

May 28, 2024

REPORT NO. 2024-15

STATE OF THE COUNTY ADDRESS

Mr. Chairman, Vice Chairman, County Board Supervisors, Staff, Youth in Governance, and distinguished guests and citizens:

This marks my 10th State of the County address. Time is a thief, and I am deeply honored and incredibly fortunate to have the opportunity to speak before you, the County Board, and our citizens.

Most State of the County addresses... let's face it- talk about successes and challenges. This year, however, I will take a different approach. I will begin with some important recognitions and then we're going to respect the past by focusing on the future, because we are at a crossroads. And you, the 88th County Board, must address these critical issues, whether we like it or not.

The County Impact Awards are a chance for me to utilize my pulpit to recognize those citizens who, despite adversity, are going about on a daily basis making our County— plain and simple— *better*.

The first recipient I am proud to acknowledge is Nicole LaForge. In the face of unimaginable loss, Nicole has shown extraordinary strength and compassion, transforming her grief into a mission of hope and healing for our community. In the wake of her husband, Deputy Joshua LaForge's untimely passing from a heart attack last Fourth of July, Nicole chose to channel her sorrow into action, leading a heart health initiative within the Racine County Sheriff's Office. This initiative provides heart CT scans for Racine County Sheriff's Deputies and their spouses, offering a proactive step in heart health awareness and prevention.

Through this initiative, 99 individuals have been screened, with 74 requiring lifestyle recommendations. 6 cardiology referrals were made, 3 of which needed immediate follow-up. This screening has, without a doubt, impacted all 6 individuals' health care journeys, and likely saved their lives.

Joshua LaForge was more than a dedicated Deputy; he was a husband, a father of three, a son, a brother, an uncle, a coworker, and a friend. His sudden passing was a shock to his family and friends because he appeared to be the epitome of health. Heart issues can be silent, and it's crucial to be aware of not only the warning signs but also how to care for your heart every day. Sometimes, those warning signs never present themselves.

Nicole's work ensures that our community has the tools and knowledge to combat heart disease effectively, addressing a critical issue as heart disease remains a leading cause of death for both men and women in the United States.

As I present this award, inscribed with the quote "Helping mend a broken heart by helping those still beating," we are reminded of Nicole's incredible resilience and love. Her advocacy for heart health demonstrates how one person's dedication can inspire and protect an entire community. Nicole, your work has touched countless lives, and today, we stand with you in solidarity and gratitude. Thank you for your tireless efforts and for showing us all the power of love and determination in making a difference.

We extend our deepest gratitude to Deputy LaForge and his family for their dedication and service. Their commitment to the well-being of our community continues to inspire meaningful change.

The second recipients are two people we all know. I could stand here for the next 30 minutes and tell you how much they love Racine County and all of their dedication to making it better, but in the interest of brevity I won't do that, but I will say on a personal level, I get to call them great friends who support me but also tell me when I am full of you know what... These two

individuals have been public servants for years and are looked up to by many. The Impact Award goes to by official title as Chairman Emeritus Tom Roanhouse and Chairman Emeritus Bob Miller whose service to the people of Racine County may go unnoticed by many, but their impact will and does have a ripple effect for years & years to come. Bob & Tom thank you for your service and please let's recognize all three recipients one more time.

Fortunately, this 88th Racine County Board has an incredible opportunity to make a difference and in accordance will have to make some incredibly tough decisions about the future of Racine County. Last year I mentioned that our financial "check engine light" was on. Despite being 72 out of 72 counties in per capita spending, we have managed our finances diligently over the last 20 years. Over the last decade, we have navigated a multitude of challenges and changes: a natural disaster, unprecedented economic development, a pandemic, historical inflation, a complete overhaul of juvenile justice, a 500% increase in mental health services, and an ongoing fentanyl crisis that continues to devastate our County, State, and Nation. Additionally, we have implemented body cameras, strengthened cybersecurity measures, and faced civil unrest. We have also consolidated services and absorbed costs internally for projects like parking lots and culverts. Our county is transparent and fiscally responsible—if I'm being honest, almost to a fault. This mindset of being transparent and bold in front of the community has led to many heavy lifts for our leaders, and the community, is something I know our property taxpayers appreciate. We face significant and necessary, yet hopeful, challenges ahead.

First, the fentanyl crisis. The fact is we as a County are fighting like hell to quell this scourge, yet fentanyl is wreaking havoc in our community. We need resources to stop this once and for all. We need to keep this from our youth, schools, from reaching our County— period.

Second, it is imperative that we allocate more resources to our Veterans. With the growing number of Veterans in need, we have a duty to ensure they can access the benefits they have rightfully earned. This is not just a priority; it is a fundamental obligation— period.

Next, the world is currently facing a mental health pandemic. Projections indicate that by 2040, one in two people worldwide will be affected by mental health challenges. For Racine County, this means 100,000 residents. Name another issue with such widespread impact and the potential for such devastating consequences.

Last year, I highlighted the issue of our antiquated 9-1-1 system, which is rapidly becoming obsolete. Investing in state-of-the-art technology for our residents is a necessity, not a luxury. In addition to upgrading our 9-1-1 system, we face a critical situation with our Sheriff Substation, which houses our 9-1-1 department. This building, constructed over 50 years ago, will require significant updates and repairs over the next few years, costing millions of dollars.

Our Marina also needs major repairs and upgrades. The DNR has mandated that we fix the fueling stations, upgrade to ADA compliance, and install new piers to maximize future revenue.

With all these pressing issues in mind, it begs the question: what *is* the State of the County?

We are at a crossroads. Over the last 10 years we have made prudent, smart, and brave decisions; decisions that have benefited many. Let me take a moment to compare us to Kenosha County and the City of Racine. As you can see, we operate efficiently, and according to state data, we rank 1-2-3 in service delivery success in our Human Services department. Consider the example of two identical job descriptions, one from Kenosha County and one from the City of Racine. Despite offering comparable compensation, our employees chose to stay with the County, citing our superior work culture. This achievement is thanks to the continuous efforts of HR Director Sarah Street and her staff, who have made our workplace environment one of choice. While we are not perfect, we have come a long way, and I can confidently say that we take our work seriously, but we don't take ourselves too seriously. We manage to maintain a fun work environment, which is something I am particularly proud of.

For the last 24 months, I have focused on laying the groundwork for the unprecedented challenges we face this summer. 10 years ago, we faced challenges that seemed unimaginable—challenges that many counties, maybe most, might put their head in the sand or look the other way. But we don't do that— and we *can't* do that. Some local government boards have what they call “summer hours.” Well, we have summer hours too_ it's called working harder for the greater good— because that's what we're called to do.

I am asking you to rise up, look at ourselves and each other in the eye, and address these challenges now. As JFK said, “The time to repair the roof is when the sun is shining.” We cannot wait until the rain is upon us, and I must say—there may already be a slight drizzle.

I come before you, the County Board, not with all the answers, but to ask for your collaboration in addressing these challenges: mental health, fentanyl, veterans' support, and funding for our mental health center, sheriff substation, and marina. If we do nothing, it may seem easy at first, but in the long run, our residents will bear the consequences of our indecision. Indecision is what I fear most, it is our enemy that we must defeat. We, as a County, in my mind, have never been indecisive, and we never will be.

In conclusion, I ask you to engage this summer like never before. Show up, prepare, research, ask tough questions (though remember, if you don't like the answer, don't ask the question—just kidding). Differences of opinion are okay; don't take it personally. At the end of the day, we are all here to do better and be better. More importantly, we have the opportunity to show how local government can tackle tough issues and lead by example.

We will have a light shining on us like never before; I relish that, and I hope you do, as well. This summer and fall, we have some heavy lifts. Again, I know together we collectively will do what is best for the future.

Together, we can overcome these challenges. Let us rise to the occasion and show our community what we are capable of achieving. Thank you. May God bless you and may God bless Racine County.