

From: Governor's Press Office [Governor'sPressOffice@eog.myflorida.com]
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CONTACT: GOVERNOR'S PRESS OFFICE
(850) 717-9282
media@eog.myflorida.com

Governor Rick Scott's 2018 State of the State Address *Remarks as Prepared for Delivery*

TALLAHASSEE, Fla. – Good morning. I am honored to deliver my final state of the state today. I would first like to recognize: Speaker of the House Richard Corcoran. Speaker, I appreciate your commitment to cutting taxes and for fighting to make sure every Florida student can get a great education. Senate President Joe Negron. President, your focus on Lake Okeechobee and Florida's environment will benefit countless Floridians and visitors for generations.

Lieutenant Governor Carlos Lopez-Cantera. Thank you for all you do for our great state and for joining me in the fight for freedom and democracy in Cuba and Venezuela. Attorney General Pam Bondi. You have been a true advocate for crime victims and have been a leading voice in our fight against the opioid epidemic. There's no doubt that your efforts have saved lives. Chief Financial Officer Jimmy Patronis. I was proud to appoint you as CFO and in a very short time, you have done so much to help Florida families. Thank you for all you are doing to support our brave firefighters. Commissioner of Agriculture Adam Putnam. Thank you for always fighting for Florida's critical agriculture community and for all you have done to help Florida's citrus industry after Hurricane Irma. Chief Justice Labarga and members of the Florida Supreme Court. Thank you for your service to our state.

I would like to thank my wife, Ann. There isn't a day that goes by that I am not thankful for your unwavering support. As first lady, you have done so much to help Florida families. From visiting schools, to promoting literacy and helping find forever homes for kids in foster care, I am so proud of all you have done. You took a chance on me 45 years ago, a skinny kid without a penny in his pocket, who talked too fast, with only a dream. You have believed in me every day since then, including the day I told you I wanted to run for Governor. When no one else thought I had a shot, you stood by me. I love you. I would like to also recognize my son-law-law Pierre and my oldest grandson, Auguste. Auguste wants to either be a paratrooper like his great-grandfather or a police officer when he grows up.

I know how disappointed you all must be that you won't get to hear me give another great speech like this, try to hold back the tears. Putting jokes aside, I stand here today, at the beginning of my last year as Governor, thankful for the opportunity that we have all had to help our beloved state of

Florida. I am thankful that in 2010, with the amazing support of my family, the people of Florida gave me the chance to turn our state around. This has been the most rewarding job.

There were the naysayers who told us there was no way that a businessman with no experience in politics or government could possibly be successful at helping to turn Florida's economy around. Fortunately for all of us, the naysayers were wrong.

When I was in business, I would see politicians come and go and always make promises that they would be business-friendly, cut taxes and reduce regulations. And usually, it was all just talk. Nothing much ever happened. I have done business in almost every state, and when I brought an issue about permits or licensing to government leaders, they would often just repeat their same promises and reassure me that they would get back with me. Of course, they rarely ever did.

In 2010, when I ran for Governor, I promised to change the status quo and create an environment where businesses can succeed and create jobs for Florida families. And the results speak for themselves: Working together, we've created an environment where our private sector has added nearly 1.5 million jobs; our GDP has grown 26 percent; home values have skyrocketed; we've decreased state debt by \$9 billion; and our unemployment rate has dropped from over 10 percent when I took office to a more than 10-year low of 3.6 percent – even lower than the national rate.

Those are some great statistics, but this is not about statistics. It's about real people. Like many people, I grew up in poverty and I can tell you firsthand having a job is not something we should ever take for granted. Florida has experienced this incredible economic revival because we have worked hard to cut taxes over 80 times, which has saved Florida families more than \$7.5 billion. Working together, we have taken billions of dollars out of the government's hands and given it back to Floridians.

Like many of you here, this is my last year in this position. This is my last session to cut taxes. And, we must acknowledge that, unfortunately, at some point, there will be politicians sitting in this chamber who are not as fiscally responsible as we are today.

I am sure there will be people who hold our jobs down the road who will want to increase taxes, otherwise known as taking more money from hard working Floridians. Decades ago, Florida voters approved an amendment to the constitution that prohibited a state income tax. The skeptics warned that bad things would happen – the skeptics were wrong.

I want 2018 to be the year that Florida voters pass a constitutional amendment that makes it harder for politicians to raise taxes. My proposal would require 2/3rds of the legislature to vote on a tax increase for it to become law. Some have asked if this proposal would be in effect during a financial emergency or another national recession, and my answer is clear – ABSOLUTELY.

It is during times of economic downturn where this proposal is needed the most. It will force leaders to contemplate living within their means rather than taking the easy way out and just sticking it to the public by raising taxes on families and job creators.

I ask all of you to join me in this fight and ensure we do all we can to not let future politicians undo the hard work we have done to grow Florida's economy and create jobs. We need to secure a strong economy for our children and grandchildren.

I also have put forward a tax cut package this year that will truly benefit every single Floridian. Before I took office, everyone who had a driver's license faced a massive fee increase. This year, I want to reduce those fees back to pre-2009 levels by cutting the fee for the renewal of a regular driver's license by more than 58 percent from \$48 to \$20; I want to cut the fee on an original regular driver's license by more than 43 percent from \$48 to \$27; and I want to cut the fee on an original Commercial

Driver's License by more than 10 percent. My dad was a truck driver and if he had extra money back in his pocket, that would have been a big deal.

My tax cut proposal also includes sales tax holidays to help families prepare for the school year and hurricane season. After the storms we experienced last year, we need to have a longer sales tax holiday so people have time to buy the supplies they need like generators, batteries and flashlights. My proposal extends the current one-week sales tax holiday to three weeks over a three-month period to ensure people have ample time to get the goods they need before the start of hurricane season.

I don't think anyone in this room could have predicted the mammoth storm Hurricane Irma would become. There wasn't a portion of our state that was safe from Irma. We saw it shift, turn, and literally cover our entire state. It was like a scene from a movie.

But, Floridians came together and faced Hurricane Irma head on. As I traveled around the state, I heard story after story of families helping one another and communities standing together. The response and solidarity that was shown by our state was one of the proudest moments that I have had as Governor. And when I was urging people to get prepared for the storm and to evacuate, so many of you were there to help raise awareness in your communities. Thank you.

And after the storm, we showed up. From handing out water, to working at food banks, so many Floridians and many of you in this room helped your neighbors in need. And I believe Florida has come back even stronger.

Florida demonstrated to the entire world how to prepare and respond to a natural disaster, and two heroes who helped Florida prepare and respond to Hurricane Irma are with us today. I would like to introduce you to Lauren and Michael Davis from Jacksonville. Lauren and Michael both serve in the Florida National Guard, and were deployed along with thousands of our brave National Guard members during the storm. However, their deployment was at a very inconvenient time for the young couple. Their wedding was set in Jacksonville Beach the same week as the Hurricane was impacting Florida.

So, instead of postponing getting married, Lauren and Michael decided to exchange vows in full uniform in front of their fellow guardsmen at the Orange County Convention Center as they prepared for post-storm response. Lauren and Michael chose to put "service before self," a trait we should all strive to have. Lauren and Michael, thank you for your sacrifice to protect your fellow Floridians. And please be sure to give all these legislators the details on your wedding registry.

Just when we thought we got through Irma, Maria was quickly approaching Puerto Rico. While we are so blessed Florida was spared, sadly our fellow Americans in Puerto Rico were devastated. Like many of you in this room, I have been focused on helping Puerto Rico recover and rebuild. I have visited Puerto Rico twice following the storm. I saw firsthand the devastation on the Island and I have tried to help the people of Puerto Rico any way I could. We have had hundreds of thousands of Puerto Ricans come to Florida since Maria and my goal is that Florida be the most welcoming place for people displaced by the storm. We have set up centers to help Puerto Ricans get connected to services and resources, made it easier for students to get enrolled in our schools and removed barriers for professional licenses so people can quickly get to work in our state.

But, there is still more we can do together to help Puerto Ricans displaced by the storm. This year, I am proposing \$12 million in funding to establish the English Language Learners Academy. This program will focus on reading improvements and making sure students displaced by Hurricane Maria have access to important learning programs. And, I ask that you join me in supporting this important program this year.

As we saw throughout this entire hurricane season, our first responders came to the rescue of so many. Not only did our first responders and National Guard do an outstanding job during Hurricanes Irma and Nate here in Florida, but they came to the rescue of our friends outside of Florida. Following Maria, 50 Florida Highway Patrol members deployed to Puerto Rico to help with security and traffic control in San Juan. And following Hurricane Harvey in Texas, more than two dozen Florida Fish and Wildlife officers helped rescue more than 500 people trapped in flooded areas. While they are not here with us today, please join me in a round of applause to thank these brave men and women.

Our law enforcement have done an incredible job protecting Florida families and I hope each of you will support my proposed pay raise of \$30 million for all state sworn officers this year. I am also proud to support a measure that is going through the Constitutional Revision Commission to give free tuition to the families of fallen first responders, state law enforcement officers and military members who have lost their lives in the line of duty.

Since I have taken office, 41 officers have tragically been killed in the line of duty. These brave men and women died as heroes and it is important that the state does everything possible to take care of the families who lost a loved one who was working to protect our communities. When you think about it, it's the least we can do.

The last thing our military men and women and first responders need to be thinking about when they go to work every day is "will my family be taken care of if I am gone?"

Two of those heroes that died in the line of duty last year are Sergeant Sam Howard and Officer Matthew Baxter. They were senselessly shot while on patrol in Kissimmee. Sergeant Howard's wife and daughter, Billie Jo and Unique, are here today. Officer Baxter's wife, Sadia, is also here and was recently sworn in as a special agent for the Florida Department of Law Enforcement. Billie Jo, Unique and Sadia, we will continue to do all we can to honor Sam and Matthew.

Another incredible hero who was tragically killed in the line of duty is Lieutenant Deborah Clayton. She was executed in cold blood and I have fought hard to ensure that her accused killer is prosecuted to the absolute fullest extent of the law. I will stop at nothing to fully support the families of fallen police officers like Deborah Clayton. That is why I removed cases from a prosecutor last year who refused to seek justice for fallen law enforcement officers.

I want to be very clear – in Florida we have zero tolerance for anyone who attacks our law enforcement officers and I will fight to make sure justice is swift and these killers are prosecuted to the fullest extent of the law.

That doesn't stop with law enforcement. We have to take care of all crime victims in our state. No one in Florida who has been a victim of crime should feel ashamed. Victims of crime or harassment deserve to have their voices heard. Last year, I was stunned to learn that state employees who reported incidents of sexual harassment did not have their identities protected in many circumstances. If you were a state employee who was the victim of sexual harassment and you filed a complaint with your agency, your name and other identifying information was not always confidential. I have daughters and learning that there was not a public records exemption for this really bothered me, so I vowed to change the law. With the help of all of you in this room, we passed a law to protect state employees who were victims of sexual harassment. Working together, we took a step forward to protect those in state government who were victimized. But, it is clear that more must be done.

Last month, I signed an executive order that outlines the process for sexual harassment training, reporting, investigating, and recovery for victims at all of my agencies. I urge both chambers, and all of the cabinet agencies, to follow our lead and do the same. I also want to take a step further and encourage the Legislature to pass a bill that protects state employees who witness their colleagues

being harassed or victimized. I want to ensure the identities of these brave individuals are protected so they feel encouraged to participate in investigations.

Unfortunately, we have seen this play out all over the country, including Tallahassee. Things have got to change, and it starts right here in this building. The people of Florida deserve better than what they are reading about in the news. We all must join together and send a very strong message: Florida stands with victims.

I now want to turn to another serious topic that I believe by working together, we must combat in our state. Like so many families, I have had to watch a loved one struggle with drug abuse. It is hard and so painful. When I first took office, I worked with General Bondi and many of you in this chamber to crack down on pill mills. We fought hard to get pills off our streets, but as we have seen with the national opioid epidemic, our fight against drugs is not over.

I would like to introduce you to Sarah Sheppard. Sarah is a Parent Partner at Healthy Start, a non-profit organization in Daytona Beach that is one of our many state partners in the fight against the opioid epidemic. After overcoming her own addiction seven years ago, Sarah now dedicates her time to helping parents during the challenging recovery process so that they can be reunited with their children. Overcoming addiction requires incredible strength and bravery and we must make sure that resources are available to help people get the treatment they need.

This year, I have proposed to invest \$53 million to fight opioid abuse in Florida. I have also proposed legislation to prevent drug addiction on the front end, reduce the ability for dangerous drugs to spread in Florida's communities, give vulnerable Floridians the support they need, and ensure law enforcement officers have resources to protect those impacted by opioids. I ask that all of you support these measures this session so we can help Sarah in this important work she and so many others do in our state each day. Thank you, Sarah.

I know I talk about jobs numbers a lot, to the point where the reporters all roll their eyes, but there are some other statistics that are pretty impressive and show great strides in our state.

Since 2011, 20,000 children in foster care have been adopted. Think about that, 20,000 more kids are in a home with a loving family in just the last seven years. One of those thousands of families is with us today.

I would like to recognize recent new mom, Erica Ford, from Tallahassee. Erica is a Child Protective Investigator with the Department of Children and Families, who has also worked to help children in need by serving as a foster parent. In 2015, Erica was asked to foster a baby boy named Adam. She quickly fell in love with him and when his younger brother, Avery, was born the next year, she also began caring for him. Erica wanted to do all she could to give them both a better life, and she made the decision to permanently open her heart and home to these children by officially adopting the two young brothers as a proud single mother. Erica, thank you for changing the lives of these precious children. Your profound actions will no doubt inspire more Floridians to adopt.

I am also proud that since 2013, I have awarded nearly 13,000 Florida veterans with the Governor's Veterans Service Award. And one of these recipients is here today. Let's welcome Paul Huszar. Paul is the owner of VetCor, a restoration company in Tampa. He is also a veteran and served more than 20 years in the military. As a small business owner, Paul has seen the result of our efforts to cut taxes first hand.

He has been able to invest in his company and create more than 20 new jobs in just five years. Paul's business is also one of the many job creators that have worked to hire Florida veterans through the

Veterans Florida Employment and Training Services program. I am proud that we've worked together to make it easier for businesses like Paul's to create jobs so more Florida veterans can support their families. Thank you, Paul.

Before I close, we must also recognize the larger role Florida plays globally. Over the past few years, we've seen the conditions deteriorate drastically in Venezuela. As I have travelled the state, I have heard from Floridians who are worried about the situation the Maduro Regime has created in Venezuela. Make no mistake – Maduro and his gang of thugs pose a problem for the entire world. Especially for us here in Florida. Florida is home to a vibrant Venezuelan population and many of our friends and neighbors still have family there.

There is no free speech, people like Leopoldo Lopez are imprisoned or put under house arrest for fighting for democracy and there is limited access to food and medicine. The people of Venezuela deserve better. They deserve freedom and democracy. To do our part, I proposed to ban state investments going to benefit the Maduro Regime. And, last year, the entire Florida Cabinet supported this effort. Thank you. Now, I am fighting for legislation that takes this important step further by blocking state agencies from doing the same. I ask all of you to join us in this fight and pass this important legislation.

I would like to introduce you to Sebastian Ghiragossian and Mariana Cortez from Miami who desperately want to see change in Venezuela. In 2011, Sebastian escaped the crisis in Venezuela by moving to Miami, where he met his wife Mariana. Together, they opened Bunnie Cakes, a vegan bakery that employs more than 20 Floridians. Sebastian is one of the many people who had to flee their home in Venezuela for freedom and opportunity. While we are proud to have him here in Florida, we must continue to stand with the people of Venezuela against the Maduro dictatorship. Sebastian and Mariana, I am going to fight to make sure Florida does everything possible to bring freedom and democracy to Venezuela.

I have spent every day since taking office fighting to grow our economy and ensure we have the most prosperous state for generations to come. I am proud of the work we have accomplished together to secure Florida's future by creating an environment where Floridians of all ages have the tools they need to succeed in our state. But, our work is not done.

We must secure our future by investing record funding in our environment, our education system and our transportation infrastructure. We must secure our future by helping those with disabilities have access to great jobs. We must secure our future by ensuring we remain the most military and veteran-friendly state in the nation. And, we must secure our future by making sure Florida remains the global destination for jobs.

We have a finite amount of time left in these positions. Let's all fight together until our last minute in office to secure Florida's future for every family. Thank you, God bless you and God bless the great State of Florida.

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