

STATE OF ILLINOIS
104th GENERAL ASSEMBLY
HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES
TRANSCRIPTION DEBATE

73rd Legislative Day

2/18/2026

Speaker Welch: "The House will be in order. Members will be in their chairs. Shhh. We shall be led in prayer today by Pastor Stephen Thurston. Pastor Thurston is with New Covenant Missionary Baptist Church in Chicago, Illinois. Pastor Thurston is a guest of mine today. Members and guests are asked to refrain from starting their laptops, turn off all cellphones, and rise for the invocation and Pledge of Allegiance. At this time, Pastor Thurston."

Pastor Thurston: "Thank you, Speaker. Let's pray. God of justice, God of mercy, God of love, we come to this moment not as spectators in the theater of politics but as stewards of a sacred responsibility that no election can grant and no loss can revoke. Lord, before the governor speaks, I need you to speak. Remind every person in this chamber that power is not a possession, it's a trust. Remind our leadership that a budget is a moral document and every line item is a confession about whose life we believe has value. Remind them that the marginalized are not a constituency to be managed but the moral measure of everything done in this building. God, our state is brilliant and broken at the same time. We have skyscrapers within close proximity to food deserts. We house world-class hospitals, and yet there's zip codes where people die of preventable diseases because poverty became a preexisting condition. We have children who are intellectually gifted yet criminally underserved by the schools we fund based on how much their house is worth. God, press on the conscience of every legislator until they move from awareness to accountability, dismantling systems that allow geography to decide destiny. God, fix our moral vision,

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clear up the cataracts caused by dark money and the glaucoma of greed that slowly steals peripheral vision until they stop seeing the people on the edges of society. We don't just pray for a speech that will deliver on optics. We pray for the courage to govern outcomes after the applause dies, we pray for political will to champion the masses over the major donors, and we pray for leaders who will prioritize people over party and personal political survival. Steady the governor, subpoena the legislature, and let every decision made in this building this year be measured not by what it did for the privileged few but by what it did for the people Jesus always seemed to find himself standing closest to. It's in the name of the one that outranks every title in this room that I pray. Amen."

Speaker Welch: "Amen, pastor. We will be led in the Pledge of Allegiance today by Representative Harper."

Harper - et al: "I pledge allegiance to the flag of the United States of America and to the republic for which it stands, one nation under God, indivisible, with liberty and justice for all."

Speaker Welch: "For all. Roll Call for Attendance. Leader Gabel is recognized to report any excused absences on the Democratic side of the aisle."

Gabel: "Mr. Speaker, let the record show that Representative Faver Dias is excused today."

Speaker Welch: "The record will show. Leader Keicher is recognized to report any excused absences on the Republican side of the aisle."

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Keicher: "Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Please let the record reflect that every Republican is here to conduct the people's business today."

Speaker Welch: "The record will so... so reflect. Have all recorded themselves who wish? Have all recorded themselves who wish? Have all recorded themselves who wish? Mr. Clerk, please take the record. With 116 Members... Members present, we do have quorum. Quorum is present. Mr. Clerk, Committee Reports."

Clerk Hollman: "Committee Reports. Representative Jones, Chairperson from the Committee on Insurance reports the following committee action taken on February 17, 2026: do pass Short Debate is House Bill 4464. The Chairperson from the Committee on Transportation: Regulation, Roads & Bridges reported the following committee action taken on February 17, 2026: do pass Short Debate is House Bill 4187; recommends be adopted is House Joint Resolution 48 and House Joint Resolution 49. Representative Harper, Chairperson from the Committee on Agriculture & Conservation reports the following committee action taken on February 17, 2026: recommends be adopted is House Resolution 579, House Resolution 580, and House Resolution 594. Representative Ammons, Chairperson from the Committee on Energy & Environment reported the following committee action taken on February 17, 2026: do pass Short Debate is House Bill 4418 and House Bill 4566. Representative Mussman, Chairperson from the Committee Education Policy reports the following committee action on February... February 18, 2026: recommends be adopted is House Resolution 613. The Chairperson from the Committee on Human Services reported the following committee action taken... taken on February 18, 2026:

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do pass Short Debate is House Bill 4509, House Bill 4584; and recommends be adopted is House Resolution 619. Representative Gong-Gershowitz, Chairperson from the Committee on Judiciary - Civil reports the following committee action taken on February 18, 2026: do pass Short Debate is House Bill 4462, House Bill 4463, and House Bill 4508. Representative Jiménez, Chairperson from the Committee on Housing reports the following committee action taken on February 18, 2026: do pass Short Debate is House Bill 4571."

Speaker Welch: "Representative Canty, for what reason you seek recognition?"

Canty: "Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Point of personal privilege."

Speaker Welch: "One moment, Representative. Shhh. State your point."

Canty: "Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I rise today in honor of Black History Month. And I want to take a few moments to recognize someone that I think we should all know, though I may be a little biased. I want to talk to you all about my dad, Lieutenant Commander Benjamin Keith Canty. And a little bit further on, I'm going to read you a small section of a book that my daughter wrote about my dad called 'Cleared to Land.' She's a sixth grader at Thomas Middle School in Arlington Heights. So, before we jump into that, my dad was in the Navy for 24 years. He was a pilot. He flew multiengine planes and helicopters. He was asked to join an astronaut program but declined because he thought that being a helicopter pilot would be more exciting than going to space. He's an avid restorer of World War II planes, one of which hangs in the Pensacola Museum. He was given awards for his service in the

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Navy in creating and growing the Navy's HR organization and developing better equipment and swimmer safety training when he was on a submarine and three of his friends perished due to drowning as a result of helicopter accidents. On December 31, 1986, one of the biggest things that Papo, my dad, did during his time in the Navy was fighting the deadliest hotel fire in Puerto Rican history. It was also the second-largest hotel fire in the history of the U.S. territories. It was at the Dupont Plaza in San Juan, Puerto Rico. The whole building went up in a matter of minutes. Over a hundred people died and many more were injured. There were three helicopters on the scene when they called in my Papo. He had put together a crew to do maintenance on a helicopter and authorized that it was safe to use. After that, he and his crew hopped on and went to the fire. It was sunset when they got there. Many other people working on the fire got frustrated and left. It was getting dark, and my Papo had to borrow equipment from other helicopters. Just as the fire started to die down, it flared up again. He had to work with the Puerto Rican National Guard to rescue 25 people still in the building. His crew was not very good, as one of them was drunk from New Year's Eve drinking and one of them was too young to be there. It was up to my Papo and one other member of their crew that was still fine. The younger pilot kept focusing on the wrong things, thinking of protocol before saving lives. With my Papo in command of the helicopter, they got to work. It was unlike anything they had ever seen. They kept calm, but the darkness of the night made it hard to see. And worse yet, there were broken antennas and smoke swirling around. He had to fly

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higher than they usually would so that people wouldn't try to jump into the basket of the helicopter. He had to hold it absolutely still but could still only load eight people at a time. To make matters worse, one of the Puerto Rican National Guard planes thought that it might be helpful to turn on one of their super powerful military-grade lights to help them see. Instead, it caught my Papo off guard and ended up temporarily blinding him. The only other actually OK pilot had to talk him through the rest of the rescue. Throughout the entire rescue, the crew was terrified that someone would jump into the helicopter and throw them off balance. Nobody ended up doing that, though. My Papo said it.. that he wanted to switch pilots, but there was never an opportunity to do so. He said it was crazy because he was called a hero with no fear, but he describes how that just wasn't true as he was terrified the whole way through. It took three trips to get everyone off of the building. In his own words, he said, 'One trip wasn't fun. Two trips were very unpleasant. By trip three, I just had to force myself to do what I needed to do and what was necessary.' He left her with a statement, and it's one that I live by every day, and I think we should all live every day as we do the work of the people. And he said, 'Fear is OK. Panic kills people.' And as we go through the rest of Black History Month and as we go through the rest of our work this session, I hope that you will all heed that message, hear those words. Even when you are afraid, go forward, but don't panic. Thank you."

Speaker Welch: "Thank you, Representative. Representative Slaughter, you seek recognition?"

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Slaughter: "Yes. A point of personal privilege."

Speaker Welch: "Please state your point."

Slaughter: "Thank you, Mr. Speaker, ladies and gentlemen of the House. As we continue to celebrate 100 years of Black History Month, I wanted to invite everyone to the annual Illinois Legislative Black Caucus Foundation soiree. This event is happening tonight. It starts at 6 o'clock at the Abraham Lincoln Museum. So, please, please, please come out and enjoy yourself as we continue to celebrate this centennial year of Black History Month. Thank you, Mr. Speaker."

Speaker Welch: "Thank you, Representative. The regular session will stand in recess. The doorkeeper is recognized for an announcement."

Doorkeeper Hill: "Mr. Speaker, Mr. Speaker, the Honorable President Harmon and the Members of the Senate are at the door and seek admission to the chamber."

Speaker Welch: "Madam Doorkeeper, please admit the honorable Senators. We can welcome the Senators better than that. Give them a round of applause. Would the Members of the House and our guests from the Senate please take their seats? Shhh. Would the Members of the House and our guests from the Senate please take their seats? As designated in the House Joint Resolution #51, the hour of noon having arrived, the joint session of the 104th General Assembly will now come to order. Mr. Clerk, is a quorum of the House present?"

Clerk Hollman: "A quorum of the House is present."

Speaker Welch: "President Harmon, is a quorum of the Senate present in this chamber?"

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President Harmon: "Thank you, Mr. Speaker. A quorum of the Senate is present."

Speaker Welch: "Thank you, Mr. President. There being a quorum of the House and a quorum of the Senate in attendance, this joint session is convened in accordance with the customs and traditions of joint House-Senate sessions. Ladies and gentlemen, at this time, I'd like to take a moment to acknowledge some distinguished guests on the floor. Please welcome and give a round of applause to our honorable attorney general, the Honorable Kwame Raoul. Please welcome to the floor of the House the honorable secretary of state, the Honorable Alexi Giannoulias. Please welcome to the floor of the House the honorable comptroller of this state, the Honorable Susana Mendoza. Please welcome to the floor the treasurer of this great state, Honorable Michael W. Frerichs. Please welcome to the floor of the House of Representatives the new chief justice of the Illinois Supreme Court, the Honorable P. Scott Neville, Jr. Please welcome to the floor the Honorable Justice of the Illinois Supreme Court David K. Overstreet. Please welcome to the floor the honorable Illinois Supreme Court justice, the Honorable Lisa Holder White. Please welcome to the floor of the House the Honorable Illinois Supreme Court Justice Elizabeth M. Rochford. Please welcome back to the floor, she's no stranger, the Illinois Supreme Court justice, the Honorable Justice Mary Kay O'Brien. Please welcome to the floor, for the first time, the newest Supreme Court justice, Illinois Supreme Court Justice Sanjay T. Tailor. Please welcome, for the last time, I believe, he tells me this every year, our auditor general,

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the honorable... the honorable, my friend, Frank Mautino. Please welcome to the floor the chief of staff to the governor of this great state, the Honorable Ms. Anne Caprara. Please welcome to the floor the deputy governor for budget and economy, Mr. Andy Manar. Please welcome to the floor the director of the Governor's Office of Management and Budget, Ms. Alexis Sturm. And please welcome to the floor the senior advisor to the governor for policy and legislation, Ms. Emily Miller. The Chair recognizes the House majority leader, Representative Gabel."

Gabel: "Mr. Speaker, I move for the adoption of Joint Session Resolution #2."

Speaker Welch: "Mr. Clerk, read the resolution."

Clerk Hollman: "Joint Session Resolution #2. Be it

RESOLVED, That a committee of eleven be appointed, six from the House, by the Speaker of the House, and five from the Senate, by the President of the Senate, to wait upon Governor JB Pritzker and invite him to address the Joint Assembly."

Speaker Welch: "Representative Gabel has moved for the adoption of the resolution. All those in favor signify by saying 'aye'; all those opposed say 'nay.' In the opinion of the Chair, the 'ayes' have it. And the resolution is adopted. Pursuant to the resolution, the following are appointed as a committee to escort the governor. And when I call their name, I would ask that they come to the center. The appointments from the House are Representative Andrade, Representative Buckner, Representative Jiménez, Representative Ortíz, Representative Grant, Representative Swanson."

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President Harmon: "The appointments from the Senate are Senator Aquino, Senator Johnson, Senator Ventura, Senator Erica Harriss, and Senator Hills."

Speaker Welch: "Thank you, Mr. President. Will the Committee of Escorts please convene at the rear of the chamber and await the governor? The doorkeeper is recognized for an announcement."

Doorkeeper Hill: "Mr. Speaker, Mr. Speaker, his excellency, the governor of the state of Illinois, JB Pritzker, and his party wish to be admitted to this chamber."

Speaker Welch: "Madam Doorkeeper, please admit the honorable governor and his party. Members and guests, the honorable governor of this great state, JB Pritzker."

Governor Pritzker: "Thank you all very much. Speaker Welch, President Harmon, Leader McCombie, Leader Curran, Lieutenant Governor Juliana Stratton, my fellow constitutional officers, Members of the 104th General Assembly, Chief Justice Neville and all the justices of the Supreme Court that are here, First Lady MK Pritzker, honored guests, and all of the people of the great state of Illinois, I'm very pleased to be here to share with you a message about the State of the State and to introduce another balanced budget proposal. This year is special. We celebrate the 250th anniversary of the United States of America. Two hundred and fifty years this democracy has stood, imperfect at times, struggling at others, but always with pride in our people's enduring aspirations to steer this nation toward unity, freedom, and justice. During that quarter of a millennia, Illinois has played a unique role in helping our country bridge the fractures that

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inevitably emerge in a young nation. It's also the 50th anniversary of the establishment of Black History Month, set in February to coincide with the birthdays of Abraham Lincoln and Frederick Douglass and to honor the too-often neglected accomplishments of Black Americans. Yesterday, we lost a giant who spent his life on the front lines of the Civil Rights Movement. He broke down barriers, he inspired generations, and he kept hope alive. I ask all of you to stand and join me in a moment of silence for the passing of Reverend Jesse Jackson. Thank you all very much. Throughout my time in office, I've tried to bring attention to Illinois' important role in history. I've told you stories about the Great Chicago Fire, about the uniqueness of our handwritten copy of the Gettysburg Address, about the heroes of the pandemic we faced a century ago, about our predecessors in these offices who confronted unexpected crises and who found solutions they previously didn't think were possible. I've told you stories about Illinoisans whose names loom large in American history, and some whose names history forgot. I think, to lead, it's important to be a student of history. If you have the courage to confront all of our past, the good and the bad, the hopeful and the messy, history has the power to inform a better future. I have particularly enjoyed reaching into the state archives to see the State of the State messages that past governors have delivered to this body. I admit there is a particular comfort in reading the words of people that preceded me by generations and hearing their frustration with problems remarkably like the ones that we confront today. I also like the idea that some poor governor a hundred years

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from now will read these words looking for comfort. I've always been intrigued by Governor John Peter Altgeld, and I discovered the State of the State message to the 39th Illinois General Assembly all the way back on January 9, 1895. Altgeld's State of the State lasts for 60 pages. I assure you mine today is considerably shorter. Note which side of the aisle that came from. During his State of the State, he talked about the need to ensure that science would govern the practice of medicine in Illinois, the high cost of insurance, the condition of Illinois' prisons, the funding of state universities, a needed revision of election laws, the concentration of wealth in large businesses, and a section entitled 'Women in Public Service.' That last part starts with Altgeld's pride about appointing women to positions in state government, well before women had the right to vote. And he concludes by saying, 'The army of women who are obliged to earn their own bread is constantly increasing. Justice requires that the same rewards and honors that encourage and incite men should be equally in the reach of women in every field and activity. And I am glad to report that they have met every reasonable expectation. As a rule, they have done their work well.' Now, I bring up Governor Altgeld's words on the subject of equal rights to highlight one enduring human truth, injustice can become a genetic condition we bequeath on future generations if we fail to face it forthrightly. When we gathered here a year ago, President Trump had just taken office. To be perfectly candid, as Illinois is one of the states whose taxpayers send more dollars to the federal government than we receive back in services, I was hoping

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that his threats to gut programs that support working families was the kind of unrealistic hyperbole that fuels a presidential campaign but then is abandoned when cooler heads prevail. Unfortunately, it seems there are no cooler heads at 1600 Pennsylvania Avenue these days. Eight point four billion dollars. Eight point four billion dollars. That is how much the Trump administration has cost the people of Illinois. Alongside many other states, Illinois is fighting more than 50 cases in court where the federal government is illegally confiscating money that has already been promised and appropriated by the Congress to the people of Illinois. These are not handouts. These are dollars that real Illinoisans paid in federal taxes and that have been constitutionally approved by our elected Democratic and Republican Representatives in Washington. Unlike the federal government, every year Illinois must balance its budget. When Donald Trump is taking resources away that are rightfully ours, none of us, Democrats or Republicans, should be OK with that. So, as we embark on this journey of maintaining our state's now reestablished record of fiscal responsibility, I want to say to anyone on either side of the aisle, if you want to talk about our FY2027 budget, you must first demand the return of the money and resources this president has taken from the people of Illinois. On top of the cost inflicted on this state's residents, billions in illegally withheld funds, our state is also forced to spend enormous time and taxpayer money going to court and fighting to get what is rightfully ours, a heinous example of the government's waste and fraud if I have ever seen one. For his work expertly wielding his legal

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sword to protect our state, I want to ask you to join me in recognizing our outstanding Attorney General Kwame Raoul. It is impossible to tally the hours, days, and weeks that our state government has spent chasing news of presidential executive orders, letters, and edicts that read like proclamations from the Lollipop Guild. Here's just one glaring example. The Trump administration, out of the blue, asked the Illinois Department of Transportation to spend state money getting rid of rainbow crosswalks in Chicago. That was happening while victims of severe storms, flash floods, and tornadoes were waiting months for a response to their requests for FEMA to help their devastated communities. Those requests for relief were then denied by the president, at great cost and pain to the communities affected. But, hey, I'm glad someone in Washington is focused on what color our crosswalks get painted. Meanwhile, the president is making life harder and less affordable with tariff taxes on working families and small businesses; trade wars devastating farmers; cuts to health care, food assistance, and education; imposing increased bureaucracy on states; lower job creation than any year since Trump's first term. You get the idea. Here's the good news: Illinois has suffered through similar hardship before, and we know the way out. Since 2018, our state's credit rating has gone from near junk bond status to getting 10 consecutive credit upgrades. Our \$8 billion overdue bill backlog has been paid. Our pension funded ratio has gone from nearly an all-time low to now the highest in 17 years. And our rainy day fund has grown from \$4 million to \$2.4 billion. And we've done all of this while balancing the

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budget every year and making historic investments in education, in child welfare, in disability services, in private-sector job creation. We've been building a fiscal foundation to ensure that come hell or high water, including the turbulence of Donald Trump, we can manage through the hard times and nevertheless make progress for a brighter future. Despite the headwinds, the Illinois economy has proven remarkably resilient, forging ahead on our path toward accelerating growth and expansion. This year our state's GDP surpassed \$1.2 trillion, up from 881 billion when I took office. We are among the top 10... 20, we're among the top 20 economies in the world and a top five state for electricity production. We are now number 13 in CNBC's Best States for Business, up a whopping 17 spots since 2019. For the third year in a row, Illinois ranked as the number two state in the nation for corporate expansions and relocations into our state. And in 2025, our Department of Commerce and Illinois Economic Development Corporation attracted a record-setting amount of investment across all of our regions. Site selectors and companies looking to move to Illinois consistently tell me that our high-quality, skilled workforce sets us apart nationally. And skilled workers are choosing Illinois because they earn more here. In fact, Illinois ranks fourth nationally for college graduates seeing a return on investment in their education. And for earnings in the trades, like construction, Chicago is number one in the country for large metros, and Peoria is number one for midsize metro areas. And for small metro areas, Decatur, Champaign, and Rockford are numbers two, three, and four respectively. And while Donald Trump

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says it's a 'hellhole' here, 113 million domestic and international visitors still flock to Illinois, spending a record \$48.5 billion, driving an all-time high in hotel tax revenue and restoring O'Hare as the busiest airport in the nation. Look, I want to grow our economy faster, and now that we've turned this state in the right direction, a growing number of companies are choosing Illinois to make investments and create jobs. Our narrative and our economy is changing and improving, and we're setting ourselves up for even better results in the years ahead. It has been a remarkable year for K through 12 education in our state. We prioritized school funding, putting billions more into public education to improve the student-teacher ratio and get better outcomes for our children. And it's working. The Nation's Report Card compares all 50 states, and the results are clear. Illinois is among the best in the nation. Only one state outpaced Illinois in eighth grade reading scores, and only four states outpaced Illinois in eighth grade math scores. We're leading the pack because of sustained investments in education. At the same time, Illinois' high school graduation rate has climbed to its highest level in 15 years. And high schoolers' participation in career and technical education has grown to nearly 300,000 students statewide. Those results were driven in part by the passion and the dedication of the record high number of teachers employed in our state this year. Our Teacher Vacancy Grant Program has invested \$120 million to help school districts recruit and retain educators. Because of those remarkable results and because of our commitment to building on what works, I'm proud to say that we are extending

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the program for a fourth year. Year after year, this legislative body has come together to solve generational challenges through even the most difficult years, including the recent passage of monumental legislation to build a world-class transit system and incentivizing new energy sources to make electricity more affordable. In this spring legislative session, we will need to harness the same ingenuity, urgency, and commitment to overcome obstacles that would otherwise hinder real fiscal progress for the state. In that spirit, today I am proud to once again present you with a balanced budget proposal. Seven times now, I have promised to propose and sign a balanced budget, and seven times I have delivered on that promise. This year will be no different, despite how challenging this eighth year's budget is. Prudence demanded that this year's budget proposal seeks a discretionary spending increase that is less than one half of 1%. It levels off and, in some cases, reduces programs that are important to me, some of which were proposals of my own. But I believe that the imperative of responsible governance and overcoming the fiscal irresponsibility of past decades must come ahead of the interests of any one politician, of any one program, or any one party. That doesn't mean that we can't make transformative progress. We won't let headwinds from Washington stop us from addressing the fact that Illinoisans, like Americans everywhere, are still paying too much for groceries, too much for housing, too much for electricity, too much to live. Everything is just too damned expensive. And that's why now more than ever, we must work together to make life more affordable for Illinois' working families. I

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propose an agenda to address the high cost of living that makes life easier for the middle class and those striving to get there. Let's start with housing. The problem is clear, Rent is too high and homeownership is too far out of reach. The cause is clear too. We are not building enough homes fast enough. The Project for Middle Class Renewal at the University of Illinois issued a report last summer showing that we will need to build 227,000 more homes by 2030 to keep up with demand. In many places, local regulations have made it too difficult and costly to build new housing. Some of the rules even have shameful roots that go back to the days of redlining. Often the problem is a failure to modernize and keep up with the changing times that we live in. It all adds up to bureaucratic red tape that unnecessarily increases costs, delays construction, and frequently kills projects altogether. For example, local parking mandates often require a uniform number, minimum number of spaces for every new build, even in places where people don't have cars because they have ample public transit and available street parking. Unused parking spots add millions of dollars in costs and severely limit the number of new units that can be built affordably. Spaces for cars are being prioritized over spaces for people. The great news is we have developers ready to build homes and we have Illinoisans who need them, and it doesn't get done because of these regulations. It's on us to help fix it. Today I'm proud to announce the Building Up Illinois Developments, or BUILD, Plan, an initiative to lower housing costs by making it easier, faster, and more effective to build homes in Illinois. This is an ambitious slate of

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reforms designed to eliminate unnecessary barriers and lower costs for housing construction, produce a wider range of family-friendly housing types, and streamline construction processes. We will enable more unused housing units to be redeveloped and put them into service. City by city, town by town, neighborhood by neighborhood, block by block, a little more housing in each area can significantly advance our housing stock. We'll add to that a robust approach to closing financing gaps for developing housing of all kinds, from targeted funds for smaller projects to direct support to local communities so that they can clear initial hurdles and make housing sites build-ready. Focusing on affordable housing, the Next Generation Capacity Building Initiative is designed to provide capital, training, and technical resources to allow more affordable housing developers to access low-income tax credits in diverse communities. Removing barriers for home builders will attract responsible developers to build in places that they've been unwilling to build in so far. Reduced regulation, greater financing options, a wider range of smaller units made available for rent, we can add hundreds of thousands of homes in Illinois with this creative approach. Illinois is up to the task, but it has to start now, here, and with us. Now, affording to have a home is one thing. Affording to live in it is quite another. Electricity bills are eating up more and more of household budgets across the country, and that's got to stop. We are fortunate in Illinois. With the Climate and Equitable Jobs Act, we created an energy credit program that is putting money back into the pockets of Illinois consumers. That means this year families will

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receive \$803 million in credits on their electricity bills. That's on top of the \$1.3 billion in credits CEJA has already provided. Over the long run, bringing down electricity bills requires producing and delivering more energy for Illinois' homes and businesses. But let's not ignore the fact that lowering electricity prices is truly a multifaceted challenge. We need to think critically about our future energy usage, with the needs of Illinois households at the forefront. So, in the face of rising demand and surging prices, I'm proposing a two-year pause on authorization of new data center tax credits. With the shifting energy landscape, it is imperative that our growth does not undermine affordability and stability for our families. There are also a massive number of new renewable energy projects awaiting interconnection across the region that our Northern Illinois grid operator, PJM, has moved too slowly to bring online. So, together with a bipartisan coalition of all 13 governors in the PJM region, I demanded that they speed it up. And now, they are. We also got a price cap from PJM that will save consumers across the region \$45 billion through the year 2030. Finally, PJM must force data center developers to pay their capacity... for their own capacity resources to power their operations to protect consumers from higher rates. Similarly, our Central and Southern Illinois grid operator, MISO, has a long waiting list of projects, and they have agreed to bring those projects online. Together, this will massively increase available power for Illinois homes and businesses. But our work to lower energy prices can't stop with PJM and MISO. Illinois is already number one in clean nuclear energy

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production. That is a leadership mantle that we must hold on to. Producing even more energy is vital to keep up with increasing demand and bring down prices. A few months ago, the General Assembly passed and I signed the Clean and Reliable Grid Affordability Act which lifts a decades-long moratorium on new nuclear power in Illinois. And that opened up the possibility and the door for construction of new modern reactors that can help us keep our clean energy leadership and create new jobs. And with CEJA already in place, many of those jobs and contracts will go to people from communities that previously never had the opportunity to benefit from the energy sector. The economic opportunity of building new clean power is enormous. So, today I've issued an executive order designed to speed up building new clean nuclear power so that we can increase our electricity supply and secure our energy future. We can take years off of the development and launch of new baseload energy production. It sets a new nuclear energy framework for Illinois, one that prioritizes affordability, safety, and reliability. Our state agencies have been ordered to immediately begin working together and reaching out to local governments to identify sites for new reactors. It will also advance the development of a state regulatory framework with rigorous safety and siting standards. My goal is delivering at least two gigawatts of new clean nuclear capacity in our state, enough to power up to 2 million Illinois homes. For Illinois households and businesses, expanded supply will make electricity less expensive, more reliable, and clean while creating thousands of jobs and maintaining our state's status as a net energy

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exporter. As we tackle the high costs Illinois families are paying for energy and housing, we also need to focus on the unaffordability of health care. A car accident. A cancer diagnosis. A life-threatening disease. Getting treated and getting well shouldn't be a lifelong burden on your finances and credit score. Two years ago, the state of Illinois launched our historic medical debt relief program to unburden working families who are sinking under the weight of overdue bills from an unexpected illness. Today I'm proud to announce that, as of this week, we have negotiated the elimination of \$1 billion in medical debt for 520,000 Illinoisans across all 102 counties. We're providing immediate financial relief, and we're doing it for pennies on the dollar. I've proposed we continue this program this coming budget year. Fighting for working families means attacking the bills that weigh people down in their everyday lives. The cost of health care in this country is ridiculously high, and while President Trump's budget makes it even more expensive, Illinois is standing up to protect its people. Another way to make life more affordable is by helping Illinoisans earn more. And one of the most important determinants of earnings is getting a good education. It leads to good-paying jobs. Never has getting a postsecondary degree been more important, but it's historically been too damned expensive. And that's why the majority in the General Assembly has worked with me since day one to make college a realistic and more affordable pathway for all Illinoisans. How's it going? Illinois now has the second-highest percentage of people with a bachelor's degree among the nation's top 10 most populous states, beating out

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states like California and Texas and Florida. Our public university enrollment has reached a 10-year high. And today the number of Illinois students attending our public universities tuition-free has reached an all-time high of 44%. Similarly, our community colleges have surpassed the 2019 fall student count and have seen steadily rising enrollments. Along with vocational training in high schools, this is vital to our future. Attracting major job creators requires sustained investments in our most valuable resource, our people. We have built a pipeline of qualified workers with the skills and training to fill the high-growth sectors of the future, but we still need more. That is a path to a better life that should be available to every Illinoisan, and that doesn't require a university degree. I propose we create a vocational training grant program, which will provide school districts and regional vocational centers with support to build and expand specialized workforce programs, like the proposed Southland Career and Technical Education Center in Park Forest and the South Central Illinois Training and Innovation Center in Litchfield. These partnerships forge higher paying career paths for high school students while meeting the workforce needs of our employers. We have over 200,000 job openings in Illinois right now. This legislative session, let's explore every possible avenue to help businesses fulfill their workforce demands and give high school students a path forward to a good-paying job. Overall, Illinois now consistently ranks among the top 10 states in K through 12 education quality and in higher education access. But even with Illinois high school graduation rate at a 15-

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year high and eighth grade reading and math scores among the highest in the nation, we cannot take our foot off the gas in our efforts to equitably fund our schools. Despite the challenging fiscal environment, my budget proposal for this year prioritizes our state commitment to evidence-based funding and advances our effort to hire more teachers. I'm also proud to announce that entering its third year, our early childhood literacy program, in partnership with the Dolly Parton Imagination Library, has quickly expanded to 88 counties across Illinois. From the Austin neighborhood of Chicago to Pulaski County in Southern Illinois, 97,000 children birth to five, regardless of their family income, now receive free, age-appropriate books in the mail every month. Reading literacy starts at home, and this program is working to make it easier for parents to give their kids a great start. For FY27, my budget proposal continues this program so that we can reach all 102 counties. Helping parents give their children the best possible upbringing is among my highest priorities as governor and always has been. Everywhere I go, parents tell me one of their deepest concerns is the impact social media is having on their kids. It's a challenge unique to this generation, and it's made worse by the perverse incentive that social media companies seem to have to keep kids scrolling no matter what the cost to their physical and mental health. There's real harm being done, and it's interfering with our ability to give children the most productive educational environment possible. It's time to get cell phones out of the classroom. Working together, parents and teachers in school districts like Champaign and

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Springfield and Peoria prohibited cell phones in classrooms already. Twenty-five states, including Florida, California, Texas, and New York have done this with bipartisan support, and it's time for Illinois to follow suit. But we can do more. I'm proposing the Children's Social Media Safety Act, a commonsense proposal to decrease the harmful effects of social media on kids, improve their safety and privacy online, and prevent financial scamming of children. This bill will put decisions about children's online safety back into the hands of parents by allowing them more easily to restrict their kids access on exploitative websites and apps. Social media algorithms have been proven to create mental health issues in adolescents and foster polarization and misinformation in society as a whole. Those companies are profiting from online engagement of Illinois' consumers, and they currently contribute nothing to ameliorate the negative effects of their platforms so that... I propose a social media platform fee that will generate \$200 million per year to support K-12 education. Parents and kids... parents and kids deserve to have better-funded schools. And if social media giants are going to feed off of Illinois families, they ought to support Illinois families. Our world is changing, and it seems like increasingly the benefits of those changes are reaped by a smaller and smaller group of people while middle- and working-class Americans pay for it. Special interests and large corporations seem to delight in finding ever more insidious ways to extract money from everyday people. Those same companies then react with a mixture of surprise and outrage when they're asked to rein in their worst abuses.

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Last year, after Illinois' insurance companies announced they'd be raising rates on Illinois homeowners by double digits, I demanded to have those companies justify the enormous rate increases. Every other state, except Illinois, has the power to do so. Consumers deserve to have proof of why their premiums are increasing at a rate far above inflation. So... so, today I'm calling on the House to pass HB3799 that seeks from homeowners insurance companies a justification for material premium increases, a bill that has already been voted out of the Senate. Again, 49 other states have this reporting requirement. Illinoisans deserve nothing less. One point five million Illinois households could see their insurance bills go up by an average \$750 this year. For most homeowners, this is nothing short of a crisis, and no one should claim that pursuing standard homeowner protections is an attack on business. This is about fairness and corporate responsibility to consumers. On a similar note, junk fees have crept into every aspect of people's lives, imposed by ticket sellers, rental companies, large tech companies, chain restaurants, and more. They're quietly nickel-and-diming Illinois families out of thousands of dollars per year. This session, I'm supporting legislation to ban such practices by requiring upfront full disclosure of all mandatory fees. It's about time for every Illinoisan to be able to take control and get the relief that they deserve. Now, I'm committed to doing everything government can to rein in the worst of the price gouging and profiteering that we're seeing. But I implore the titans of industry who regularly ask government to make their lives easier, what are you doing to make your

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employees' and your customers' lives easier? It's a question that I'm committed to asking every CEO who shows up in Springfield looking for help. I hope you will ask them too. Before I became governor, I had a long career in business and I employed thousands of people. The vast majority of business owners are good people who want to do right by their employees, their communities, and their customers. Right now, everyday people are having trouble making ends meet, and we are all looking for ways to alleviate their burden. So, it's time for every business to get in the game, step up to the plate, raise wages, and help lower the cost of living for Illinois families. A year ago, I stood before you and I asked a provocative question: After we have discriminated against, disparaged, and deported all our immigrant neighbors and the problems we started with still remained, what comes next? Some of you walked out when I asked that question. But a year later, we have an answer, don't we? Masked, unaccountable federal agents with little training occupied our streets, brutalized our people, tear gassed kids and cops, kidnapped parents in front of their children, detained and arrested and at times attempted to deport U.S. citizens and killed innocent Americans in the streets. Illinois was the canary in the coal mine for what we saw happen in Minnesota. It's a playbook as old as the game: overwhelm communities, provoke fear, suggest that those tasked with enforcing the law are also above it, and drip authoritarianism bit by bit into our veins in the hopes that we won't notice we're being poisoned by it. The problem for Donald Trump and Stephen Miller was that Illinoisans did notice. Last year was not the first time a

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president has tried to subdue the Illinois population with hired thugs. In 1894, when the Pullman workers walked off their railroad jobs to protest a 25% cut in their wages, President Grover Cleveland, who at the time was serving the second of his two nonconsecutive terms, deputized 5,000 U.S. Marshals and ordered federal guard troops into Blue Island to end the strike. On July 3, 1894, those marshals provoked a confrontation. Police Superintendent Michael Brennan described the federalized marshals in this manner: 'They were dangerous to the lives of the citizens on account of their careless use of pistols. They fired into the crowd of bystanders when there was no disturbance and no reason for shooting.' A report from the Chicago Record newspaper read, 'In regard to most of the deputy marshals, they seem to be hunting trouble all the time.' Sound familiar? The strike fizzled after 25 people, 25 people had been shot and killed and many more wounded. But Governor Altgeld never forgot President Cleveland federalizing troops against Illinoisans. Six months later, when he delivered his message to the General Assembly, Altgeld devoted fully half of those 60 pages to the events surrounding the Pullman Strike. His anger at the federal government's overreach jumps off the page even 131 years later. 'If the president can, at his pleasure, send troops into any city, town, or hamlet, whenever and wherever he pleases, under the pretense of enforcing some law, his judgment, which means his pleasure, being the sole criterion, then there can be no difference whatever in this respect between the powers of the president and those of the Czar of Russia.' If we have the courage to confront all of our past,

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it will inform a better future. I have joked with many of you that I wish I could spend just one year of my governorship presiding overprecedented times. I yearn for normal problems. It was a conversation I had more than once with my friend, the late Governor Jim Edgar. Jim and I didn't share the same political party, but we did share something far more important, a fierce love of our country and our state. I've been thinking a lot lately about love, about loving people and loving your country and the power involved in both. Love is an affliction. It's the most fortifying of our emotions and the most debilitating. It refuses to ground itself in logic or reason. Its very existence enriches us, even though its presence always creates chaos. Love is a superpower. It teaches the brittle to bend. It shows the selfish how to share. It grants courage to the coward. Once sparked, love becomes momentum. It's the sled gathering speed down the hill. It's the drop of water as it tips over the falls. It's glitter out of a bottle. The bravest thing any of us will ever do in this life is to love without promise of reciprocation because love's ferocity does not dim with rejection. Try to banish love to a shadow and it will only reach harder for the sun. I know, right now, there are a lot of people out there who love their country and feel like their country is not loving them back. I know that. I also know that love unrequited can break a heart made fragile by dashed hope. Which is why it's important for me to stand before you today and tell you that your country is loving you back, just not in the way you're used to hearing. It's not speaking in anthems or flags or ostentatious displays of patriotism. It will never come from

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the people who say the only way to love America is to hate Americans. Love is found in every act of courage, large and small, taken to preserve the country we once knew. You will find it in homes and schools and churches and art. It is there. It has not been squashed. Over the last 12 months, I've heard love start to shout here in Illinois. I heard it from the bicyclers who showed up in Little Village every day during Operation Midway Blitz to buy out tamale carts so the vendors could return to the safety of their homes. I heard it from the parishioners who formed human chains around churches so that immigrants could worship. I heard it from the moms in the school pickup line who whipped out their cameras and their whistles. I saw it in every face of a Midwesterner who put on their heaviest coat and protested outside on the coldest day. I am begging my fellow politicians, my fellow Illinoisans, my fellow Americans to realize that right now in this country we are not fighting over policy or political party. We are fighting over whether we are going to be a civilization rooted in empathy and kindness or one rooted in cruelty and rage. What you choose to arm yourself with in this fight, love or hate, exposes which side you are fighting on. Only the weakest of people believe that love is the weakest of weapons. And it turns out that love actually is all around, and that those who think that cruelty can destroy us are incapable of understanding the power of a nation moved by it. I love my country. I refuse to stop. The hope I have found in a very difficult year is that love is the light that gets you through a long night. Thank you. God bless you, and God bless the great state of Illinois."

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Speaker Welch: "Governor, please hold for one moment. Will the Committee of Escorts please come forward to escort the governor from the chamber? Shhh. President Harmon is recognized for a motion."

President Harmon: "Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I move that the joint session do now arise."

Speaker Welch: "President Harmon has moved that the joint session do now arise. All those in favor signify by saying 'aye'; all opposed signify by saying 'nay.' The 'ayes' have it. And the joint session will now arise. The regular session will come to order. Shhh. The House is going to return to regular session. Ladies and gentlemen. Mr. Clerk, committee announcements."

Clerk Hollman: "The following committees will be meeting this afternoon: Meeting at 2 p.m. is the Elementary & Secondary Education: Administration, Licensing & Charter Schools in D-1; State Government Administration will meet in Room C-1. Meeting at 4 o'clock is the Gaming Committee in Room 114, Higher Education in Room 122. All other committees have been canceled."

Speaker Welch: "Mr. Clerk, Agreed Resolutions. And now, allowing perfunctory time for the clerk, Leader Gabel moves that the House stand adjourned until Thursday, February... February 19, at the hour of noon. All those in favor say 'aye'; all those opposed say 'nay.' In the opinion of the Chair, the 'ayes' have it. And the House stands adjourned."