

2024 SOTC Speech by Chair Fernando

INTRO

I believe strongly in the work we're doing at Hennepin County. Our mission is to serve residents through transformative services that reduce disparities, eliminate inequities, and create opportunity for all. While we've made a lot of progress in the last few years, there is still so much we must do to serve our residents, who remain our North Star. Today, I'll be sharing many of our accomplishments, as well as inviting you to support our future work.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

We are gathered in the 625 Building auditorium. This is a new and very exciting space for us. This room and building demonstrates the physical transformation of our spaces in a way that acknowledges the future of our workforce: one that operates in-person, remote, and hybrid.

So thanks for joining in person, and thanks for joining us *beyond* this physical space – virtually, from your homes, workplaces, schools, or one of our multiple satellite locations.

Joining me today are Hennepin County Commissioners, Jeff Lunde from District 1, Marion Greene from District 3, Angela Conley from District 4, and Kevin Anderson from District 7. Vice Chair Debbie Goettel from District 5 is unable to be with us today, but she sends her thanks to you all. I also want to thank our two countywide elected officials for joining us today: County Attorney Mary Moriarty and County Sheriff Dawanna Witt.

We're also joined by representatives from native nations, the state of Minnesota, other counties, the Metropolitan Council, and cities across Hennepin County. Thanks for being here, for your vision, and for your partnership.

This event and everything we highlight today is only possible because of the dedicated work of our incredible staff. My deepest thanks to our nearly

10,000 employees. You are the people interfacing with our residents, implementing our programs, and providing services.

Our achievements are *because* of your leadership, questions, ideas, feedback, and genius – truly, thank you!

I offer my sincere gratitude to County Administrator Hough, our Assistant County Administrators, and leadership team who are here today or watching virtually. Special thanks to the staff who contributed to the production of this address today, for not only the onsite event here, but our various satellite locations, and the livestream.

And last, but certainly not least, I want to give a shout out to my family and hype crew for joining me today – in person and online.

GOALS AND ACCOMPLISHMENTS

Whether you interact with us through our service centers, health centers, or libraries. Or whether, you're an elected official who mostly speaks with our IGR team, our dedicated staff work to build community across the county.

Let's start by putting context around the importance of our community, our County, and the role we play throughout the region.

Hennepin County is Minnesota's most populated county with 1.3 million residents. We are made up of 45 municipalities that span from urban cities to rural communities; and includes global destinations like the Mall of America; major transit hubs like the Minneapolis-St. Paul International Airport; and important innovation and research centers like the University of Minnesota Twin Cities.

We are a center of commerce. Approximately one-third of the state's jobs come from businesses in Hennepin, including 8 Fortune 500 companies and many small businesses and entrepreneurs – from art to athletics, food to

entertainment, enjoying nature to civic activism, we have a little bit of something for everyone here in Hennepin – and the work we do as a government has the potential to serve and affect millions of people today, and many generations to come.

Changes to environmental and energy policy will affect the air and water quality for all Minnesotans. Improvements to our transportation infrastructure and transit systems will affect employment opportunities and the moving of goods and services across the state.

Local governments matter, counties matter – individuals do not and cannot always feel the effects of federal government policy in the same way that they do the policies and programs of our local governments. For many of our residents, no level of government has more effect on their day-to-day life than County government.

We do not take this responsibility lightly, and it's my personal mission to ensure we extend community's vision, with strong governance and through a multi-generational lens. Thank you for trusting us with your hopes, dreams, and feedback. We strive to make Hennepin a great place to live and work. The vision we're pursuing, the compassionate work we do, reflects that.

Beyond our state and our region, Hennepin is also a national leader. Our programs are repeatedly recognized and awarded by national organizations, and in the past few years especially, federal leaders have visited to observe and learn from our successes.

On Health, we want to ensure that everyone has access to the care they need. A big example of this was our work around Medicaid renewal. Throughout the COVID federal emergency, people enrolled in Medicaid would stay continuously enrolled. When the emergency rules ended, folks needed to actively re-enroll to ensure they did not lose medical coverage. This renewal process affected hundreds of thousands of Minnesotans, including 190,000 households in Hennepin. We collaborated with external partners to inform

and support residents through the renewal process, and we improved IT processes so as many residents as possible could keep their medical coverage.

We are making major investments in our healthcare infrastructure. NorthPoint Health and Wellness Center is very close to wrapping up a comprehensive expansion project to meet the growing health and social service needs of our community. When the Campus Expansion Project is completed, NorthPoint will provide increased access to quality and innovative health & wellness services, expanded space for clinics and programs, and more employment and economic development opportunities.

In 2023, we launched a \$1.7 million mental health awareness community campaign aimed at normalizing mental health conversations and reducing stigma through education and connections. The call to truly See Mental Health earned more than 202 million total impressions, ensuring people were reached multiple times in a variety of ways. Digital impressions alone totaled nearly 49 million, and the See Mental Health team participated in 36 community events, engaging more than 8,000 people in person across the county.

We are also committed to maintaining healthier, safer homes. Since 2004, we've removed lead paint from 5,200 houses and apartment units. Housing and Economic Development teams host non-paint lead poisoning testing events, promote in-home screenings, offer full home inspections, and help remedy health hazards through grant-funded home repairs. In 2023 alone, 212 homes were improved through lead removal and safety improvements.

On housing, I believe that access to dignified housing is a human right, and I'm proud of this Board's unwavering commitment to address housing needs in the region.

We are actively investing state, federal, and county dollars to keep homelessness rare, brief, and non-recurring. Hennepin invested \$191 million in 2023. With that investment, the county funded services and operations for

more than 15,000 units of supportive housing – and we’ve invested over \$98 million in transitional and permanent housing. Hennepin County truly leads the region when it comes to the full housing continuum.

Another way we’ve leveraged that funding, was to eliminate the requirement that families with eligible earned income, contribute to the cost of shelter stays. By eliminating the “pay to stay” requirement, we gave families back agency over their financial resources and the ability to build assets that position them to be successful when they are able to leave shelter.

Homelessness to Housing is a person-centered and trauma-informed approach to housing services for people experiencing homelessness. Each individual is paired with a case manager who provides holistic support and resources, in order to help them sustainably secure housing. By the end of 2023, less than 2 years since the program started, the program had housed 673 individuals. We are proud to say that 94% of the individuals housed through this program have not returned to the homeless response system.

We’ve also led in re-introducing Single-Room Occupancy housing, into our communities since 2020. So far, the county has acquired five properties and assisted a partner in purchasing a sixth. Last year, two of the properties were sold, rehabilitated, and began leasing to residents, creating 83 new units of deeply affordable housing.

Additionally, we are investing money to help homebuyers, and to eliminate barriers to homeownership. Our homebuyer assistance program began in 2020 as a pilot program for populations disproportionately impacted by systemic barriers to homeownership.

This pilot helped 20 residents purchase their first home, 85% of whom identified as Black or African-American. In 2023, our Housing and Redevelopment Authority launched its first designated fund for homeownership assistance, constituting its largest annual investment in homeownership.

We also expanded participation in the Homestead Market Value Exclusion Program. Homeowners who participate in the program receive tangible benefits related to property and income taxes, such as property tax savings and eligibility for statewide property tax refunds. However, many eligible homeowners don't homestead.

That's why we created a multi-departmental team to evaluate homesteading rates and increase participation. The team found that race, language, income, and geography impact application rates. Through direct, multilingual outreach and community events, the team was able to enroll over 5,800 new homesteaded properties, saving *each household* hundreds, even thousands of dollars per year.

Through our Elevate Hennepin program, we provide businesses with a full range of supportive opportunities, tools, and resources to help strengthen their businesses and reach their goals. To date, almost 2,200 businesses have utilized Elevate Hennepin – and our advisors have delivered over 21,000 hours of *no-cost* consulting, to solve problems and help business owners. This has led to the creation of more than 100 new businesses, and the creation or preservation of 300 jobs.

In addition to working with businesses, we do a lot to help workers too. Last year, the county launched a guaranteed basic income pilot program called Raise the Baseline. Raise the Baseline addresses pandemic-exacerbated disparities by making 15 monthly direct payments to eligible residents. Participants make their own decisions about how to spend the money to meet *their* family's needs. The pilot launched last summer; 167 families are currently receiving payments.

There are many factors that make Raise the Baseline unique from other similar programs across the country – including innovative IT support, a streamlined enrollment process, payments based on family size, and a taper-down period to prepare for a successful program exit. The pilot will conclude

in December of this year. We are working with a research partner to gain insights from program participants and are looking forward to using this pilot to inform our future policies and practices to support resident income.

We also support employment opportunities through the Pathways Program. Pathways are customized educational programs designed to train job seekers for in-demand positions. Since 2014, our teams have trained over 700 people and hired over 400 graduates from Hennepin's Pathways program, with 45 graduates hired in 2023.

There are currently over 30 distinct pathway job training opportunities. Pathways hires are diverse and reflect our region's demographics; more than 60% of hires identify as a person of color, many are multilingual, veterans, and immigrants. We also engage youth with public sector work experiences through community partners like Step-Up, BrookLynk, and Urban Scholars.

In the context of income, we also recognize that improving income can often have unintended complications for individuals and families receiving other kinds of government assistance.

That is why we partnered with 13 community-based organizations to implement unique programs aimed at reducing, and ultimately eliminating, the negative impacts earned income can have on residents who are participating in public assistance programs. Strategies vary and range from providing financial assistance to establishing emergency funds to providing employment, education, and financial coaching services.

On environmental justice, we are investing now in long-term solutions – from expanding our tree canopies to creating a new climate action plan to proactive leadership on solid waste.

As a North Minneapolis resident, I've advocated for closure of the HERC since long before I was in elected office. The County's public position has appropriately evolved over the last year, due to new laws, information,

studies, and perspectives. This led to the County Board pursuing a plan to stop burning trash as soon as 2028. We are very excited about the work that's been done towards the HERC's responsible closure and are dedicated to working with cities and the state of Minnesota to implement zero-waste policies and reduce how much waste is created to begin with.

COLLABORATION

A key partnership for this board is our deep collaboration with our Hennepin delegation in the state legislature. Working closely and collaboratively with legislators, and with the assistance of our Intergovernmental relations staff, we have been able to achieve favorable outcomes in key policy areas for the county.

Last year was a particularly successful and productive legislative session and we are already continuing that progress this year. Thanks to this strong partnership, and alongside community voice and advocacy, we were able to accomplish many of the county's state policy priorities last year, and I would like to highlight just a few of them now.

The Protect Reproductive Options Act ensures that every Minnesotan now has the fundamental right to make decisions about their own reproductive healthcare, including the right to use or refuse reproductive health care, to continue a pregnancy and give birth, or to obtain an abortion.

The Restore The Vote Act makes sure Minnesotans, who are not currently incarcerated for a felony conviction, can vote – which strengthens our society by reintegrating people who have completed their sentences.

And the Driver's Licenses for All Bill, allows undocumented residents to obtain a driver's license, ensuring our residents and roads are safer.

I could go on and on, but now let's focus on legislation that specifically *equips* the County better serve residents:

In environment policy, the county received funding for state investment in our Zero Waste Plan and climate action goals.

In transportation, dedicated funding was established for projects in Metro counties, something that we have been asking for, for a long time.

In housing policy, the state established new revenue streams, and dedicated much needed rental and housing assistance funding – which will be instrumental in *stabilizing* residents and families, as well as *preventing* evictions and homelessness.

The legislature also passed a bill that expanded MinnesotaCare to undocumented Minnesotans, ensuring that all residents can access the healthcare they need.

And the Minnesota Rehabilitation and Reinvestment Act was passed, which will bring large reforms to the area of law, safety, and justice.

Funding from these bills and others allows us to implement programming to assist our residents, address disparities, strengthen our economy, implement climate justice, and fund the systems that solve problems in the region, the state, and beyond.

Our cities and municipalities are also incredibly important partners in so much of the work we do.

One collaboration that has been overwhelmingly successful is the 911 Embedded Social Worker program, which just this past year, has now expanded to every municipality in the county.

Through this program, Embedded Social Workers receive referrals from municipal law enforcement agencies regarding individuals who appear to have mental health, chemical dependency, or other needs. In these calls, social workers offer support, assessments, and connections to community services – with the goal to reduce criminal justice system involvement and create timely access to social services.

As an example of this program’s effectiveness, Embedded Social Workers produced an 80% reduction in calls among the top 25 callers in Brooklyn Park. We are excited for the future of this program and the many other opportunities to collaborate with city governments.

Next, I want to highlight the opportunities we’ve had to partner with community organizations, non-profits, and other providers. Last spring, the county concluded our anti-racism initiative, a project which dedicated \$300,000 of funding from the 2022 county budget to support ongoing community building, healing, and anti-racism work taking place in the communities surrounding George Floyd Square.

We partnered with two organizations for this initiative, a national non-profit, The People’s Institute for Survival and Beyond; and a local community organization, the Central Area Neighborhood Development Organization. The knowledge, relationships, and community built through each aspect of this initiative were impactful and the money from the county was a huge support to these organizations to advance the anti-racism work they had already been doing and continue to do.

In 2021 Hennepin County and the Metropolitan Council launched a first of its kind anti-displacement program to support residents and businesses impacted by the Blue Line Extension light rail. We conducted an 18-month engagement process with the communities surrounding the planned Blue Line extension.

The Anti-Displacement Work Group – made up of community advocates, residents, and stakeholders – developed *17 recommended policies* for Blue Line extension government partners to consider, build upon, and implement.

This work group would not have been possible without our close partnership with the Center for Urban and Regional Affairs – or CURA. They led the cohort, and they bring their extensive knowledge of leading community research through a racial equity lens. Thanks to that work, the Blue Line Extension project will be designed to benefit residents and businesses currently living in these communities.

We will make sure current neighbors can remain in the community to experience the transformative benefits and community prosperity this project can bring now and into the future.

Both of these projects were well received in their communities, and the feedback from participants in these initiatives were overwhelmingly positive. This is the kind of co-governing and community impact we can achieve when we work together with community leaders and organizations.

Through all of this work across the county and with our partners, the common goal we work towards, is serving our residents.

As an organization, we recently updated our mission, vision, and values to integrate our commitment to disparity reduction and reflect the changes we have experienced as a county. The world, our community, and our government institutions have changed a lot in the last few years. As an organization, we need to reflect those changes, evolve, and remain flexible, in order to best serve our residents and community.

I've used that word – community – a lot throughout my remarks because community connection is critical to our work. We must continue finding ways to further engage with and deepen our partnership *with* communities.

One of the ways we currently rely on our communities is through Community Advisory Boards. Members of the public and local officials can be appointed to serve on more than 11 various advisory boards, task forces, and committees.

I thank these board members, who advise county commissioners on issues and programs, help set policy, and deal with a variety of topics of concern to the county. The perspective and lived experience of these board members are invaluable as we try to better meet the needs of our residents.

I want to impress upon everyone here today, the importance *and* the need, for collaboration with our communities.

- This means asking for and welcoming feedback on policies and decision-making.
- This means building partnerships and providing funding to community organizations to create connections and support residents.
- This means increasing access to government spaces and information.
- This means continued and growing investment for youth, LGBTQ+ neighbors and coworkers, people with disabilities, and others who are disenfranchised from our systems.

I am committed to increasing community inclusion and participation in county government. I ask everyone here and watching online to do the same.

Because it is not enough for us to dream about the world we wish to create. We must also ask ourselves, “What are we willing to give up, in order to create that world? What are we willing to do, to risk, to challenge, to invent?”

Only when we ask these questions, and take those actions, will we achieve the world we all deserve.

CLOSING

In closing, to our residents: I am here because of you. I am leading with you and for you. I am humbled by your support, and I promise to continue working

very hard every single day to make sure your voices have a seat at this decision-making table.

Effective government is all about ensuring everyone has what they need to lead full and vibrant lives – authentic in their personhood, and with genuine sense of belonging. Government should also be about dedicated innovation, and the bravery to take calculated risks.

I've often called myself an "idea refurbisher" because being good at governing isn't about coming up with all the answers yourself, it's about working with a dedicated team, building off of each other, and being deeply tied to the communities we serve. That's how we make meaningful change. That's what we're doing at Hennepin.

And while I am so proud of our innovative work and Hennepin's continued leadership in the areas of affordable housing, climate, transit, health outcomes, and addressing the unsheltered homelessness crisis, I also know how much more our communities *still* need from governments, and I'm dedicated to continue working to meaningfully improve the lives of residents.

Finally, I again extend my deepest gratitude to residents, community partners, County staff, my colleagues, and our County Attorney and County Sheriff – for your work, dedication, and partnership. I look forward to continuing to work hard on all of your behalf to achieve a more equitable County.

Thanks for being here today and for tuning in virtually. We'll end with a reception, just outside this room, which features food and décor from all seven Hennepin districts. We also have a photo backdrop and to-go boxes, so I hope you'll stay and mingle.

I am Commissioner Irene Fernando, but you can call me Commish. Thank you!