



# Gov. Pritzker Proposes Transformative, Generational Investments in FY24 Budget

February 15 2023 2:31 PM

**SPRINGFIELD** – Building on what he describes as four years of fiscal progress, Governor Pritzker’s fifth balanced budget proposal will make transformative, generational investments in early childhood education and childcare, the teacher pipeline, higher education, and efforts to fight poverty.

Please see below for links to the proposed FY24 budget as well as the Governor’s remarks as prepared for delivery.

[Fiscal Year 2024 Operating Budget](#)

[Fiscal Year 2024 Capital Budget](#)

[Fiscal Year 2024 Budget in Brief](#)

**State of the State and Budget Address**

**Wednesday, February 15<sup>th</sup>, 2023**

**\*Remarks As Prepared For Delivery\***

Mr. Speaker, Mr. President, Leader McCombie, Leader Curran, Lieutenant Governor Stratton, our Constitutional Officers, members of the General Assembly, Justices of the Illinois Supreme Court, Cabinet Members, First Lady MK Pritzker, Second Gentleman Bryan Echols, esteemed guests — it’s a distinct honor to come before you today.

The last time I stood at this podium was back in early 2020. Three of the four current legislative leaders had not yet taken up their current posts. And the fourth, the Senate President, was just weeks into his new job and, well, back then, he had more hair. Then a year later Chris Welch became Speaker, and I began to wonder if baldness was a new sign of power in Illinois state government. But I want to thank Leader McCombie and Leader Curran for dispelling the myth and joining the Hair Club. I appreciate your full heads of hair vaulting us back into the majority.

But I digress.

## **Fiscal Responsibility and a Sound Economy**

The last time I stood here seems like a lifetime ago. So many fiscal challenges laid ahead. And so much progress has been made. What was once an Illinois with \$17 billion in overdue bills is now an Illinois that pays its bills on time. What was once an Illinois that went years without a budget is now an Illinois that has passed four balanced budgets in a row. What was once a state with no cushion to protect it in an economic downturn is now an Illinois on track to have a \$2.3 billion Rainy Day Fund. What was once an Illinois with a credit rating on the verge of junk status is now an Illinois getting credit upgrades.

Our fiscal progress is remarkable.

Remember the \$230 million in College Illinois debt? Paid.

Remember the \$900 million in group health insurance debt? Paid.

How about the \$800 million Thompson center liability? Paid.

\$4.5 billion Unemployment Trust Fund debt? Paid.

The \$1.3 billion debt owed to Illinois' treasury funds swept by previous governors? Paid.

\$8 billion of overdue bills? Paid.

As of Fiscal Year 2023, all our state's short-term and medium-term liabilities will have been eliminated. All of it. Our budgets are built on a solid foundation of normalized state revenue and more efficient management of state resources.

We have used our surpluses to chip away at our long term liabilities too, including \$500 million more into our pension stabilization fund over the last two years and my proposal this year to increase that by another \$200 million. The percent of the budget needed to

meet our statutory obligations has declined as our revenues have grown and our fiscal fortunes have improved.

Maybe some who are listening to this are asking, “What does this all mean to me?”

Here’s what it means. We’ve reduced the burden on Illinois taxpayers by eliminating hundreds of millions of dollars in interest payments. We’ve reduced taxes on those who can least afford them, and we’re finally investing in what really matters — improving education and making college more affordable, modernizing our transportation systems, improving public safety and assisting law enforcement to make our neighborhoods safer, reducing homelessness and increasing mental healthcare, cutting taxes and fees on small businesses, attracting new businesses, giving more state revenue to local governments and schools so they can stop raising your property taxes, and so much more. Getting our fiscal house in order is improving our economy, which crossed the threshold of \$1 trillion in GDP at the end of last year.

In the age old fight between happy warriors and misery’s carnival barkers, we’ve shown that if we resolve to do it, happy warriors win every time. And we are winning.

Which is why, here in Illinois in 2023, I’m confident in saying the state of our State is stronger than it has been in decades, and we’re getting stronger every day.

Fiscal responsibility isn’t easy, nor is it a one-time fix. It’s an annual effort that requires persistence. It requires conservative revenue estimates, as all of my budget proposals have. But when done right, consistent balanced budgets strengthen the institutions our residents rely upon, creates new opportunities for success, and makes life easier for the people of Illinois.

People like Anne Tyree. For more than two decades, Anne has worked at Centerstone — a nonprofit that provides treatment for mental health and substance use disorders. For her, behavioral health is a personal issue that has touched her own family in profound ways.

In years past, Anne saw state funding slashed for Centerstone’s patients, young and old alike, who are among the most vulnerable Illinoisans. She describes the experience as nothing short of traumatic. When Illinois couldn’t pay its bills, Centerstone was forced to close outpatient facilities and shutter vital programs. Many other behavioral health providers faced a similar fate.

It was heartbreaking. People on their way to recovery — single parents, children in rural communities, people struggling financially — didn’t have access to critical resources and services that could have saved their lives.

Anne will tell you that she's seen a complete transformation over the last four years because of stable budgeting and a dedication to mental health and substance use disorder treatment. The statistics tell the story. During the prior administration Illinois was 16th in the nation for behavioral health services. Today, we are number nine and climbing.

I've been so adamant about balancing the budget because we need to ramp up our investments in services like behavioral health, and we couldn't promise it unless we were sure we could pay for it.

Anne Tyree is here with us today, and I know we all want to express our gratitude to her and Centerstone and behavioral health providers everywhere for all they've done for our most vulnerable.

I do not tell you Anne's story to say, "our work here is done." Rather, it demonstrates that without fiscal responsibility, we end up with trauma and chaos for the people we serve. Our responsible approach to budgeting has moved us away from the days of lurching from crisis to crisis, and instead is producing better outcomes and a brighter future for Illinois.

You, the majority of the General Assembly, are succeeding. You, the majority of the people of Illinois who elected the General Assembly, the Constitutional officers, and me, are succeeding. Together, we've slogged through the tough times and are making the responsible decisions for our future.

In the first year of the pandemic, we focused on meeting the core needs of our state's residents, like healthcare, housing, and food — and we balanced the budget. The next year, when federal relief came, we distributed vaccines and invested in recovery for our people and our businesses — and we responsibly balanced our budget. When the economy began to recover, we paid off overdue debts, improved our long term fiscal outlook, and gave tax relief to every Illinoisan — and we balanced the budget. At every turn, a majority of the General Assembly embraced the necessary fiscal stabilization measures to set us on the right path. You returned dollars to taxpayers, and you made prudent, transformative investments for Illinois' future.

## **Smart Start Illinois Early Childhood Education Plan**

Today, I ask you to partner with me once again — this time on the long-term investment that has the greatest return for taxpayers with the most positive social and economic impact I have ever come to you with.

It's called Smart Start Illinois, and it will make our state the best place in the nation to raise young children. Smart Start is comprised of four elements: pre-K, childcare, early

intervention, and home visiting. It also makes our existing programs more equitable, giving moderate income families greater access to quality programs, and investing in an early childhood workforce made up largely of women and people of color.

Smart Start Pre-K is a four year plan that will allow access to pre-school for every three and four year old in Illinois. It will increase our funding for the Early Childhood Block Grant program this year by \$75 million. That's \$179 million more than when I took office.

Smart Start Pre-K will provide new center-based and school-based classrooms, improve quality across the board, attract new professionals to the field, and ensure we reach our most vulnerable. In the first year alone, 5,000 more seats will be available for children across the state.

Of course, adding preschool seats only works if you have the staff to support them. That's where the Early Childhood ACE Scholarship program comes in. Last year with the legislative leadership of Senator Cristina Pacione-Zayas, we began investing in community colleges and universities to build a pipeline of early childhood educators. Already nearly 1500 people are on a path to get up-skilled, and I propose to continue providing this opportunity for the next four years.

Next, Childcare. Working parents need more quality childcare options. The broader shortage of labor we are seeing across the state right now can't be addressed without growing the availability of childcare for working families. But Illinois' current childcare assistance program is based on unreliable and unpredictable funding that makes it hard for providers to invest in their workers or to grow. The current system is based on attendance in a given month, which as all parents know fluctuates if kids are sick or parents' work status changes. When attendance falls under a certain minimum level in a month, the provider's reimbursement rate for that month gets cut even though their fixed costs for providing services that month don't change. As any small business owner knows, that causes tremendous uncertainty for the future. Going forward, that's going to change. So I propose Smart Start Workforce Compensation Contracts to move us towards more stable funding to support high-quality programming and competitive wages for caregivers. The contracts will create a more equitable system for child care providers and families alike, and it will require an improved standard of care across the field.

Although we provide childcare assistance for parents who already have jobs, we've never before provided childcare for someone who's unemployed but looking for a job. It's nearly impossible to interview with an employer if you're simultaneously the 24/7 primary caregiver for your family. So, in 2021, we initiated a program that provides three months of childcare for unemployed parents who are engaged in a job search or a

job training program in preparation for a new job. Here with us today is Itanzia Dawson — one of those parents. Our new childcare assistance for job seekers gave Itanzia the opportunity to go back to school — and now, she has a new career as a teacher's aide at the Carole Robertson Center for Learning in Little Village on the West Side of Chicago. Let's recognize Itanzia for her hard work and commitment to building a better life for her family.

From Chicago to Peoria to Marion, this transformative new program is putting industrious parents like Itanzia to work. Smart Start Childcare makes this program permanent.

Too many families can't access early childhood programs at all because they live in an early childhood desert where no providers or available spots exist within a reasonable radius of their home or work. Smart Start Illinois will allocate \$100 million of new capital to double the Rebuild Illinois investment already helping providers build new and expand existing facilities. This program will be the beginning of the end of early childhood deserts in Illinois, and working families will have more and better options for their children.

Third, Smart Start Early Intervention funding will support the essential state program that gives infants and toddlers birth to age three with developmental delays, autism, or other diagnosed medical conditions the services they need, including for speech and language challenges and occupational and physical therapies. For years, these families have suffered from underfunding of Early Intervention services. Not any longer. A \$40 million increase is allocated in the FY24 budget, which will increase rates and allow thousands of children and their families to maintain access to these critical services.

Finally, home visiting in Illinois is an evidence-based program that has a long history of improving maternal and child health, preventing child abuse and neglect, preventing crime and domestic violence, and promoting children's development and readiness to participate in school. We aren't reaching enough families in these vital infant and toddler years, but Smart Start's expanded Home Visiting funding will allow us to help even more families.

Thanks to our stronger fiscal standing, we can afford to do this, and as every provider, teacher, and parent in this state knows, we can't afford to wait.

The research is clear. Smart Start Illinois will save taxpayers \$7 for every one dollar invested and will vault Illinois to national leadership in early childhood development. Enhancing quality early care and education is a win-win solution for re-mobilizing parents in the workforce, enhancing brain development and kindergarten readiness, saving taxpayers money, and increasing economic activity now and in the decades ahead.

## **Historic Education Investments (K-12)**

On a broader scale, our increased investments in education have already been paying off. Last year, Illinois high schoolers notched their highest graduation rate in over a decade — with a notable increase among Black and Hispanic students. Every demographic group in Illinois experienced accelerated growth in both English language arts and math — outpacing pre-pandemic levels. More students took Career and Technical Education or dual credit courses than ever before. And US News and World Report ranked Illinois 6th in the nation for Pre-K to 12 education, and among the top ten most populous states, we're number one.

Compare that to 2018, prior to the implementation of evidence-based funding, when 168 districts in Illinois were funded at levels under 60 percent of adequacy targets. Today, only 2 districts are in that lowest category.

Every year, an international organization based in London evaluates and chooses the world's best schools. In 2022, Chicago's Curie High School, a public school on the Southwest side of Chicago, was one of just five schools in the world to earn this ranking — and it was the only one chosen in North America. By melding great academics with an exceptional arts program, along with individualized mental and social-emotional support, Curie High School students are given the resources they needed to thrive.

I wanted to recognize the commitment of Curie's educators, social workers, counselors and support staff, so I asked Curie High School's Principal Homero Penuelas to join us here today. Principal Penuelas, thank you for setting such a great example of educational growth and showing the excellence Illinois schooling has to offer.

When it comes to K-12 education, we've come a long way, and we still have a long way to go. Which is why I'm proposing we increase our investment in K-12 education by another \$506 million: including \$350 million in EBF, an \$86 million increase in grants for transportation and special education, and an additional \$70 million targeted at educator shortages. My teacher pipeline proposal directs the \$70 million annually over each of the next three years to the 170 school districts with the most acute needs and vacancies. Those districts represent over 80% of the unfilled teaching positions in our state. Filling them will improve the student-teacher ratio for over 871,000 students.

## **Historic Education Investments (Higher Ed)**

When we talk about early childhood and K-12 education, what we're really talking about is preparing them for what comes next, which can be a post-secondary degree or a job. But unless we're making it affordable to attend the institutions and programs that

provide the necessary 21st century degrees and skills, we're not fulfilling on our promise of cradle to career opportunity.

Here with us today is the Mayor of Bloomington, Mboka Mwilambwe. Born the youngest of seven children in the Democratic Republic of Congo, Mboka came to the United States in 1989 to pursue a college education. And thanks to financial assistance from ISU, Mboka did that right here in Illinois, graduating from with a bachelor's degree in mathematics and then a master's in education. He became a U.S. citizen in 2008, and after a career as a college administrator, Mboka was elected Mayor of Bloomington — the first African American ever to hold that position.

Seated next to him is Jaichan Tyrique Smith from Chicago who is currently a junior at University of Illinois-Springfield, majoring in psychology with a minor in child advocacy studies. He plans to pursue a career as a child clinical psychologist so he can help the next generation of young Illinoisans. In Jaichan's words, he could not have attended college without the MAP Grant program.

Mboka and Jaichan, you represent the promise of what college affordability can do for someone's future, and how our state benefits from it. Your success is our success. Please stand so we can recognize you both.

I am determined to make sure that every person in Illinois has that same opportunity.

When I first took office, our state was losing high school graduates to other states because Illinois state government had cut funding for higher education and had fallen behind other states in providing financial support for students. Think about that for a moment: we were losing our brightest young people to other state universities because we weren't providing enough students with scholarships or providing a large enough award, so other states were simply doing what was in their own best interests by stealing our best economic assets — our brightest minds. And we know that when students leave their home state for college, 70% of them never come back.

I set out to change that, and working with the majority in the General Assembly, that's exactly what we did. This year, every single student who is eligible for a MAP grant now gets one, and we are providing larger scholarships than ever before. While other states battle dwindling enrollment numbers, our public universities are seeing extraordinary growth. For the second year in a row, freshman enrollment at our state universities has increased substantially — and at a much faster rate than the rest of the nation.

But we can do more.



With a \$100 million increase to MAP, we can make history. Together with Pell grants, virtually everyone at or below median income in Illinois can go to community college tuition-free. That means higher wages and better jobs in healthcare, IT, construction management, manufacturing, accounting, and much more.

For decades we neglected direct investments in our state universities and community colleges. I propose we raise our direct investment in them by \$100 million — the largest increase in more than two decades. This is yet another way to make college more affordable.

After years of decline, we're seeing growth across higher education in Illinois that's well above the national average. This is our moment to take it all to the next level.

## **Economic Growth**

Just a few weeks ago, Illinois was named the number one state in our region for workforce development. That's because we're making the necessary investments in job training. Let's hold onto that title by investing another \$25 million into Illinois Works for diverse hiring in the trades, \$10 million for high school vocational training for the electric vehicle workforce, \$1 million for data center operator training, and \$20 million in grants to recruit, train, and rapidly upskill workers for job openings at Illinois companies.

And we're going to need every one of those skilled workers and many more, because as of today, we have more than 81,000 more job openings in Illinois than we have skilled workers to fill them. And our economy and our industries are continuing to grow.

Capital investments in Illinois through EDGE agreements nearly tripled since before the pandemic — from \$348 million in 2019 to \$1 billion in 2022. And the number of new jobs created by EDGE has jumped nearly 60 percent.

The data center industry is booming in Illinois — creating more than 8,000 jobs just since the passage of our bipartisan Data Center Tax Credit in 2019. Since then, Illinois has become the second largest data center market in the United States, and the fifth largest in the world. And our expansion of clean energy production under CEJA is expected to feed our data center growth for years to come.

Thanks to our Film Tax Credit, TV and film production revenue in Illinois reached a record high last year of almost \$700 million, including \$400 million in wages paid and more than 15,400 jobs.

Cannabis legalization has created more than 30,000 jobs since 2020, and Illinois is home to the country's most diverse cannabis industry and some of the largest companies.

From Kellogg and 4Front to Ferrero and Tyson to Rivian and Lion Electric, large businesses are moving to and expanding in Illinois.

So too are small businesses. After a successful first round of grants, we are adding an additional \$20 million to our Rebuild Illinois Downtowns and Main Streets Capital Program to spruce up and modernize central business districts all across Illinois so small businesses will thrive. To make it easier to do business in Illinois, we are creating a "one-stop business portal" to help small businesses and aspiring entrepreneurs figure out what they need to do to start and grow a business, get permits and win business with state government. And with equity as a guiding principle, we are providing \$10 million in assistance for minority-owned businesses who plan to expand in Illinois. There's more to do, but we're ensuring that Illinois is open for business.

## **Public Safety and Violence Prevention**

But we need to be safe in our businesses and our homes. So we've beefed up support for law enforcement to reduce crime. In 2022, Illinois State Police's Metropolitan Enforcement Groups and Drug Task Forces across the state seized 679 firearms and over 13 tons of drugs including multiple major interdictions of deadly fentanyl, and 1,942 individuals involved in crimes were arrested. With increased patrols and technology, ISP cut the number of homicides on Chicago area expressways by 88% and shootings dropped nearly in half. That's real progress, and this year's budget continues funding the hiring of additional troopers and upgrading the tools to catch perpetrators.

## **Rebuilding our Social Services**

Hand in hand with public safety are the human services necessary for people most in need. Over the last decade, human services in Illinois were challenged in two ways: first, by massive budget cuts, and then, by the pandemic. Among the areas most in need has been behavioral health services. In so many ways, the pandemic exposed the cracks in this system — leaving too many to deal with crises without any help.

We've looked at ways both big and small to address these needs.

Today in Illinois there is no single, consistent front door for young people or for families to walk through if they need behavioral health care. There is no central website that parents can search or phone number to call. Instead, they are left to navigate a confusing and overlapping multiple agency bureaucracy on their own.

That's going to change. The FY24 budget invests \$10 million to create our first care portal and resource referral tools for families seeking care. They can learn about the resources available to them and be matched with what meets their needs best, all in one place.

Nearly a year ago, I launched the Children's Behavioral Health Transformation Initiative to evaluate and redesign the delivery of behavioral health services for children and adolescents throughout our state. This initiative recognizes that while DCFS and DHS are on the frontlines of caring for our most vulnerable children, it will take a whole of government, inter-agency approach to truly provide the care our children deserve.

In alignment with the initiative's recommendations, we are investing another \$10 million towards a two-year expansion of the Comprehensive Community Based Youth Services program focused on youth aged 11 to 17 who are at risk of involvement in the child welfare system or the juvenile justice system. This funding will expand 24/7 services to youth — including assessments, crisis stabilization, and housing.

This fiscal year, for the first time in a decade, DHS began selecting children from the PUNS waiting list, a database that registers individuals with developmental disabilities, to receive home and community-based care. This work must continue. Over the next fiscal year, DHS plans to offer services to an additional 500 children on the list. This will provide these children and their families access to needed services and supports while decreasing the State's waitlist for services.

One of the most difficult challenges we face right now in the field of social and mental health services are the critical worker shortages we are seeing across the country. Let me be clear: there is no bigger challenge in this arena than the workforce problem. And we are competing with 49 other states to try and attract people to these jobs here in Illinois. Providing more competitive wages to develop and support our workforce is an absolute necessity.

For the last several years, I have directed state funds towards supporting wage increases for our private sector provider partners including those who work with the Department of Children and Family Services; that continues in this budget proposal. And an additional \$120 million in the FY24 budget for the Department of Human Services allows us to continue rate increases to make Illinois more competitive in the market for workers who serve people with developmental disabilities.

The investments we've made in social service agencies over the past four years and that we are proposing for the coming year will finally have reversed the hollowing out that occurred in human services under the previous administration if we are able to hire up enough staff in this tight labor market. We are cautiously optimistic that we can do so.

## **Fighting Poverty and Ending Homelessness**

This entire budget proposal rests on our shared goal: to give Illinois families the support and opportunities for the big building blocks of a good life: food access, housing, and healthcare. Certainly most people won't need to rely on government for those things. But we will have failed everyone in Illinois if we don't place a higher priority on tackling poverty — because fewer people living in financial distress means a better quality of life for everyone in our state.

So, this budget proposes increasing Temporary Assistance for Needy Families — TANF — by \$50 million so our families have more help to cover basic necessities like transportation, electricity, and food.

We also need to recognize that it does no good to provide a family with more money to purchase food if they have no local grocery store to shop at.

Government at the state and local level has tried hard to attract big retail food chains to neighborhoods that need them with tax incentives and flashy ribbon cutting ceremonies.

But after the cameras leave, often so do the commercial chains — leaving poorer rural and urban communities high and dry. It's time we return to a tried and true model — one where those communities are served by independent, local grocery stores that sell food grown by Illinois farmers.

This budget includes a first of its kind investment of \$20 million to launch the Illinois Grocery Initiative, assisting municipalities and independent grocers to open or expand grocery stores in underserved rural towns and urban neighborhoods — with an additional \$2 million going towards purchasing healthy, nutritious food from Illinois farmers.

When you're addressing poverty, hand in hand with food to eat is a place to call home. In Illinois, over 120,000 people experience homelessness annually and over 76,000 children face doubled up homelessness living in overcrowded shared housing. In Illinois, Black people are eight times more likely to experience homelessness than white people, but the faces of Illinoisans with no home to go to are not homogenous...they include single parents with infants and toddlers, 6th graders trying to complete their homework using toilets as a desk in temporary shared housing, and LGBTQ+ high schoolers who were kicked out of their homes by their parents. Homelessness is not an identity, it's a set of circumstances.

Today, I am proud to unveil Home Illinois, a plan with a goal to invest \$50 million this year into prevention, crisis response, housing units, and staffing.

To see success, look no further than Rockford, Illinois.

Working in partnership with community organizers, judges, and housing authorities, Mayor Tom McNamara and the City of Rockford have engaged in successfully assisting homeless residents in their transition to apartments and helping struggling families avoid eviction from their homes.

The state should help other communities do the same — mobilizing every agency and every resource at our disposal, so no Illinoisan is without a home.

## **Expanding Reproductive Healthcare**

Some of the most marginalized people in our society are women, especially women of color, who earn the least and take on some of the greatest societal burdens. When conservatives on the Supreme Court overturned *Roe v. Wade*, they didn't strip the right to an abortion from wealthy women, they took it from the most vulnerable women.

I won't accept that for the women of Illinois, and neither do the majority of the people of Illinois. That's why, last month, we expanded our pool of abortion providers and eliminated barriers to access: allowing birth centers to provide all reproductive care, eliminating copays for birth control and abortive medications.

Since *Roe* was overturned, all the states around us have taken away reproductive freedom from their residents, so Illinois healthcare providers are seeing triple the demand, with desperate patients showing up at the crack of dawn every day.

That's why we are establishing a Reproductive Health Public Navigation Hotline, so patients can call ahead for a risk assessment and find the services that will meet their needs. From transportation and lodging to insurance coverage options, the hotline will help patients traverse a complex and overwhelmed system. To address the shortage of reproductive healthcare workers, we are providing \$5 million toward learning collaboratives for worker training.

Let's not pull punches — this is the result of a national conservative crusade to legislate against the most intimate matters of a woman's basic healthcare. I'm sure there are some elected officials who would like us to stop talking about abortion.

Well, too bad.

There are women in this country right now who are facing untold mental and physical anguish because of the fall of *Roe v. Wade*. Here in Illinois, women know their rights

are protected, but that doesn't take away our obligation as Americans to speak up for the rest of the nation.

## **Strengthening Public Health Infrastructure**

In the past few years, we saw the critical role that our public health infrastructure plays in our residents' wellbeing. No one was prepared for a disease that took more than 36,000 Illinoisans' lives in 30 months and affected hundreds of thousands of others. And every responsible public health expert will tell you that the next pandemic will not take another 100 years to arrive. We must act on the lessons from COVID and build a more robust state and local public health infrastructure so we are prepared for whatever comes our way.

We must invest \$45 million in upgrading our Department of Public Health's IT for Illinois' National Electronic Disease Surveillance system and Long-Term Care systems — which are tools states use to monitor the spread of disease, prevent outbreaks, and protect our most vulnerable residents. And we'll couple that with an \$8.5 million investment to assist public health professionals identifying and projecting the potential impact of new and emerging diseases on the horizon. If COVID-19 taught us anything, we must invest in the tools to quickly and aggressively contain their spread.

Every day I've held this office since the outbreak of COVID, I think about the healthcare workers who risked their lives to save others — going home but needing to keep their distance from their spouses, parents or children, battling exhaustion and burnout, and too often having to deliver the worst possible news despite their best efforts. Our healthcare workers are heroes — and though there is never enough we can do to repay them for their sacrifice, I propose we make their lives just a little bit easier by reducing the debt burden they face.

That's why the FY24 budget includes \$3 million for Healthcare Worker Loan Repayment and Scholarship programs — alongside a \$25 million rate increase for practitioners to broaden access to critical healthcare services, from an obstetrician for a pregnant woman to a behavioral health specialist for a struggling teen.

Delivering what matters to Illinois residents and their families is what defines good governance. We've all been asked to represent our constituents with tenacity and honor. And to speak up when our common American values are challenged.

Our history is a series of stops and starts, of ups and downs, of our ancestors getting it tragically wrong and courageously right. The only thing we can hope for in this work is that the values we attach our names to will make our grandchildren proud.

After all, this is the Land of Lincoln. We have a responsibility to that legacy.

As Elie Wiesel said, “We must always take sides. Neutrality helps the oppressor, never the victim. Silence encourages the tormentor, never the tormented.”

With that in mind, I want to take sides on something I feel obligated to speak out about, especially given the history of anti-Semitism and discrimination suffered by my ancestors and that persists for so many others today.

There is a virulent strain of nationalism plaguing our nation, led by demagogues who are pushing censorship, with a particular attack right now on school board members and library trustees. It’s an ideological battle by the right wing, hiding behind a claim that they would protect our children — but whose real intention is to marginalize people and ideas they don’t like. This has been done in the past, and it doesn’t stop with just snuffing out ideas.

This afternoon I’ve laid out a budget agenda that does everything possible to invest in the education of our children. Yet it’s all meaningless if we become a nation that bans books from school libraries about racism suffered by Roberto Clemente and Hank Aaron, and tells kids they can’t talk about being gay, and signals to Black and Brown people and Asian Americans and Jews and Muslims that our authentic stories can’t be told.

I’m the father of two children. I care a great deal about their education. Like every good parent, I want to be involved in what they learn. I’m also a proud American. Our nation has a great history, and much to be proud of. I want my children to learn that history. But I don’t want them to be lied to. I want them to learn our true history, warts and all. Illinois’ young people shouldn’t be kept from learning about the realities of our world. I want them to become critical thinkers, exposed to ideas that they disagree with, proud of what our nation has overcome, and thoughtful about what comes next.

Here in Illinois, we don’t hide from the truth, we embrace it. That’s what makes us strong.

I want to conclude today with sharing a story of someone who exemplifies the tenacity of our people here in the Prairie State.

In 1951, at the age of 18, Joyce DeFauw arrived on Northern Illinois University’s campus to pursue a degree in economics. But life had other plans. She met her husband, Don Freeman Sr. and left NIU to raise a family.

Seven decades later — nine children, and dozens of grandchildren and great-grandchildren later — Joyce decided she could focus on herself again, and she re-enrolled in college to finish her degree. Once again, life had other plans...a once-in-a-generation pandemic. But that didn't deter her. She finished her classes on a laptop given to her as a gift — and just two months ago, at age 90, Joyce walked across the stage to receive her Bachelor of General Studies, becoming the oldest person in history to graduate from NIU.

Joyce's story is a classic Illinois tale. We are a stubborn people — we persevere no matter the challenge. We welcome opportunity for improvement. And when we rise, we rise together.

I see it in Mboka Mwilambwe who received a tuition waiver from this welcoming state and has returned it tenfold as Bloomington's Mayor, and in Jaichan Tyrique Smith, who is on his way to becoming a child clinical psychologist. I see it in Itanzia Dawson, a mom determined to provide a better life for her family and who now educates the children of Little Village. I see it in Anne Tyree, who supports mental health patients and their families who are going through the same thing she has. I see it in neighbors who helped each other through the pandemic, in small businesses contributing to their communities' success, in the determination of our young people to make positive change for our state and nation.

We are a people with enough empathy to be kind to one another, enough grit to persevere, and just enough confidence to believe we can make a difference in this world. That's the Illinois that I know. That's the Illinois we all represent.

Thank you. God bless the great state of Illinois and the United States of America.