

## 2025 State of the County speech

Good morning! Thank you so much. Let's give another round of applause for that incredible performance. "Lift Every Voice and Sing" is a beautiful piece—its soaring melody and powerful lyrics remind us that we are strongest when we join our voices together.

Across Hennepin County, from bustling downtowns to quiet rural roads, from classrooms to clinics, residents are counting on us. They are our North Star. And today, I am proud to share that the state of our County is not just strong—it is vibrant, and it is unwavering in its commitment to every single person we serve.

I am Commissioner Irene Fernando, but you can call me Commish! I use she/her pronouns and have the privilege of representing District 2 on the Hennepin County Board and serving as the current Board Chair.

I am the first Filipino American elected in the State of Minnesota.  
I am the youngest woman to ever serve on the Hennepin County Board.  
And I am the first Board Chair of color in Hennepin's 173-year history.

It's not lost on me that we meet during a time of great challenge, and great responsibility. As your Board Chair, I believe deeply in the work we are doing, to improve the lives of our residents and workforce.

Today, I'll be sharing our commitments, highlighting our work, and looking forward to the future of our County.

Before we get started, a few acknowledgements:

First, thank you to everyone joining us here in person, and thanks to those joining virtually, from your homes, workplaces, or schools.

On behalf of my fellow Hennepin County Commissioners here in the front, I welcome you to our 2025 State of the County!

- District 4 Commissioner, Angela Conley
- Vice Chair and District 5 Commissioner, Debbie Goettel
- District 6 Commissioner, Heather Edelson
- And District 7 Commissioner, Kevin Anderson
- I'd also like to acknowledge District 1 Commissioner, Jeff Lunde and District 3 Commissioner Marion Greene, who could not join us today. Both send their regards.

A special welcome to our Hennepin County elected officials: County Attorney Mary Moriarty, and County Sheriff Dawanna Witt.

We're also joined by representatives and leadership from Native nations, the State of Minnesota, other counties, the Metropolitan Council, and cities across Hennepin County.

If you're an elected or appointed policymaker, please wave or stand. Thank you for your vision and for your continued partnership because residents deserve effective, compassionate leaders across all governments. Round of applause, please!

At the heart of Hennepin County's important work... is our incredible and vibrant workforce.

From dedicated social workers, ensuring families receive the support they need, to public works teams maintaining our roads and infrastructure, to emergency responders who keep us safe, and so many others, who work for the betterment of residents' lives. Your work matters.

Each day, you step up with commitment and resilience, making a meaningful difference in the lives of people we serve. You are the people interfacing with our residents, implementing our programs, and providing services. My deepest thanks go out to you.

And to County Administrator David Hough, our Assistant County Administrators, and leadership team: I offer my sincere gratitude. Special thanks also to: Mr. LaPointe, Known MPLS, and the incredible staff—Communications, Event Technology Services, and Facility Services teams—who planned and produced today's address.

Give it up for the Hennepin County workforce, everyone!

And last, but certainly not least, shout out to my family and hype crew for joining me today—in person and online.

Let me begin by saying this: Local governments matter. Counties matter. And today—more than ever—how we lead, how we listen, and how we serve will define our shared future.

Since I last stood before you, at the 2024 State of the County, we've witnessed sweeping change at our federal level of government.

While the state of the County remains strong, vibrant, and committed, we are not immune to the many challenges shaping our nation. Political uncertainty and federal funding reductions have placed real burdens on local governments, threatening to slow the progress, that we have worked hard to achieve. It's also caused real fear and harm... in families, at schools and workplaces, and across our communities.

But when resources are tight, we innovate. When policies shift, we adapt. Staying true to our core values always. And when our communities need us the most, we do what Hennepin County has always done: We step up, we show up, and we deliver.

Hennepin's mission remains clear: to serve residents through transformative services that reduce disparities, eliminate inequities, and create opportunity for ALL. To assure that no matter where you live, the

make up of your family, where you come from, OR the challenges you face, you have access to the resources needed to thrive.

Everyone deserves to be *seen, heard, and valued*.  
Hennepin County has your back.

As the largest County in Minnesota, Hennepin is not just the economic engine of our state, but a North Star of opportunity, innovation, and community—not just across our region, but across the nation.

Our businesses range from small startups and local entrepreneurs, to Fortune 500 organizations—contributing to nearly one-third of ALL the state’s jobs... spanning industries from arts and entertainment, to technology and healthcare.

And this collective impact extends far beyond our County, helping to shape the area’s economy, workforce, and quality of life for all people.

We will advocate at the state and federal levels, for the resources we need to serve our residents. We will continue to champion and invest in our workforce. It is YOU—the people doing the work every day—who make Hennepin County a place of opportunity, hope, and promise.

Our history proves that when we work together, we accomplish great things. Today, we reaffirm our promise to move Hennepin forward—boldly, inclusively, and with an unshakable dedication to progress.

Every day, we strive to make Hennepin a great place to live and work. Thank you all for trusting us with your hopes, dreams, and feedback.

Hennepin’s commitment to serve residents and reduce disparities remains unwavering. We understand there are complex reasons why people may need assistance. That’s why we invest in upstream services to prevent problems before they start.

The County focuses our efforts to reduce disparities in seven key areas: Connectivity, Education, Employment, Health, Housing, Income, and Justice.

We are also devoted to climate mitigation and resiliency across the organization - because we understand that taking bold action on climate - is an investment in our future and the well-being of our communities.

When we start our work from this shared perspective, and hold ourselves to these commitments, we are following our call to help and honor the very people we've been entrusted to serve.

Nothing proves this dedication more than this past year's outcomes, and the progress we have made together.

## *CONNECTIVITY*

Access to information, services, and opportunities is essential for our strong and vibrant communities. Hennepin County is dedicated to creating and enhancing physical and digital connections.

Whether it's through our robust public transportation system, improving road safety in our urban and rural landscapes, or expanding critical broadband access, connectivity bridges gaps and links residents to critical services like healthcare, housing, education, and employment.

Connectivity is more than roads and wires... it's about building relationships, and strengthening the ways people access essential services, to meet their fundamental needs. Connectivity is the bridge linking our vibrant communities to opportunities and to each other.

We understand that equitable access to these connections, is necessary for every resident to fully participate - in existing opportunities, and in their communities.

To improve access to reliable and efficient public transportation, we're proud to have built more than 900 ADA compliant pedestrian ramps, AND 6.5 miles of additional transit-only lanes, along rapid transit routes.

The County has also installed 13 new or improved miles of sidewalks, bikeways, and multi-use trails. All our transportation projects – whether they're enhancing bus routes or creating safer pedestrian pathways – are designed for people, to get where they need to go... safely.

Additionally, we're continuing to address the digital divide.

In 2024, we provided 2,500 households with gigabit connectivity. We know that high-speed internet is a necessity for students, workers, job seekers, and families. We're expanding broadband access, so no one is left behind. And we're improving access to services and strengthening our communities.

At Hennepin County, we advocate for a future, where connectivity is not a privilege, but a shared foundation for all.

## *EDUCATION*

We're passionate about education because we know that education is, one of the most powerful tools we have, to build strong, vibrant communities... to reduce disparities, and improve outcomes, for all our kids and for future generations.

We're working for everyone at each stage of life... to have the opportunity to learn and grow. From children in early childhood education programs to adults looking to further their education and careers to individuals seeking their high school diploma or GED. Education is more than what happens in a classroom... it's about opening doors, and equipping individuals with knowledge and skills.

Through our partnership with schools, community organizations, and higher learning institutions... we provide resources and support for residents in pursuit of their educational goals.

Last year... 1,850 [Kinder through 5<sup>th</sup> grade students] received reading support through Let's Read literacy sessions. And more than 1,000 students received tutoring support, through Educational Support Services.

We know mental health can be a [barrier to educational success]. To advocate for students' wellbeing in school and at home - we partnered with over 200 schools, to offer mental health services in 2024.

Education is a cornerstone of equity, and not every resident has the same starting point. That's why we focused on closing gaps in educational achievement and graduation rates / as well as fostering a culture of lifelong learning... to provide the people we serve, with access to the tools they need, to succeed in today's workforce and throughout their lives.

## *EMPLOYMENT*

Employment is central to a person's economic prosperity, and it has a profound impact on every area of life—from housing and health, to income and opportunity. We believe by improving career development and creating pathways to stable and meaningful employment—we can help people earn a living and empower them to build brighter futures.

We are proud of the progress we've made. Since 2013, our Pathways Program—which connects job seekers with meaningful work, livable wages, benefits, and career growth—has hired more than 430 program graduates to permanent positions at Hennepin County. And 89% of Pathways graduates remain in their role for more than one year. In 2024, we also helped 231 parents attain their high school diplomas, which will benefit their long-term employment prospects.

As one of the largest employers in the region, Hennepin County takes its role as both a service provider and an employer - seriously.

We are intentional about ensuring County employees have the support they need to build strong and vibrant careers. Our investment goes beyond compensation. Our Total Rewards program is robust, and we actively support the growth and advancement of our employees through training, tuition reimbursement, and mentorship opportunities.

In addition, we focus on creating pathways to employment for those who face barriers to getting hired. Last year, we hosted 189 paid internships. By connecting people to job training programs, internships, and employment opportunities, Hennepin County is helping connect residents, including those from historically underrepresented communities, with access to good-paying jobs. This is how we continue to build a vibrant Hennepin County with opportunity for all.

## *HEALTH*

Good health is essential to strong and vibrant lives and communities. We recognize that devastating health disparities exist—and are exacerbated by factors like racism, income inequality, and limited access to health care. We declared racism a public health crisis acknowledging that communities of color, face worse health outcomes because of these systemic factors.

In 2024, we allocated \$1 million for heart health, focusing on reducing disparities among African American and Indigenous women. Our approach to health is holistic and aims to improve physical health, as well as mental and emotional well-being.



Through programs focused on mental health support, preventive care, and improving access to health services. We are working to reduce health disparities—because no one should face worse health outcomes due to their race, gender, bank account, or zip code.

Our \$87 million contribution for the NorthPoint Health and Wellness Center expansion – in North Minneapolis, where I call home – was a transformative investment, enhancing access to integrated medical, dental, and behavioral health services for many people across our County.

Additionally in 2024, we supported 139 families through in-home recovery programs, helping parents heal while keeping families together.

By working with trusted partners, and listening to the needs of our communities, we can continue to expand on the community- and data-driven solutions that have proven to reduce health disparities.

Food insecurity is another critical predictor of health. To address this, we contributed over \$3.2 million to community food providers last year, to increase food access and security.

It's also essential to highlight... that Hennepin County funds the only public safety-net hospital in the state of Minnesota... meaning we serve everyone... regardless of their ability to pay or where they call home.

Hennepin Healthcare System, HHS, HCMC, is more than a hospital. It's a promise to provide exceptional care without exception, serving people 24/7, and is the largest provider Hennepin County uses, in the delivery of human services and public health programs.

The Hennepin County Board is immensely grateful for the essential services that HHS staff and leadership provides for our communities. And we take seriously our role in providing all Minnesotans access to quality healthcare that meets their needs.

Health is not just about treating illness—it's about building communities where every resident has the opportunity to live a full and healthy life.

## *HOUSING*

Housing is one of the most fundamental needs for any individual or family. We're focused on addressing the housing crisis in our region, BY creating and preserving affordable, and deeply affordable housing.

Hennepin County is a unique contributor and partner in the housing landscape—acting both as a funding partner and a service provider. And we support our affordable housing strategy and our homelessness response by administering and overseeing \$218 million dollars, in 2024.

Our approach to housing focuses on creating a broad variety of housing opportunities—from affordable rental units to homeownership programs—with the help of private, and public sector partnerships.

A safe and affordable place to live is the foundation on which people build successful lives. Hennepin County has a person-centered approach to providing housing, shelter, and resources.

Our goal is to increase access to housing stability for people. We work to develop a range of affordable housing options, across income levels, while working to make homelessness rare, brief, and nonrecurring by ensuring access to stable, dignified housing.

Since 2005, Hennepin County has had a “shelter all” policy for families with children younger than 18. It's the only policy in the state that strives to shelter all families because Hennepin firmly believes that no child should be sleeping outdoors, especially in one of the coldest urban counties in the country.

Although no layer of government is mandated to shelter our unhoused residents. Hennepin continues our compassionate commitment to shelter all families, however they may find themselves in our geography.

We have fewer families in shelters now, compared to last year, due to focused efforts:

- to support families' quick transition from homelessness to housing
- to prevent eviction
- and to help families find other options in their networks.

The number of people experiencing unsheltered homelessness is down this year and the number of people in stable housing is up. Partially a result of improved and diversified shelter settings that our nonprofit partners provide with our support.

As well as the continued, consistent presence of street outreach workers who support and shoulder the administrative burden of transitioning into housing. The Homeless to Housing team have helped 788 people transition from homelessness to housing, in 2024.

Our efforts are bolstered by collaboration, with other government agencies, local housing authorities, community partners, and dedicated non-profit organizations. Our success is a testament to the power of community collaboration, dedicated resources, and a shared commitment to ensure people and veterans have the homes and support they deserve.

Because we believe every veteran deserves a safe, stable home, and we're proud of our efforts to effectively end veteran homelessness in the Hennepin County. We've reached a point where any veteran experiencing homelessness—is identified, connected with the services they need, and provided support to stabilize their housing situation, quickly.

Hennepin County received an award from the Biden Administration for our work on Veteran's Homelessness. Thank you to all the staff, providers,

and advocates, who made this unprecedented victory a reality—and for proving that we can shape systems and make strategic, bold investments to end homelessness in our communities, one person at a time.

## *INCOME*

Hennepin County understands that income inequality remains one of the most persistent challenges facing our communities. Income is more than a paycheck, It's a path to achieve self-sufficiency, the ability to build wealth and stability, and it's the means to provide for your loved ones.

Income is a foundational building block for opportunity. Stable and fair income provides the resources to secure basic needs, live healthier, build savings, contribute to your community, and invest in future generations. We're proactively addressing income disparities through focused programs and strategic investments.

Through Elevate Hennepin – our NO-COST small business consulting program – we've provided more than 42,000 hours of one-on-one, on-demand advising services to 3,262 businesses and entrepreneurs. Supporting the development and preservation of our small and local business community is critical to the job market and local economy. Elevate Hennepin has helped local businesses create and retain over 688 jobs, impacting over 14,000 livelihoods across Hennepin and the region.

Our vision for a vibrant Hennepin County ensures every resident has the opportunity to achieve financial stability and success. Unfortunately, significant disparities in income among communities of color remain. These disparities translate into a wealth gap, creating barriers to long-term success. We're devoted to closing this gap by promoting economic opportunities, supporting small businesses, and reducing barriers to business ownership. We've provided support to entrepreneurs of all backgrounds with resources accessible in over 200 languages. Together,

we continue to create pathways for wealth-building, help level the playing field, and create lasting opportunities for financial independence.

## *JUSTICE*

Hennepin County's justice system is complex, interconnected, and shared among federal, state, local authorities, and other key partners. At the core of our efforts, we are working to create a fair and equitable system for everyone, regardless of their background.

Last year, we had a 200% increase in the number of residents, who received supports from our Adult Representation Services department. Since launching in 2019, Adult Representation Services has helped to make the legal system more equitable for thousands of income limited individuals. The ARS legal team has helped clients stay in their homes, reunite with their children, terminate guardianships, access much-needed resources, and more.

By collaborating with stakeholders across the justice system, we're working to create a more equitable future, one recognizing the injustices of the past, while working toward a fair and just system. Our Community Productive Day Program offers on-the-job training and a living wage, for Department of Community Corrections and Rehabilitation supervision clients, the program also aims to increase diversity in the trades.

Since 2021, the Hennepin County Sheriff's Office HOPE Program, or Helping Others by Providing Education, has supported 8 GED recipients and 37 high school diploma recipients.

And in 2024, the Hennepin County Attorney's Office expungement clinics served more than 600 people, expanding future job and housing opportunities.

Across all Hennepin's programs, we are dedicated to the work of justice reform, ensuring our system works to dismantle systemic racism.

## *CLIMATE*

Data on recent weather patterns and the devastation from extreme-weather events, locally and around the world... confirm that we cannot ignore the urgent need to take action for our climate.

Challenges posed by climate change affect all of us, and disproportionately affect those who are financially vulnerable, and communities of color.

This past summer, 120 community scientists volunteered to collect important data on our region's climate, informing our climate work as we move forward. Hennepin County is working to build strong, resilient communities, adaptable to our changing climate.

Last year, our Forestry team planted 32,000 bareroot trees throughout the County, as part of our effort to plant one million trees by 2030, and we are currently on track to reaching this goal.

Because here in Hennepin County... trees are infrastructure. A strong tree canopy means breathing cleaner air, cooler temperatures during extreme heat, and water storage to prevent flooding.

Through investments in green infrastructure, sustainable development, and climate adaptation strategies, we are not only mitigating the impacts of climate change, but also creating a more sustainable future for all, regardless of where we live, or the resources we have.

Last year, we were 1 of 24 government bodies to participate in the U.S. Department of Energy's Community Local Energy Action Pilot program.

And as a North Minneapolis resident, I have advocated on the HERC long before I was in elected office.

The County's public position has appropriately evolved over recent years, due to new laws, information, studies, and perspectives. The County Board has passed a plan to stop burning trash, inside this decade, but this can only be achieved, through deep partnership and bold leadership.

We are very excited about all the work that's been done to reinvent the solid waste system and are dedicated to work alongside all our Cities and the State of Minnesota, to implement zero-waste policies, and to reduce how much waste is created to begin with.

I look forward to the strategic actions and meaningful investments by Cities who use the HERC, as well as at the Legislature, to collectively achieve a zero-waste future, responsibly convert the HERC to a recycling and recovery facility while maintaining the continuity of essential public services.

## *WORKFORCE*

The success I've highlighted today are examples of the strength and vibrancy of Hennepin County and prove what we are able to accomplish together. Our work is nation leading. In 2024 alone, our programs and services won 34 awards from multiple national organizations.

Our continued progress as a County is a direct reflection of the dedication, talent, and hard work of our more than 9,700 employees.

Each department, each team, and every individual play a vital role in driving our mission forward.

Whether it's advancing public safety and justice, maintaining or improving infrastructure, streamlining services, creating models, or working one-on-one with people as they navigate the unimaginable...

Hennepin employees serve residents, every day, with purpose and passion across our 104 service locations and worksites.

Words cannot express the gratitude I feel for our workforce. Your commitment to excellence is the backbone of the success we celebrate here today, and the foundation for the future we are working on building together. Thank you for choosing Hennepin, and for making our world a more vibrant and equitable place for all.

I am incredibly proud of the progress we've made - together. But we know there's still more to do.

We will continue to work relentlessly with stewardship, integrity, equity, innovation, and our people at the heart... of everything we do.

I said it earlier, and I'll say it again :  
Local governments matter. Hennepin County matters.

Especially now, as Federal protections are rolled back, and funding becomes more uncertain, the role of County government is critical to the wellbeing of our residents, communities, and shared future.

In this environment, Hennepin's commitment to equity and community engagement remains unwavering. We will continue to listen, partner, and respond to evolving needs - implementing programs that foster stability, opportunity, and growth.

We aim to continue advancing our strong, committed, and vibrant communities where everyone thrives, and where local governments deliver effective results, provide caring support, and reduce disparities.



At the heart of our work is connection.

Every day, we depend on strong relationships—with residents, service providers, community organizations, and all levels of government.

Our Community Advisory Boards play a vital role in this ecosystem. Members of the public and local officials can be appointed to serve on more than 11 wide-ranging advisory boards, task forces, and committees.

These volunteer board members live and work in Hennepin County advising County commissioners on issues and programs and helping to identify priorities and set policy.

Thank you for sharing your perspectives, collective expertise, and lived experiences are invaluable as we strive to continuously improve.

Round of applause for everyone who volunteers for Hennepin!

We remain focused on deepening relationships, especially with historically marginalized communities.

We will continue to ensure that our services meet people where they are and collaborate with partners and community to advocate for the resources we need to support our County and residents.

Given today's intensifying conditions, collaboration must be more than a seat at the table, collaboration means building the table together.

And none of this happens in isolation.

If there's one message I hope to leave you with today, it's this: we, the County, cannot do this work alone.

Our shared future depends on deep, authentic collaboration with our communities. We must welcome feedback, make space for it, and be willing to act on it... even (and especially) when it might challenge us.

For our youth, LGBTQ+ neighbors, people with disabilities, communities of color, and others who've been pushed to the margins or stigmatized... we will continue to advocate for equity and access.

We are devoted to increasing community inclusion and participation in Hennepin County's government... because your voice matters.

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, risk, challenge, invent?"

Only when we stand up for and with one another, do we truly have each other's backs. And Hennepin County has yours. We're doing the work to create the community we all deserve.

The State of *our* Hennepin County is strong, vibrant, and committed.

As we close, please remember this:

Hennepin County is more than a government, we're a community of listeners, problem-solvers, and changemakers.

We've weathered storms with focus and resolve. And we always remain clear about who we are and what we stand for.

Whatever the road ahead brings, *Hennepin County has your back.*

To every resident... whether you've just arrived, or your roots here run generations deep...

- We are here for you.
- We see your dreams.

- We hear your concerns.
- And we honor your right to thrive.

We are not passive observers of change... we are architects of change.

- We build systems.
- We advance equity.
- We invest in resilience.
- We lead with compassion, and act with courage.

So let us move forward, united by purpose and driven by hope. Let's rise to meet this moment, for every child growing up here, for every elder who has paved the way, and for *all* of our neighbors.

Because when every voice is heard, when every neighbor is seen, and when every community is valued... we are strong, vibrant, and committed.

The state of our Hennepin County is strong... because you are strong. And together, there is nothing we can't achieve. Thank you!