking and achievable. Out of this Movement—one that can trace its lineage to the Civil Rights Movement of the past—new leaders emerged, and these new leaders will get us to the Promised Land of freedom and justice for all people in this community.

The Movement, which many in government truly did not understand was excoriated, mocked, and then dismissed. And as the energy of the righteous voices intensified, the defiance of local government grew. However, in the end, it was the people—not the politicians—who emerged victorious. In this community, the moral arc of the universe was pulled a little closer to justice. Concessions were made, and much needed reform is well on its way.

It never had to be this difficult. Elected leaders should come to office with a willingness to listen and learn. And when leaders of an oppressed minority are pointing out systemic failures, all of us would be wise to listen.

For me personally, a Black man with a front row seat to it all, I witnessed my peers in local government display a profound level of ignorance on these complex issues of race. Now, it is certainly okay to not know about these things. On its face, ignorance can be forgiven. However, willful and persistent ignorance is dangerous and unbecoming of a public official. We cannot expect to govern a diverse population in this time without having even a cursory understanding of these issues. We cannot expect to heal our communities without first coming to terms with the things that have harmed them.

Now is the time for critical thinkers. Surely, we can hold two truths in our minds at once. We can acknowledge policing as a noble profession, while also acknowledging the need for reform. We can criticize our leaders without casting aspersions on their character. We can love our community, while pointing out her flaws.

We can point out her triumphs too. This past year, your Linn County government has realized several landmark initiatives and achievements.

- We moved one step closer in the process to bring the very first agri-community to Linn County with the Dows Farm Project. The brainchild of former Linn County Supervisor Brent Oleson, and former Director of Planning and Development, Les Beck the Dows Project will be a legacy initiative, and a model of sustainable development for the entire state.
- The Safe, Equitable, and Thriving Communities Fund, managed by Karla Twedt-Ball and Rachel Rockwell of the Greater Cedar Rapids Community Foundation has reached nearly \$1 million dollars of total investments, validating it as a vehicle for social change and squarely anchoring it in this community for the foreseeable future. It is spearheading the group violence intervention model, an evidence-based approach to addressing severe conflict among young people. The Linn County Board of Supervisors was the first government entity to believe in this effort. We've contributed \$200,000 dollars to date, and we are committed to supporting this initiative until the problems of poverty and youth gun violence in this community come to an end.
- Through the tireless efforts of Supervisor Ben Rogers and other community partners, Linn County opened one of the first mental health access centers in the state of Iowa. This center will provide 24/7 high-quality care to individuals experiencing a mental health crisis or substance use emergency. Its very existence demonstrates that there is a role for government to not only provide these critical services, but to play an active role in destigmatizing mental health treatment. This is a quantum leap for mental health advocacy. This is a lifeline for many in this community.
- While all of the issues we try to address through government action are important, in the end, none of them will matter if we don't ensure a habitable planet. There is no compromise here. We must do all that we can now to pass down a healthy planet to future generations. This is why I helped lead Linn County in declaring a climate emergency, setting the stage for the creation of the first ever Sustainability Department, led by the soon-to-be Dr. Tamara Marcus. Under her leadership, we will do climate justice and we will lead the state in our efforts.

All of these things and more are reasons why the state of our county is strong. Our government is trusted. It is efficient. It is filled with experts and dedicated public servants. And it strives to be one of the largest enterprises for good. This is our strength.

If for some reason, this is my last opportunity to address you all as Chair of the Linn County Board of Supervisors, may I leave you with this:

My entire time in office has been spent challenging our community and her leaders to envision a progressive, inclusive, and equitable county. This has come with some conflict and pushback—two things common in politics as the arena of life and of government is filled with toil. But it has also come with a great deal of heart and love of people. I've often said the point of being in elected office, the point of government is to help people and solve problems. Over the years, we've helped thousands of people in this community and we've endeavored to address some of our toughest challenges. We come to work every day thinking about how to help those in need in the present, while planning to meet the challenges that may still be generations away. This is what good leaders do.

We work in the dark, we do what we can, we give what we have. I implore you all to remain encouraged, to stay engaged, ready to stand up and speak out for what you believe in. Seek truth in all things. Be kind to one another. Lean in and learn about the things we may initially fear, so that we may be reminded that in the end, we are not so different after all. And do all of these things with the express intent to make gentle the life of this world.

Thank you.