



2022 State of the County Linn County

Presented by:

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Linn County Board of Supervisors, District 2
Linn County, Iowa

INTRODUCTION

Friends and distinguished guests, it is my high privilege and distinct honor to present the annual State of the County address.

I am ecstatic that we are gathered here, safely in person, for the first time in three years! This is a time to celebrate and reflect on what we have been through and realize that we are a more resilient community as a result.

I want to thank the League of Women Voters for hosting and organizing this event. The League of Women Voters is a nonpartisan, grassroots organization working to protect and expand voting rights and ensure everyone is represented in our democracy.

I would also like to take a point of personal privilege to welcome and thank my family for being here today, especially my wife Andrea and my children Kieran and Penelope. Our children—and I mean that in the collective sense—showed me with their child-like wonderment what true grace looks like during this pandemic, how to adapt to challenging situations like virtual schooling, and, even though our everyday lives have been upended, that is just another opportunity to re-invent what we consider normal.

They faced an unknown virus, invisible to them, with grit, fortitude, and most importantly, love. As adults, we still have a lot we can learn from children if we stopped for a moment to realize that we need each other in order to move forward. I am so grateful for Kieran and Penelope, and I love you both with all of my heart and soul.

As a parent, it is difficult to explain to your children that we might not know what to do or we don't know where this road leads because we are all walking it for the first time together. Children often look to their parents for answers, and nothing can really prepare you for a global pandemic that affects every single aspect of our lives, or a 140mph category four land hurricane occurring at the same time.

However, watching my children play together in the dark of night because our power hadn't been restored, or the ease in which they navigated the world wearing a mask, and, perhaps more importantly, reminding me and us that our humanity toward others matters, especially for those with whom we disagree. They showed tremendous courage in the face of the unknown.



Our community is not a stranger to events unimaginable. We never anticipated 31.2 feet of water in downtown Cedar Rapids, but we soon learned that our fate is in our own hands and that is why we have trained repeatedly over the years on flood preparedness and I feel as though we have flood preparedness down to an art and science.

I am confident that nobody in this room ever imagined a day where they would experience 140mph sustained winds for 60 minutes in Iowa. Together with the City of Cedar Rapids, surrounding metro cities, the Linn County Emergency Management Agency, Linn County Public Health, non-profit service providers and private businesses, we are building more robust and resilient systems around our blind spots to ensure we are better prepared for the known and unknown, the imagined and unimaginable.

It was former boxing heavyweight champion of the world Mike Tyson who once said, "Everyone has a plan, until they are punched in the mouth." We may not have a plan for everything but our community has shown over and over again that we can take a punch and are still standing.

I would also like to take this opportunity to thank the elected officials from a variety of local governments for joining us here today, including our newest Supervisor Louie Zumbach.

You might be familiar with Louie in his former capacity as a state legislator, but he is also a fifth generation Iowa farmer. When Louie sees a problem, he is naturally wired to want to solve it. Maybe the lens through which we look at life is different, but Louie adds valuable insights, strategies, and wisdom to the Board.

Last year, after several days of strategic planning with members of the public on revising Linn County's five-year strategic plan, Louie and his wife Deb invited our two consultants, along with our HR Director, Supervisor Stacey Walker, and me, to their farm for dinner to break bread and enjoy each other's company. Naturally, Stacey showed up to Louie's farm in a suit and tie.

Some of you in this room might have experienced Stacey Walker's gratitude exercise while groups gather or while enjoying a meal together. It's very simple: each person speaks upon the things, persons, or events that give them gratitude. They get to speak uninterrupted and the only rule is that everyone must give the speaker their undivided attention. When you speak your truths, you find out quickly the things that unite us are more numerous than the things that divide us. Tears were shed and shared. We even got into a lengthy discussion about the mating habits of lobsters.

I am not trying to embarrass my brother, but it is a fact that Stacey's familiarity with farms is limited. At one point in the conversation, Louie and his wife Deb asked Stacey about his familiarity with basic pieces of farming equipment. They were amazed that he was unaware of what an auger was. Stacey calmly wiped the corners of his mouth with his napkin and asked if Deb and Louie knew what a Du-Rag was and what it was for! I think Louie's response was "touché."

We shared many laughs. If you could have been a fly on the wall, you would have seen what we expect political leaders to do: find enjoyment from our similarities and celebrate our differences with curiosity and a desire for deeper understanding. That experience gave me hope that despite real and perceived political differences, we have an extraordinary capacity to find the good in all of us.

For the past two years, it has felt like we have been learning how to fly a plane while repairing it at the same time and living in a world of stark paradoxes.

For instance, at the start of the pandemic, people cheered healthcare workers and doctors at the beginning and end of their shifts. However, healthcare workers and doctors went from being celebrated to vilified, their expertise questioned and science rejected. Many of us in the room received hundreds of emails from constituents who would rather believe the medical advice of their chiropractor or a stranger on Facebook over licensed medical doctors or public health professionals, including Linn County's Public Health Director Dr. Pramod Dwivedi.

Even our concept of time has been challenged. How often throughout this pandemic have you felt time speed up and slows down at the same time? There were days where I forgot what day it was.

Voter turnout for school board elections historically is very low. School board members are not paid and oversee the largest percentage of your tax dollars within a taxing district. However, throughout this pandemic, school board meetings have become the most attended, disrupted, and contentious public meetings all across Iowa and the United States.

In this community, Cedar Rapids school board members have been subject to process servers coming to their homes to serve them with documents demanding they pay aggrieved parents who are anti-mask and anti-vaccinations the equivalent of the total national debt or liens will be placed on their homes. We then had an individual come to Linn County to record "liens" on CR School District property and school board members' homes. These liens are not legally enforceable, but this is the age we live in.

That isn't even the most bizarre. In the past two years, Auditor Joel Miller and I have become pretty decent friends and colleagues and he has had a good, collaborative relationship with the Board of Supervisors. We live in very strange times!

Some of the themes that I hope emerge from this speech are the resiliency of our community strengthened by working collaboratively with public and private institutions and the idea of post-traumatic growth, which is defined as a positive psychological change experienced as a result of the struggle with highly challenging life circumstances.

Put more simply, post-traumatic growth is the ability for people, organizations, and systems to be tested by external forces only to rebound better, stronger, and in a position to thrive. Not everyone in our community has experienced growth after trauma. Much like grief, how each of us responded and reacted to this pandemic is individual, ebbing and flowing over and through us at different speeds and with different outcomes.

I often describe Linn County as "the safety net for the safety net" and we are the layer of government designed to provide critical and necessary human services to individuals and families who struggle and oftentimes we are the organization of last resort.

PUBLIC HEALTH

We all have shouldered burdens throughout this pandemic, made sacrifices, socially distanced, became stay at home teachers but I would argue few have shouldered more than Dr. Pramod Dwivedi, Linn County's Public Health Director, and his team. Recommendations made by Dr. Dwivedi would influence decisions made by policy makers, impact how businesses can operate, if schools could remain open, or how long we would need to quarantine.

Few have had to fly a plane, turn on the fasten seat belt sign, extinguish a cabin fire, serve the drinks, land safely and be ready for the next flight all at the same time.

Dr. Pramod Dwivedi, his team of incredible public health epidemiologists, nurses and staff coordinated continuously with both local hospitals, emergency management, and local-state-federal governments and agencies. I want to thank Dr. Dwivedi and his staff of incredible public health workers for the burden they shouldered, the time away from their families, from their everyday lives to try to keep the community safe.

Your Linn County Public Health Department was the first public health agency in the State of Iowa to earn national accreditation from the Public Health Accreditation Board. The national accreditation program, which receives support from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention and the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation, sets standards against which the nation's governmental public health departments can continually improve the quality of their services and performance.

In addition, Linn County Public Health was one of only eight departments nationally to receive the Preventing Violence Affecting Young Lives (PREVAYL) funding grant from the Centers of Disease Control and prevention. This \$1.25 million dollar grant will allow Linn County Public Health to continue to work closely with community partners to align with and complement current violence prevention and community care coordination initiatives within Cedar Rapids and Linn County to address risk factors of youth violence.

The Board of Supervisors also welcomes Linn County Public Health's new Health Equity Manager Anne Harris Carter. Anne is a friend to many of us here in this room and throughout the community. She is one of the 12 children of Dr. Percy and Lileah Harris, after whom we named our new Public Health and Child & Youth Development Center.

MENTAL HEALTH & SOCIAL SERVICES

The ongoing pandemic, the ripple effects from the Derecho, changing conditions of the economy and a prolonged disconnect from family and friends, and a loss of normalcy has affected almost every person in our community differently. Even the most resilient among us have struggled. A population that has been severely affected by all of the above are those at risk of becoming homeless and the chronically homeless.

When I was growing up in Cedar Rapids, I don't recall seeing people living on the streets or under bridges. As a community, it felt like we were insulated from on-the-street homelessness you see in larger cities, but we were not insulated from the myriad of issues, barriers, and systems that

prevent individuals and families from being more at risk of being homeless.

Our community has seen record numbers of on-the-street homeless, often presenting some of the most severe and profound brain health and substance use challenges. Homelessness is defined by the department of Housing and Urban Development as a “person sleeping in an emergency shelter, transitional housing, or a place not meant for human habitation.”

A statistic that startles me every time I hear it is that children consistently make up 40% of the homeless population in our community. This didn’t make sense to me until I learned one of the leading causes of homelessness in Cedar Rapids is not directly related to drugs, alcohol, or lack of money, but domestic violence.

Cedar Rapids City Council member Scott Olson and I have, for several years, talked about how to improve service delivery and funding for homeless services. We co-authored a guest editorial where we introduced readers to a person named “Brian.” Brian and his family have been homeless for almost two years, bouncing around from friends’ couches to shelters. Brian and his family cannot afford a security deposit or first and last month’s rent to secure an apartment.

We wanted readers to assume Brian was an adult and with the details we provided readers, it was very easy to assume Brian was homeless in large part due to the consequences of his life choices. Compassion and understanding for people struggling to get out of cycles of poverty are sadly not in abundance. Brian is a 6 year old. We wanted to make readers rethink their biases.

Since 2019, Scott Olson, all City of Cedar Rapids Council members, the City Manager and City staff have been tremendous partners in assisting Linn County and Willis Dady with operating a Cold Weather Overflow Shelter at Linn County’s Fillmore Building. Linn County’s overflow shelter was originally designed to serve as an overflow during the winter months, but because of COVID-19 and the derecho, it remained in operation continually for almost two years.

The Cold Weather Overflow Shelter closed its doors on March 31, 2022. During the season, we served 623 unduplicated individuals with an average of 62 individuals per night. To put that into perspective, we served 643 individuals with an average of 55 individuals per night in our 2020-2021 season, which ran from August 22, 2020 through June 1, 2021. When the Cold Weather Overflow Shelter first opened its doors in 2015, we served 92 unique unduplicated individuals with an average of seven individuals per night.

With Scott Olson’s guidance as a commercial realtor, Linn County used monies from the American Rescue Plan Act to purchase a permanent overflow shelter on the west side of Cedar Rapids. This shelter will be remodeled to better serve individuals and families who are homeless or need temporary shelter. This is another example of local government working best, when it works together.

In addition, Linn County was awarded \$5.3 million in federal Emergency Rental Assistance dollars to help keep individuals and families housed who were at risk of being evicted once the federal eviction moratorium was lifted in 2021. This program helped more than 1,500 people stay in their homes or apartments. I want that number—1,500—to hang out there for a second. If this program didn’t exist, our homeless numbers would have increased significantly, and, again, 40% of

homeless in our community are children. As I often have stated and it is worth repeating: Linn County is the safety net for the safety net.

One of the strands of our safety net that I am most proud of is Linn County's Mental Health Access Center, which recently celebrated its one-year anniversary of opening in March 2021. The Access Center started as a whisper, an idea with no money, no location, no services and questions on sustainability given Iowa's criminally low Medicaid rates for reimbursement for services. Community providers like Foundation 2, Penn Center, Abbe Center for Community Mental Health, Area Substance Abuse Council, Area Ambulance, local law enforcement, and both hospitals committed to figuring out how we could make this idea a reality.

Access Centers help answer a question that has long plagued law enforcement, ambulance services and emergency room doctors when interacting with someone in crisis or challenged by their substance use disorder: where can I safely divert or discharge this person to? Oftentimes the only answers to that question were the hospital or jail.

We can do better than housing people in emergency rooms or jail while they wait for services. Linn County's Mental Health Access Center provides an array of evidence-based services like Crisis Observation (23 hours), Crisis Stabilization (3-5 days), sobering unit, and a medically supervised detox unit. I still have the text message from Erin Foster, the Access Center director, when we received our very first patient. Years of planning, remodeling, and thinking about an Access Center and the day arrived when it was finally being used.

Her text was an interaction she had with the patient. As Erin was leaving for the night and was checking in on the patient, the patient said and I am editing this, but she said to Erin, "Thank you for giving a blank about me. Nobody really does." That left me in tears. This is what this building was designed for: meeting people where they are at with love, compassion and no judgment.

To date, we have helped over 535 walk-ins and 96 referrals from law enforcement who would have otherwise gone to jail or the hospital. The top three presenting issues from law enforcement referrals were intoxication, suicidal thoughts, and mental health emergencies. Mental Health Access Center staff and our partner providers do not define what a crisis is. When you have the courage to finally seek help, or if this is your tenth time needing to use the Access Center, you are treated with compassion, empathy, and non-judgement. We are all complicated people navigating a complex world.

When each patient is discharged, they are given the opportunity to complete a brief survey to help us improve and address any issues. One statistic that stands out is 70% of patients who completed the post-discharge survey question: what type of services would you have accessed if the Mental Health Access Center was not available stated they either would have sought no services at all or have gone to the hospital. This service is working precisely as it is designed and I thank all of our partner providers, the current and previous board of Supervisors and the mental health region for their support for Linn County's Access Center.

In addition to our commitment to improving brain health services in the community, Linn County is also a Make It Ok workplace ambassador to reduce the stigma of brain health and substance use challenges. The stigma of having brain health challenges or an addiction is real and Linn

County wants our employees and the community to know for those who struggle with brain health or addiction issues that you are seen, you are heard, you are valued, and you are not alone.

RENEWABLE ENERGY & SUSTAINABILITY

Linn County is at the leading edge of renewable energy in Iowa. This year, the Linn County Board of Supervisors approved on a 2-1 vote a 750-acre, 100-megawatt utility-scale solar project in Coggon, Iowa, which will employ local labor from our labor shed in the construction and decommissioning of the panels and will power more than 18,000 homes in Iowa. It is estimated this project will cost over \$150 million dollars.

Linn County currently has two active applications in review from NextEra Energy. Phase 1 is scheduled to be a 50-megawatt array on 316 acres. Phase 2 is scheduled to be a 150-megawatt and 75-megawatt battery storage in Palo, Iowa, in the shadows of the recently decommissioned Duane Arnold Energy Center. This is a voluntary program of farmers choosing to lease their land for up to 40 years to private entities. Farmers are trading growing one fuel source for another. This is farming in the 21st century.

Linn County is also charting a more resilient and sustainable future by formally creating a new department of Sustainability with Tamara Marcus, a Ph.D. candidate in Environmental Science. Tamara is only the second person of color to run a Linn County department.

Under Tamara's tenure, Linn County created the first greenhouse gas inventory to establish a baseline. This provides a benchmark to better understand Linn County's countywide emissions. Linn County has a history of committing to climate action, in part demonstrated by our ambitious emissions reduction goals as outlined in the climate resolution of 2019. Future reports will be completed by the newly created Sustainability and Resiliency committee with support from the Sustainability Department and the International Council for Local Environmental Initiatives.

Linn County is not only collecting data and tracking progress, we are taking action. We are focused on resiliency and addressing issues of equity while taking action. Tamara is working on creating a resiliency hub, which will focus on providing access to three initial critical resources: electricity, food, and actionable information; creating a tree equity program; and creating opportunities for the next generation of environmental leaders.

AMERICAN RESCUE PLAN ACT FUNDING

As many of you might be aware, the Linn County Board of Supervisors will be receiving a total of \$44 million from the American Rescue Plan Act, better known as ARPA, in two tranches. We received our first tranche of \$22 million in June of last year and will receive our final \$22 million in June. We recently approved \$11 million in awards to organizations representing categories in public health, capital investment, social services, affordable housing, and water and sewer infrastructure.

Linn County and the City of Cedar Rapids collaborated to create a unified portal for applications to be submitted, reviewed, vetted for eligibility, and sent to the appropriate funder for their

consideration. Linn County slowed down our approval process when we received word that Linn County would be receiving approximately \$53 million from the state of Iowa in Community Development Block Grants for Disaster Recovery and COVID-19 Relief. Once we learned that the state was still finalizing the rules for this funding, we decided to proceed with ARPA funding awards.

This is an incredible opportunity with one-time dollars to make significant investments in the community. Round 2 applications will become available in the near future and our commitment is to invest in programs and services that are impactful and meaningful.

COMPLEX ISSUES

As you can see, the velocity, complexity, and number of issues we face is vast in addition to an electorate that is more divisive and divided than ever armed with misinformation along with escalating and dangerous rhetoric to match.

Throughout this pandemic, the Board of Supervisors has received hundreds of emails comparing our mask mandate or promotion of getting the vaccines to be the moral equivalent to slavery and 1930s Nazi Germany. There are policy makers and leaders in this room whose family members, relatives, and ancestors were impacted by slavery and the Holocaust.

Words matter. Information matters. Truth matters.

I am confident that Stacey's ancestors would gladly trade the cotton fields for a cotton mask. My Jewish great grandparents were executed in a mass grave outside a concentration camp in Riga Latvia. They would have gladly traded a tattooed number on their forearm for a vaccine in their shoulder. This is real to me and changed the lives of my family, and is not something that you throw around for political fodder.

Speaking of World War II, in a recent conversation with Cedar Rapids Councilmember Ashley Vanorney I learned one of her relatives was a German minister who sympathized with the Jews during World War II. Because of this, he was evacuated to London where he and other military aged German males were deported to Australia, packed onto a ship called the HMT Dunera.

My great uncle, Ernst Lyon, was smuggled out of Germany with my grandmother through the Kindertransport, never to see their parents again. He was deported from London enroute to Australia but that ship was torpedoed near Nova Scotia. After his rescue, he was then boarded onto a different ship to Australia called the HMT Dunera. Our two relatives were on the same ship, headed to the same place and over 70 years later their descendants would be in positions to decide how best to keep their communities safe.

Stories like Stacey's, Ashley's and my own are personal and real. As policy makers, we don't take lightly the responsibilities confronting us during this pandemic. We reflect on what others before us have had to endure just to survive systemic oppression. This pandemic is not the same as what they went through. Words matter. Information matters. Truth matters.

An interesting side note: one of Ashley's relatives would later become an Australian cosmic-ray physicist who has a mountain named after him in Antarctica. Did you climb it when you were there Stacey? We have truly come full circle!

There has been a lot of interest in the impact of the reduction of the board of supervisors from five to three members. Just in the past two years, we have been faced with:

- The effects of an ongoing global pandemic and radically changing our operations to keep our employees and the public safe;
- The aftermath of the derecho, including a rise in homelessness, lack of affordable housing, workforce pressures and shortages;
- Loss of local control by the state legislature and the governor denying local elected officials the ability to keep their citizens safe;
- The opening of the Mental Health Access Center;
- Buying a new permanent cold weather overflow shelter;
- Creating an agri-community at Dows Farms;
- And reviewing and voting on contentious and complicated utility-scale solar applications all the while keeping our eyes to the horizon and not being able to legally talk about any of these issues outside of a public meeting.

Yes, the workload has increased, and yes, the ability to speak with your colleague on crafting better policy and achieving greater collaboration is why most counties in Iowa have a five member Board of Supervisors. Linn County, with a population of 230,399, joins counties with three-member boards like Sac County, population 9,814; Mills County, population 14,484; Hamilton County, population 15,039; and Jefferson County, population 15,663.

I think you get the point I am making.

In 2016, voters approved a ballot measure reducing the Board to its current size. We were intentional with the ballot language: "Shall the community's representation on the Board of Supervisors be reduced from 5 to 3?" I get when faced with the choice of having the same level of government or less, most people would vote for less without fully realizing its impact.

We heard throughout the solar debate that it is unfair that only two Supervisors, let alone two from Cedar Rapids, get to make these decisions that impact rural residents.

The irony is not lost on me that the leader of the petition drive to reduce the Board from five members to three was from Coggon, Iowa, and six years after his successful petition drive, a 750-acre utility-scale solar array is scheduled to be constructed in...Coggon, Iowa; nor the fact that one of the former Supervisors who did not win re-election when they were placed in the same district as their colleague in 2016, lived in and was the former Mayor of...Palo, Iowa.

Fewer Supervisors means less representation, especially to rural Linn County residents.

Since citizens voted to reduce the Board representation, it should be up to the voters of Linn County if they want to increase it back to five. Not by state legislative decree or the Board of Supervisors arbitrarily placing it on the ballot for another vote. This decision should be up to the voters of Linn County.

ELECTED OFFICIALS' RETIREMENTS & CONCLUSION

I would like to end with thanking several elected officials who have recently retired or announced they are no longer going to serve in public office.

Linn County Attorney Jerry Vander Sanden retired late last year after a 39-year career in the County Attorney's Office. He started in the County Attorney's Office in 1983 fresh out of law school; he hadn't taken the bar exam yet. Later, he went on a blind date with another County employee, Denise, who would become the love of his life.

Treasurer Sharon Gonzalez is not seeking re-election and will be retiring at the end of this year. Sharon started with Linn County on September 10, 1979. In her 43 years of service, Sharon has seen many changes to the Treasurer's Office and Linn County. All the titles and registration documents were issued on a typewriter—if you screwed up you had to start over. You could smoke at your desk. Sharon is proud of the high-quality customer satisfaction she and her staff provide to Linn County customers coming to her office. We thank her for her 43 years of service.

Recorder Joan McCalmant is also not seeking re-election and is retiring after 36 years of service. She began her career with Linn County on November 3, 1986 as Chief Deputy Recorder. She replaced her sister who had been the chief deputy for eight years. Political appointments were very different back then! Joan has helped modernize the scanning, storage, and distribution of deeds, passport information, and marriage/birth/death certificates. We thank her for her 36 years of service.

With the time I have remaining I want to say a few things about my friend, colleague, and brother Stacey Walker.

I first heard about Stacey Walker in 2013. Everyone was talking about how dynamic and game-changing Stacey was. Stacey. Stacey. Stacey. I looked forward to finally meeting her!

Stacey is a trailblazer, a dear friend, and I would argue one of the most consequential and important elected officials I have ever served with. Stacey is a man fiercely devoted to elevating people of color, being a voice to those who struggle to find their own voice, and he dares to do what the great philosopher Aeschylus once said: "to make gentle the life of this world."

When you surround yourself with someone whose spirit of intellect, curiosity, passion to help others, and to stand firm in the face of systems designed to push you down, you can't help but be transformed.

I have watched Stacey run headfirst and be thrown into issues confronting the strongest headwinds and the steepest of terrain. Before he was elected, Stacey took leadership of the Safe, Equitable and Thriving Taskforce, which was formed because a 14-year-old African American child shot a 15-year-old African American child and someone needed to lead on addressing youth gun violence in our community.

As one of the few African American elected officials in the state of Iowa, the burden of being a voice, a symbol, a representative of people of color has both fueled him and inspired him into action. I saw up close and personal the toll each time someone who looked like him was killed by

police. He has opened my eyes to many of the injustices that sadly occur in our communities, but he seeks to right the wrong.

I could speak ad nauseam about how much Stacey means to me, but I will leave it with how much my daughter Penelope loves Stacey Lynn Walker. When your children love your best friend for who they are, you know that person is special. My daughter Penelope loves Stacey like family. Their bond is unbreakable and neither time nor distance with his future endeavors will diminish that.

My brother Stacey is leaving a legacy of transformation, black liberation, accomplishments that have changed lives for the better, hope to those in search of light in the darkness of their days, and I am left inspired, humbled, and lucky to not only serve with my best friend, but also become a better person because of him.

I will leave you with a quote that Stacey uses that has become personal to me that I wish to share: **We work in the dark, we do what we can, we give what we have. Our doubt is our passion, and our passion is our task. The rest is the madness of art.**