

Abe Uchitelle
Ulster County Legislator- District 5
Majority Leader of the Democratic Caucus

Good evening, colleagues, staff, and residents of Ulster County.

As we continue our work together in this legislative session, it's important to reflect on what we've accomplished as a body and to share our collective vision for the work ahead.

But before I speak about our current initiatives, I want to acknowledge that we gather on land where the Lenape and Munsee peoples lived here for countless generations before European settlement. Rather than just a passing land acknowledgement, I want to acknowledge some of their teachings that may guide our work today. The Lenape understood the world through the Medicine Wheel – a symbol that represents balance across four dimensions: physical needs, emotional wellbeing, mental clarity, and spiritual connection.

The concept of a wheel, or a cycle, is present in most cultures, and can serve as an important guide on the pathway to completeness and integrity. The Medicine Wheel teaches us that true community health requires attention to all these aspects simultaneously and that progress moves in cycles requiring both patience and persistence.

As we address the challenges of today in Ulster County, this indigenous wisdom offers valuable guidance. The Medicine Wheel reminds us that our policies must consider multiple perspectives and that all aspects of community life are interconnected. When we invest in housing, mental health, and emergency services, we're acknowledging this interconnection – that physical safety, emotional wellbeing, and community stability cannot be separated from one another.

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This past year, we've taken real action on issues that matter to Ulster County residents. Instead of just talking about problems, we've funded solutions: breaking ground on new housing, expanding mental health services, and strengthening our emergency response capabilities. These aren't abstract achievements – they directly improve the lives of our neighbors.

One of our most significant achievements is the creation of a new county-run mental health facility. After years of disinvestment and privatization of mental health services, we're establishing essential services under county management. We're providing the physical space to house these services, demonstrating our commitment to community care through direct county involvement.

Our housing initiatives represent another area where we've made meaningful progress. I want to specifically acknowledge and thank the Minority Leader for cosponsoring, along with my colleague Eric Stewart, the resolution that created our eviction defense program. This program exemplifies what we can accomplish when we work across party lines—providing rental assistance to keep tenants in their homes, legal representation when they need it most, and case management to address underlying challenges.

Beyond keeping people from being displaced, we've also focused on expanding housing inventory through our Housing Action Fund. In its first year, we successfully funded five affordable housing projects throughout Ulster County, and we've already opened applications for the next round of funding. This fund represents a true collaboration between the Legislature and the County Executive's office. I want to applaud the County Executive for helping co-create this program—a testament to

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what government can achieve when different branches work together with common purpose.

We're also making critical investments in emergency services, including the construction of a new Emergency Operations Center. This project obviously won't be without its challenges or critics. It's easy to sit on the sidelines and say it's too expensive or question our approach. But leadership means making difficult decisions and seeing them through—not just offering criticism.

In an era of climate change bringing unprecedented floods, fires, and storms to our region, emergency preparedness isn't just important—it's imperative. The safety of our residents is not a place for half-measures. As the majority party, we have a responsibility to bring essential projects like this across the finish line, especially when they directly impact public safety.

I want to emphasize that our investments in housing and mental health services represent more than just local progress. These initiatives are Ulster County's contribution to addressing deeply entrenched systemic challenges facing communities across our nation. The housing crisis and mental health crisis aren't unique to our county—they're national emergencies requiring bold local solutions.

When we fund affordable housing projects and create eviction prevention programs, we're not just helping Ulster County residents—we're demonstrating what's possible when local government steps up where other levels of government have fallen short. When we bring mental health services back in-house and prioritize community care, we're creating a model that other counties can look to.

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This is the power of local government in 2025—to be laboratories of democracy where we can develop, test, and implement solutions to our most pressing national challenges. While we focus on delivering for Ulster County residents, we should take pride in knowing our work here contributes to a broader movement of communities finding new ways to serve residents.

While we're proud of our innovative approaches to housing and mental health, we must also address what I'll call 'Ulster County classics' – those persistent challenges that have been with us for years, sometimes decades. Issues like siting a landfill or determining the future of the undesignated section of the railroad corridor.

Let's be honest – these aren't the issues most of us campaigned on. But leadership isn't just about choosing the most appealing challenges. It's about facing the difficult realities before us.

These Ulster County classics aren't going away on their own. We can't simply kick these cans further down the road. Guess what? We are down the road. The can has reached us.

What distinguishes this legislature must be our willingness to tackle both the exciting new initiatives AND these longstanding challenges that demand resolution. Our constituents expect nothing less than for us to make the tough calls, even when they're unpopular or complex.

Every initiative I've described—from mental health services to housing programs to emergency preparedness—depends on one critical resource: our dedicated county workforce. At a time when we've witnessed the horrifying mass dismissals of public servants at the federal level under

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the new Republican administration, we must send a clear message about how we value our workforce here in Ulster County.

The reality is simple—our county employees are significantly underpaid for the essential services they provide to our community. While we're committed to addressing this challenge in the most responsible way possible, urgent action is needed. I know that the County Executive's team is already engaged in talks with union leadership, and I call on all those involved to ensure that 2025 is the year that we begin to appropriately compensate the county workforce.

This isn't just about fairness to our employees—though that alone would be reason enough. It's about recognizing that the quality of services we provide depends directly on our ability to attract and retain skilled, dedicated public servants.

As we look to the year ahead, let's draw inspiration from the Medicine Wheel's teachings of balance, interconnection, and holistic thinking. Let's continue to demonstrate that local government can be a force for positive change when guided by compassion, collaboration, and a focus on tangible results.

Thank you, and I look forward to our continued work together.