

Deputy Chief Warner, acting Speaker Easley, members of the Council, Mr. Chief Justice, members of the judiciary, members of the cabinet, ladies and gentlemen.

I want to thank my family, many of whom are here today, whose support has been indispensable to my service.

I want to thank the more than 15,000 employees of our government and our businesses throughout this reservation, across this country and around the globe.

It is my distinct honor to report to the Cherokee people on the state of the Cherokee Nation.

We gather in a time of change in the country, a season of American division and a period of uncertainty in the United States.

That makes me all the more grateful that it is time of progress, a season of unity and a period of strength in the great Cherokee Nation.

In the past eight months we have seen the termination of federal funds totaling more than \$26 million. Over \$20 million more in federal funds are in jeopardy.

The proposed federal budget, if enacted, would cut funds or eliminate funds from programs that impact people who are counting on us. That includes the elimination of LIHEAP, which helps elders pay their heating bills and Job Corps which gives young people a chance to get on track, get trained and get a good job. More programs could be cut or eliminated.

In the face of this we have two choices. We can throw up our hands or we can roll up our sleeves. The Cherokee people expect the leaders of this government to roll up our sleeves, maintain our priorities and hold the federal government accountable. That is exactly what I propose we do.

We will extend an invitation to federal leaders to come see what happens when a government puts the people it represents first, builds from the grass roots up and prioritizes the things that build a great society.

I know that on a bipartisan basis, including among members of the Oklahoma Congressional delegation, our efforts earn the respect and praise of leaders in this country. We are counting on their friendship in the years ahead.

If leaders of this country want to see dollars stretched to the maximum and public investments that produce amazing results, I invite them to the Cherokee Nation Reservation to see it firsthand.

We can show them strides in healthcare that would be the envy of any region of this country. Our goal is not simply an adequate system of health care, but a world class system of wellness for the Cherokee people.

And we have made so much progress.

In the last five years the number of patient visits has increased from 1.3 million to nearly 2 million annually. We are also closing the gap where we had the most work to do, increasing behavioral health access by more than 330%.

In the last five years we have increased the number of healthcare providers by 16%, and our entire healthcare workforce increased from 1,500 to over 3,200.

And there is good reason for this: we are building more healthcare facilities to meet the Cherokee peoples' needs and their expectations. When it comes to healthcare we cannot slow down and we will not slow down.

Our \$485 million hospital here in Tahlequah will open next year, doubling our in-patient capacity. Our \$85 million Salina Health Center, which triples our capacity there, opened just last week.

That magnificent facility includes something special: a wellness center. We cannot create a world class system of wellness for the Cherokee people if we do not build a system that provides comprehensive support for Cherokees: mind, body and spirit.

And so I say let Salina set the standard: we should never build another primary health center in the Cherokee Nation unless it also includes a wellness center.

But, we should go further. We just opened the doors to our \$21 million wellness center in Stillwell. Next year we will replace MARKOMA here in Tahlequah with a new state-of-the-art wellness center. Communities like Kenwood and Marble City have new life thanks to our wellness investments there.

We cannot bring wellness centers or gymnasiums to every community as quickly as we want. But, we cannot stop the progress. We will strategize this year on a plan to build more of these facilities on a regional basis across our reservation over the next decade.

Mr. Speaker I will deliver that plan to you by this time next year.

Remember when I shared with you from this podium that we bent the opioid industry to a settlement for the injury they caused to the Cherokee people? We are making that industry pay for our first drug and alcohol addiction treatment center for adults and it opens here in Tahlequah in 2026.

We cannot slow down when it comes to addressing addiction issues and we will not slow down.

That is why in the coming year we will begin designing transitional residential recovery housing across this reservation. We will also propose an outpatient drug and alcohol treatment center in the community of Vinita.

I am pleased to report that 31 days from now the federal government will turn over the keys to the last Indian Health Service facility within our reservation. We are on a rescue mission to save Claremore Indian hospital from decades of federal neglect.

On October 1 a new era begins with the Cherokee Nation Claremore Emergency and Outpatient Center.

We will immediately invest \$11 million into the current facility and sign an agreement with a local hospital for seamless obstetric care.

Thanks to the work of the Council, I am pleased to announce today that we have designed the new \$244 million health, emergency and wellness facility for Claremore and it will be open in 2027 before I leave this office.

My fellow Cherokees the entire country is dealing with a housing crisis. To anyone concerned about the issue, including federal leaders, I say come to Cherokee Nation and see what happens when a government is honest about the problem and commits itself to a path of progress in addressing the problem.

Since I signed the Housing Jobs and Sustainable Communities Act in 2019, we have built hundreds of homes and repaired thousands. That is over 4,000 individual projects. We have built housing additions in Stillwell, Sallisaw, Muskogee, Tahlequah and Jay. We have five more housing additions in some phase of development.

And I am pleased to announce that one of these five housing additions is a partnership with Green Country Habitat for Humanity to build 12 affordable housing units in north Tulsa.

Another one of these five housing additions partners with Tahlequah Area Habitat for Humanity to build seven homes right here in our capital city.

The Housing, Jobs and Sustainable Communities Act has also fueled unprecedented construction and improvements of Cherokee Nation community buildings. Through our sustainable communities program we have built 10 new community buildings, made major remodels or expansions to 20 others and have made improvements to all of our buildings.

Under the amendments to the Housing, Jobs and Sustainable Communities Act I signed last year, we will keep making progress on housing and community buildings.

That law commits us to spend \$40 million on housing and community building efforts every three years in perpetuity without relying on a single penny from the government of the United States.

That is because we cannot wait for the government of the United States to come to the rescue on the housing crisis. We must take the lead.

My fellow citizens this will require that we commit even more of our resources.

I am concerned that we have Cherokee communities that, despite our efforts, continue to struggle.

These are communities founded by Cherokees before anyone ever heard of the State of Oklahoma. These are communities where our life ways are still held dear, where our language is often spoken and where our traditions are still alive.

Yet, many of these communities suffer from some of the great problems of our age: persistent poverty, dying economies, poor health, drug and alcohol addiction, substandard housing and crime.

These are communities that withered on the vine during so much of the 20th century when the federal government shackled the Cherokee Nation.

In this century the Cherokee Nation is unshackled and surging ahead. If our communities fade away in this century it will be our failure. We do not intend to fail. We intend to take action.

What is happening in these communities is in part a public health crisis and so we should address it with public health dollars.

Over the next three years we will commit over \$30 million from our Public Health and Wellness Fund surplus to invest in these communities. We will build housing, community centers, places for outdoor recreation and make investments to keep these communities safer.

We did it in Kenwood. We did it in Marble City. Those communities are full of new life and new hope. Let us do the same in places like Cherry Tree and Dewey, South Coffeyville and Sally Bull Hollow, Oaks and Greasy, Belfonte and Rocky Ford, North Tulsa and Afton, Lost City and Keys. The list of communities goes on and on.

It will take years to get to all these communities and we have no time to wait. Our ancestors did not found these communities only for us to look the other way while these communities fail. Our ancestors knew and we know it: the Cherokee people are not a people who were meant to fail.

These may be communities the rest of the world forgot about, but Cherokee Nation did not forget about them because they were founded by Cherokee people and for the Cherokee people.

Our attitude must be that the best days for these communities lay ahead of us, not behind us.

Our attitude must be that we can rebuild our communities if we listen to the people who live there and support their hopes and dreams for the place they call home.

Our attitude should be that successful communities are a choice and so let us make that choice, together

The Public Health and Wellness Fund Act, which I signed in 2021, is perhaps the single most important law on the books for building healthy Cherokee communities.

It is the law that built wellness centers and walking trails. It funded drug treatment programs, vouchers for elders to get fresh food and grants for communities- even at-large communities- to make their own health and wellness investments.

It is funded by setting aside 7% of our third-party health revenue. Deputy Chief Warner and I will propose to the Council that we increase this fund to 10% so that we can keep making progress.

There are so many opportunities to improve wellness from housing to outdoor recreation to wellness centers to behavioral health programs and many more.

If the Council approves the increase, Deputy Chief Warner and I also pledge to make an immediate investment in one of our most important missions: we will expand our senior nutrition program. This means more sites, expanded hours, new partnerships and a better quality of life for more of our elders.

Housing, playgrounds, ballfields, food security, community buildings and safer streets alone cannot alone cure what ails many of our communities. We must redouble our efforts to spur economic growth in parts of the Cherokee Nation that are far, far behind.

Last year we launched an \$85 million federally backed loan fund for small business startups and expansions over the next decade. At the request of your at-large Council members we took this program nationwide.

In less than a year we have loaned over \$5 million to Cherokee entrepreneurs near and far.

In the coming year Deputy Chief Warner and I will propose that we target some of these funds to the communities across our reservation that are most in need and where access to capital is most scarce.

We will propose Cherokee Opportunity Zones, targeting microloans and business incubator opportunities to help spur growth in areas that have not seen new private sector jobs for decades.

Fellow Cherokees, I am proud of our efforts in education. That includes a record setting number of Cherokees, including at-large Cherokees, going to college on one of our scholarships. Last school year that number was over 6,500.

But, we also must give attention to our career training programs.

In 2019 I signed the Career Readiness Act. The Career Readiness Act is based on something simple: The Cherokee people want to work and they deserve a government that has their back.

We will propose amendments to the Career Readiness Act to target our training dollars to the industries that produce high demand, good paying jobs.

We will place special emphasis on the area where we need the most help: the healthcare field. We will hold ourselves accountable for results and we will start a pilot program to take a regional approach that includes at-large Cherokees.

My fellow Cherokees, I have always believed if we show anyone our beautiful reservation, they will understand what drives us, why we love our home and why we work so hard to ensure its future is bright. Our reservation is full of amazing landscapes and natural resources, amazing communities and amazing people.

I say let us make it more accessible to residents of our reservation as well as visitors. We should forge paths across our reservation so we can share the beauty, share our stories, make a positive economic impact, improve wellness and maintain ecological balance.

I am calling on our nation to create a Cherokee National Trails System over the next decade. We can construct trails, support established trails, and even connect with trails in neighboring regions. We can create jobs, link communities and increase outdoor recreation.

The goal of creating a national trail system in a decade is ambitious, but in the coming year we can take the first steps.

Deputy Chief Warner and I will send to the council legislation that empowers our Secretary of Natural Resources Christina Justice to take those initial steps and finish the Cherokee National Trail system by 2035.

My fellow Cherokees, all the investment and all the progress means little if we lose touch with our culture and history. And so Deputy Chief Warner and I will propose to the Council several measures to further our efforts in preserving our history and revitalizing our culture.

First, we will propose a comprehensive Cherokee Nation Historic Cemeteries Act. This Act will inventory all our historic cemeteries, prioritize them for repairs and develop a long-term strategy to make those repairs.

Too many of our historic cemeteries are vanishing or neglected and it is up to all of us to pitch in. This will be no easy task, but saving our cemeteries is our obligation and it demands a national effort.

Second, we will propose a special commission on repatriation under the Secretary of Natural Resources. In 2023 we launched the repatriation project, which has opened doors to conversations with institutions far and wide about getting back what is rightfully ours.

A new repatriation commission will give us sharper focus. Quite simply too many of our records, artifacts, buildings, properties, and human remains were wrestled from us over the last two centuries. In this century It should be the job of this government to get all of it back.

Finally, it has been five years since I signed the Cherokee Heritage Center Act of 2020. Deputy Chief Warner and I will send to the Council a plan crafted by the Cherokee National Historical Society to construct a new \$50 million Cherokee Heritage Center.

I want to thank the Cherokee National Historical Society for helping get the Heritage Center into the hands of the Cherokee people and reimagining the Heritage Center for the 21st century as a world class center for history, culture and research.

Our Language Department is revitalizing the Cherokee language. Its latest milestone is a new app that brings Durbin Feeling's 1975 dictionary into the 21st century that is available today.

My fellow Cherokees, the eyes of our citizens, indeed the eyes of the whole country, are on the Cherokee Nation when it comes to operating our justice system. Our efforts must continue to build a justice system that not only meets the moment, but to build one that sets the standard.

We have made much progress on this since the historic *McGirt* decision. We have invested millions of dollars, expanded programs and staff, strengthened relationships across jurisdictions, defended sovereignty and improved services for victims.

This past year we settled Cherokee Nation's trust mismanagement case with the federal government.

We worked with the Council to lock down those funds to expand justice facilities for the Cherokee people. We have finished our design of our new Justice Center here in Tahlequah and we will build a district courthouse in Catoosa, all paid for by the trust settlement.

Deputy Chief Warner and I will also propose to the Council that we do more when it comes to our citizens who have paid their debt to society and are ready to rejoin their community.

Our system cannot be a system that abandons people once they are released because our culture teaches us not to leave anyone behind. And so we will propose a 16% increase in our Coming Home Reentry program, all for direct services.

In the coming year we will also strengthen leadership within our justice system.

Earlier this month I named former Council Speaker Mike Shambaugh as our special Envoy to the U.S. Department of Justice and Senior Advisor for Public Safety. Thank you, former Speaker Shambaugh, for once again answering the call of service to the Cherokee people.

And next month I will send a nominee to the Council for Marshal of the Cherokee Nation. I will be asking the Council to make Acting Marshal Daniel Mead *Marshal Daniel Mead*.

Finally, my fellow Cherokees, let us recommit ourselves as individuals and as a nation to ideas as old as our culture, that cost not a penny of public funds and which enrich us beyond measure.

Let us recommit ourselves to the idea that everyone deserves to live in dignity.

Let us recommit ourselves to the idea that tribal sovereignty is hollow and defenseless unless we are all in it together.

Let us recommit ourselves to the idea everyone deserves respect and no one in Cherokee society is shut out or left behind because of who they are or how they may be struggling.

These ideas are at the core of Cherokee goodness. These ideas are gifts we Cherokees can give to each other, and the world, every single day.

And, if you are looking for a way to put Cherokee goodness into action, I invite you to join Gadugi Corps and its 5,200 national service volunteers.

My fellow Cherokees, I am pleased to report to the Cherokee people that our nation is strong. Let us make it stronger in the year ahead. The path forward is clear.

In a time of great change in the country, let us be steady and stable.

In a season of American division, let us demonstrate unity of purpose.

In a period of uncertainty in the United States, let us act with confidence.

We do not have even a moment to doubt our path forward.

We do not have time to waste.

And so my fellow Cherokees let us roll up our sleeves and let us get to work.