

FULL TEXT: 2022 STATE OF THE STATE

Governor Kevin Stitt

Feb. 7, 2022

Mr. Speaker.

Mr. President Pro Tem.

Lieutenant Governor Matt Pinnell.

Members of my cabinet.

Mr. Chief Justice of the Supreme Court.

Mr. Presiding Judge of the Court of Criminal Appeals.

Members of the 58th Legislature.

Tribal leaders.

My wonderful wife and partner, First Lady Sarah Stitt.

Thank you so much to my family for being here today.

It means a lot.

And most importantly, my fellow Oklahomans.

I'm honored to stand before you today and begin my fourth year as your governor.

It has been a great privilege to lead our state.

I am thankful to the citizens of Oklahoma and my heavenly Father for giving me this opportunity.

Mr. Speaker, Mr. Pro Tem, members of the House and Senate, last year, we showed Oklahomans what's possible when we work together.

We cut taxes for all Oklahomans.

We made record investments in education and gave parents more choices.

We grew our economy.

We modernized our government, and we stood up to defend the rights of Oklahomans -- including protecting the lives of our unborn children!

Today, I am proud to say we are well-positioned to continue our momentum toward becoming a Top Ten state.

Full text version

I want to praise my colleagues in the Legislature for being fiscally conservative and responsible with taxpayer dollars.

In the face of criticism, we stayed the course.

We made smart decisions instead of going on a spending spree.

It's a different story in Washington, D.C., and so are the results.

Our national economy is struggling.

Inflation is at a forty-year high.

Gas and groceries are more expensive.

Supply chain issues have made everything harder to find.

But if you live in Oklahoma, it's a different story.

While other states are shutting down their economies, we've never been more open for business.

In fact, 40,000 more Oklahomans have jobs today compared to when I took office.

As unemployment skyrocketed in some parts of the country, ours is down to just 2.3%.

That's the lowest it's been in our state's history!

Across the country, huge numbers of Americans are moving to states that value freedom and trust their citizens to make choices for themselves.

There has never been a bigger difference between a red state and a blue state.

Freedom-loving Americans cannot escape liberal lockdown states fast enough.

Since April 2020, more than 27,000 of them have moved to Oklahoma.

That includes Jonathan and Erica, who moved here from Seattle because they believe in freedom and personal responsibility.

Can you imagine leaving a place like Norman, Oklahoma for Southern California?

I mean, who would do that?

Oklahoma, I'm proud of the progress we've made in just three short years.

But today, the state of our state is at a crossroads.

We have a choice between two paths.

One path leads toward a Top Ten State.

Full text version

It's a familiar road, and it's paved with unity, fairness, and equal protection under the law.

The other path leads to a jigsaw puzzle of jurisdiction.

From the beginning, I've sounded the alarm on the Supreme Court's *McGirt* decision.

Because I knew then, and I know now, that even a narrow Supreme Court ruling can fundamentally change a state.

Oklahoma has been robbed of the authority to prosecute crimes.

Put simply, *McGirt* jeopardizes justice.

Over the past year, we've done everything we can to protect law and order and limit the impacts of this decision.

Our broad coalition includes Attorney General John O'Connor; all 27 district attorneys across the state, especially Steve Kunzweiler in Tulsa County and Matt Ballard in Craig, Mayes and Rogers Counties; Police Chiefs like Wendell Franklin in Tulsa, the Oklahoma Sheriffs' Association; the Oklahoma Farm Bureau; the Oklahoma Cattlemen's Association; environmentalists; The Petroleum Alliance of Oklahoma, and city leaders.

Recently, we've won two major victories to protect law and order.

First, the Supreme Court agreed *McGirt* is not retroactive.

This means that convicted criminals stay in prison.

The Supreme Court also agreed to hear another case.

A win in that case would let the state go back to enforcing law and order and protecting more crime victims in Eastern Oklahoma.

That's the way we've done it since 1907.

The new rules put the federal government in charge, and it isn't working.

In 2013, a 12-year-old boy named Billy Lord was riding his bike in Wagoner.

Richard Roth was driving drunk and hit Billy and killed him.

The state convicted Roth for Billy's death and sentenced him to prison.

But Mr. Roth is white, and since Billy was Cherokee, the guilty verdict was overturned.

The case can't be retried in federal court, and Roth could go free from punishment without even so much as a traffic ticket on his record.

That's not fair. And it's not equal protection under the law.

Billy's mom, Pamela, is here today.

Full text version

She told the court that while her son was a tribal member, he was also a citizen of the United States and the state of Oklahoma.

She said allowing the man who killed her son to walk free is an insult to Billy's memory and an insult to justice.

Pamela, I'm sorry for your loss. I'm fighting for justice for Billy.

Surely, we can all agree that no crime should go unpunished.

Billy deserves justice. All victims deserve justice.

Oklahoma, here's the deal.

This isn't about winning and losing. This isn't personal. It's not Kevin Stitt versus the tribes.

Instead, it's about certainty. It's about law and order. It's about fairness, equal protection under the law, and one set of rules.

We're all Oklahomans. Let's work together to solve this.

With that, let me turn to our legislative agenda for this session.

We start this year with an incredible opportunity. Oklahomans have elected the largest supermajority in state history. We have a very clear mandate to enact strong conservative policies that protect liberty and defend against the Biden administration's federal overreach!

I challenge each of us to be bold. Let's capitalize on the opportunity we have and make Oklahoma a Top Ten state.

To reach our destination, we need a map to stay on course.

Our road to Top Ten has four checkpoints:

Driving hope for all Oklahomans, protecting Oklahomans and our way of life, making Oklahoma the most business friendly state in the country and delivering taxpayers more for their money.

Let's start with driving hope for all Oklahomans.

Hope is not a wish or a feeling.

It's a proven science that can be measured and applied.

More than 2,000 studies have shown that hope is the greatest predictor of success.

That applies to education, work, health, mental health, social relationships, family and trauma recovery.

Hope impacts everything that matters to us.

I want to take a moment to recognize the First Lady, my wife, Sarah Stitt.

Full text version

She's created the Sarah Stitt Hope Foundation to bring the science of hope to communities across Oklahoma. Over the next two years, we're training every state employee how to apply the science of hope to their agencies.

Sarah, thank you so much for your hard work.

We can drive hope for all Oklahomans through education. Throughout my time as governor, I've committed to putting our students first.

Across the country, parents are waking up to the learning loss caused by closed classrooms. They're demanding better for their kids.

I'm proud that Secretary of Education Ryan Walters and I have been fighting to put our students first and keep our schools open longer than anyone in the country!

In Oklahoma, we listen to parents, because we know God gave kids to parents – not the government!

We expanded the equal opportunity scholarship to provide more choices for low and middle-income families.

That helps students like Jonathan Wright. He's a freshman at Oklahoma Bible Academy in Enid.

When Jonathan was three years old, he was adopted out of foster care by a single mom named Lisa. Jonathan has used the Equal Opportunity Scholarship to go to Oklahoma Bible for four years.

His mom said the mentors and positive role models at his school have transformed his life.

Jonathan and Lisa are here today. Would you please stand and be recognized?

We provided record funding for all public schools, including charter and rural schools. These initial investments were good first steps for Oklahoma's education turnaround, but there's much more to do.

Just 15% of Oklahoma high school graduates are ready for college in English, math, reading and science -- less than one out of five.

We can do better than 47th in the nation when it comes to our kids. We've tiptoed around the edges for far too long.

It's clear the status quo isn't working.

We need to take bold steps. It will take courage, and it will take a desire to make a generational impact. This is our moment!

We know education is not one-size-fits-all, and I pledge to support any legislation that gives parents more school choice, because in Oklahoma, we need to fund students, not systems!

Full text version

Pro Tem Treat filed a bill called the Oklahoma Empowerment Act.

It makes sure that money follows the student, and it would make us a national leader in school choice.

Let me be clear: Oklahoma has a lot of great schools, but the results don't lie.

We need new ideas, more options, and higher standards for our kids.

This is just common sense.

We have a duty to make sure nothing stands in the way of an Oklahoma student achieving their full potential.

There are roadblocks – literally. State law creates artificial barriers for school districts that don't put our students first.

Our school transportation formula is outdated and broken. We desperately need to modernize it.

Another roadblock in our current system keeps some of the best teachers out of the classroom.

Right now, some talented teachers choose to leave the classroom to make more money as an administrator.

Oklahoma students can't be the best without the best teachers. That's why I'm proposing matching funds so that our best teachers can make six figure salaries and stay in the classroom.

It's the right thing to do for our teachers and for our kids!

Another way to support Oklahoma educators is to protect their paychecks from union bosses.

The same unions that have pushed critical race theory and school closures intimidate new teachers into handing over part of their salaries.

Liberal unions want to keep a stranglehold on their cut of teacher pay. Enough is enough!

Every other profession lets you opt-in to health insurance and other benefits at work every year. Unions should be opt-in, not opt-out!

The second checkpoint on our road to Top Ten is protecting Oklahomans and our way of life.

As elected officials, this is one of our most important duties.

We can't do that if we don't focus on securing fairness and safety in the Medical Marijuana industry.

To the citizens of rural Oklahoma, I hear you.

This is causing major problems in our communities, and we must get it under control.

Full text version

When Oklahomans voted for Medical Marijuana, they were sold a bill of goods. The state question was misleading, and it has tied our hands as we regulate the industry.

Because of that state question, Oklahoma charges just \$2500 for a commercial license. Even California charges up to \$181,000 – 72 times more!

As a result, we have 7 times the growers than California with just 10% of the people.

Next door in Arkansas, they have 8 growers. We have 8,300.

You know as well as I do that not all of that product is being sold legally.

This is a perfect example why we need to make sure initiative petitions represent Oklahomans, not out-of-state special interest groups. Oklahomans deserve to know the details before voting to change our constitution.

While we can't change the past, we can learn from it and improve our future. We are getting the right leaders in place and untying their hands to enforce the laws.

I've directed our law enforcement to crack down hard on the black market. Agents have been in the field making arrests.

Let me be clear: drug cartels, organized crime and foreign bad actors have no place in Oklahoma. We will find them, and we will bring them to justice!

Oklahoma is a proud law and order state.

As other states and cities are still defunding their police, we have a chance to stand apart. Brave men and women who put their lives on the line deserve leaders who will have their back.

Now is the time to transform and modernize our state law enforcement system into the nation's best.

To do this, we need to tackle four critical areas: the recruitment, retention, health and training of our troopers, agents and investigators.

First, we must protect our officers.

Mental health does not discriminate. Depression and suicide do not discriminate.

It's long overdue, but this year we must prioritize the health of our officers and

create the Oklahoma First Responders Wellness Division. Its foundation is a peer to peer system designed to recognize the early signs of trauma and give immediate help to officers who need it.

This could have saved Ronald Hook.

Full text version

The continued trauma he experienced as an officer seemingly went unnoticed and unaddressed.

After 15 years of dedicated service in law enforcement, this family man, husband, father and friend, tragically ended his life.

Ron's daughter Alisha, and his sisters, Sissy and Suzy, are here today. They support creating this wellness division so other officers and their families won't experience the same tragedy.

Alisha, Sissy and Suzy, I am so sorry for the loss of your dad and brother. Thank you for being here.

In the same way we can attract and support teachers, we need to provide law enforcement officers competitive pay, the best training available, and more career options.

I'm requesting that we pool our resources and build a joint statewide training facility.

Officers put their lives on the line every single day. The least we could do in return is provide them with the highest quality training.

Our state's law enforcement also desperately needs a consolidated, unified command structure within a single department.

43 other states have this. Oklahoma should be no different.

A unified command will create the career growth opportunities that today's recruits expect.

I want to pause here and thank each one of our brave men and women in law enforcement who sacrifice each day to keep our communities safe.

Other states may turn their backs on the blue, but as governor, I will always stand with those who protect and hold that thin blue line.

Our third Top Ten checkpoint is making Oklahoma the most business-friendly state in the nation.

Last year's pro-business policies are already paying dividends.

Canoo, an electric vehicle manufacturer, is a perfect example.

Last summer, Canoo announced it will open a factory in Pryor next year and bring 2,000 jobs to Oklahoma. Canoo's CEO, Tony Aquila, said he chose Oklahoma because he wants to be where the puck is going – not where it's been.

Since Canoo's initial announcement, it's added a technology hub, software development, customer support and financing centers to Oklahoma. That's at least 700 more high-paying jobs for our state.

Tony Aquila is here in the gallery today.

Full text version

Tony, thank you for believing in Oklahoma. And for helping to pioneer the future of our state's economy.

Canoo is just one company that has seen the benefit of Oklahoma being open for business.

Thanks to the Governor's Closing Fund and the Legislature's investment in business development, the Department of Commerce is coming off its best year ever.

Secretary of Commerce and Workforce Development Scott Mueller and his team are working hundreds of opportunities, thousands of jobs, and billions of dollars invested in our economy.

But "open for business" isn't just about recruiting new companies.

We've launched an innovative platform to help Oklahoma manufacturers solve supply chain issues. Our system connects them to buyers and sellers and keeps their money in Oklahoma. More than 400 companies are already signed up.

We are delivering on creating jobs and growing our economy, but we are at a critical junction when it comes to our state's workforce.

Across the nation and here in our state, businesses are struggling to find the employees they need. We need more nurses, more teachers, more engineers.

Tinker Air Force base is rapidly expanding.

I met with the Secretary of the Air Force at the Pentagon because we expect to add 6-10,000 jobs there in the next five years.

Our state's workforce needs to grow at the same pace as our businesses.

That means we have to be bold.

Our entire education system must be aligned and motivated to meet this challenge head on.

Let's tear down the silos between K-12, Career Techs and Higher Ed to train the next generation. Every student needs to be college ready or career ready.

I know we can do it.

The road to success looks different for every Oklahoman.

We're all made in God's image, and He has a unique plan for each of our lives.

That's why we have to provide career paths to match the skills of our students with the jobs in our communities.

Let's increase apprenticeships in high school and pathways to jobs that don't require a college degree.

Full text version

Let's align and leverage our system to train every Oklahoman with the skills they need to provide for their family.

In the middle of a nursing shortage, our universities can't be turning away qualified applicants like they are now. Instead, we need to reward universities for producing graduates in critical areas.

Our state depends on it.

Last year, while states like New York were billions of dollars in the hole, we cut taxes for every single Oklahoman. We took care of the 300,000 working families being hit the hardest by increasing the Earned Income Tax Credit.

We can, and we should, do more for Oklahoma families.

That's why I'm proposing to eliminate the grocery tax.

Oklahoma is one of just 13 states that taxes groceries, and ours is one of the highest.

Many Oklahomans are already struggling under the weight of record inflation. Let's give them more help this year.

Because, after all, we need more taxpayers, not more taxes.

States across the country are continuing to cut taxes on their citizens.

Nine states don't charge a personal income tax. Many others are racing to join them, and we can't be left behind.

My vision is to create a taxpayer protection plan that responsibly lowers income taxes according to our state revenue.

Cutting taxes based on how our economy grows ensures we'll always have money to pay for core services like education and roads and bridges. As our economy grows, Oklahomans share in our success by keeping more of their hard-earned money.

I look forward to working with the Legislature to modernize our tax code this session.

Another way to do that is to get rid of the income tax on military retirement benefits.

Our military installations are so important to our state, and we want to keep our retired veterans here in Oklahoma. It's a commonsense way to support those who defend our freedoms.

Let's get it done.

The fourth, and final, checkpoint on the road to Top Ten is delivering taxpayers more for their money.

Full text version

This requires strategic investments in modernizing government agencies, transparency, building our savings account, and infrastructure.

Oklahomans hired me as Governor because they wanted their government to run more like a business.

From day one, I've challenged my agency heads to deliver taxpayers more for their money. We're doing it by making agencies more effective and responsive to our citizens, not by growing government.

We have 2,000 fewer state employees than just a few years ago, and we've invested into technology to provide better results.

In May, we'll launch a unified, cutting-edge human resources system for all state agencies for the first time in history.

In the past year, too many Oklahomans had to wait too long to get a driver's license.

Basic services that should have taken a few minutes were taking days or even months.

This is unacceptable. We can't let it happen again.

That's why I'm calling for the Legislature to partner with me to make it easier than ever for Oklahomans to interact with state government.

Let's start with drivers' licenses and vehicle registration, because that's something we can all agree needs to be fixed.

There's not a business in the world that measures success based on how much it spends. Government should be no different.

I want to thank this Legislature for its commitment to transparency, especially in education.

Last year, I worked with 22 state lawmakers to request the first-ever comprehensive audit of the Oklahoma State Department of Education, because tax dollars belong in the classrooms, not in the pockets of bureaucrats!

There are no rubber stamps and blank checks on my watch.

That's why we're launching a new budgeting process for our agencies. It's called Transparent Oklahoma Performance. You can track our progress online at top.ok.gov.

I will keep shining a light to protect the taxpayers and hold our government accountable!

I want to also applaud the Legislature for prioritizing saving over spending. Today, we have the largest savings account in state history at over \$2 billion!

This year, I'm asking the Legislature to raise the cap on our savings account to continue protecting our future.

Full text version

This would give us financial security and the ability to make strategic investments like never before.

One of the ways we can make a generational impact is by investing in infrastructure. Secretary of Transportation Tim Gatz has taken this challenge head on.

Across the state, we're improving pavement and safety on urban and rural highways. We've made it to Top Ten in bridges. A major project at I-235 and I-44 in Oklahoma City is almost finished.

We've made great progress, but more can be done.

The future of our economy will depend on having a modern highway system that manages congestion and has reliable travel times.

Let's be bold.

I'm calling to invest \$13 billion in transportation over the next 10 years.

This will let us close the loops around Oklahoma City and Tulsa. We'll widen the Turner to 6 lanes the entire way. We'll expand the Will Rogers in Northeast Oklahoma and parts of the Kilpatrick in Oklahoma City.

We're also adding more access points for communities along our system. This will make travel easier and lead to more economic development across the state.

Here's an example: the Kickapoo Turnpike has been open east of Oklahoma City for a year now.

It's created an economic explosion for the city of Harrah. In the last year, more than 2,200 new homes have started construction. Harrah's first hotel opened in November, and the city estimates its population will almost double in three or four years.

We have an opportunity to bring that kind of growth to more cities across our state.

We'll announce more details – including drone corridors and emerging mobility -- later this month. This is our moment to make Oklahoma's transportation system the best in the nation!

Infrastructure is not the only place we can make a generational impact. The opportunities this year are endless.

Will we prioritize special interests or the people we serve? Will we prioritize the next generation or the next election?

Now is the time for big, bold decisions. Let's leave a legacy for generations.

As I begin the final year of my first term as governor, let's look back at the progress we've made.

When my administration took office, Oklahoma was coming off two years of revenue failures.

Full text version

We had almost no money in savings, which meant budget cuts were an annual challenge. State agencies reported to unelected bureaucrats, and they weren't being held accountable. It was so out of control that the Department of Corrections wanted a billion dollar budget increase!

Our state was reeling from a teacher walkout.

And on a personal level, I felt our state lacked the confidence and pride I saw in other parts of the country.

Because of our great work together, Oklahoma's turnaround is well underway.

Our fiscal house is in order.

We're coming off a year where we made record investments in education while still cutting taxes.

We're fourth in the nation in budget reserves.

Our state's credit rating has gone up.

We've held state agencies accountable by putting the right leaders in place and aligning them with a common vision.

Oklahomans have a renewed sense of pride in our state and our way of life.

Thousands of people across the country have said, "sign me up!"

But to get to Top Ten, we can't be satisfied with the status quo.

Jim Collins wrote in his book *Good to Great*, "good is the enemy of great."

Will Rogers put it another way: "the road to success is dotted with many tempting parking spaces."

Oklahoma has all the bones and the capabilities to be the greatest state in the nation, and we've come too far to settle for anything less than our best.

We must never lose sight of the fact that Oklahomans elected us as leaders. They sent us here to protect their rights and to make sure everyone in our state has equal opportunity to succeed.

Just because your life is fine, or your school is great, or your business is thriving, doesn't mean we don't have an obligation to make sure everyone has that same chance.

We're all here because we have a higher calling to do what's right, not what's easy.

I truly believe Oklahoma can be, and will be, a Top Ten state.

Let's work together, and let's get it done.

Full text version

I'm so proud to be an American, but I thank God every day that I'm an Oklahoman!

God bless you.