

Governor Joe Manchin's State of the State Address January 10, 2007

Mr. President, Mr. Speaker, Members of the Board of Public Works, Justices of the Supreme Court of Appeals, Members of the Legislature, Distinguished Guests, my wife Gayle, and my fellow West Virginians:

At this time last year, we were mourning the recent deaths of our courageous and dedicated Sago miners – and hoping for the recovery of our lone survivor Randal McCloy, Jr. Never could we have imagined that our suffering as a mining state was only just beginning. As you know, one short week later we were once again left to pray for men trapped in a deep mine not long after they had kissed their families goodbye and headed off to work. And once again, we would sadly discover that their safe return was not meant to be.

I believe we all learned a great deal from those dark days – we learned about our state, we learned about our people and, most importantly, we learned that when it comes to the safety of our mine workers, business as usual is simply not good enough.

As a result, we worked together to pass in one historic day during last year's legislative session, a mine safety bill that would lead the way for the first *national* mine safety legislation to come out of Congress in over 25 years. And now, every miner in every state can be confident that if the worst should occur, there are practices being put in place to aid in their survival.

But as proud as I am of that legislation, it was only the beginning of our state's commitment to our lost miners and their families – and to the miners who continue to strap on their boots and go to work in our mines every day. We must never forget that they are not only providing for their families, they are providing a valuable service for our country by ensuring that our nation has the energy it needs to succeed.

While much has been accomplished over the last 12 months to better protect these hard-working West Virginians, with 24 mining-related deaths recorded in our state in 2006 it is clear that there is still much more left to do.

As a result of the hard work of our Office of Miners' Health, Safety and Training, our Mine Safety Technology Task Force and my special advisor on the Sago and Aracoma investigations, Davitt McAteer and his team, I bring to you this session proposals that will not only better protect the miners and families of today but also keep our promise to the families of our lost miners that their loved ones did not die in vain.

First, the Director of the Office of Miners' Health, Safety and Training has recently doubled the state's mine rescue capabilities by designating approximately \$500,000 towards: establishing and equipping a new mine rescue station in the northern part of the state; establishing and

equipping two additional state mine rescue teams; and, purchasing a personnel trailer and associated resources for use by state mine rescue teams when called to an emergency.

I am also directing an additional \$4 million to next year's budget for this office which will be used to: hire five additional safety inspectors and nine additional safety instructors; increase mine rescue training time from 50 to 96 hours per year, per team member; offer more competitive salaries to mine inspectors and instructors in order to attract the qualified and capable workers needed to perform these duties; increase salaries of existing instructors and inspectors so that we can retain our best and brightest; purchase additional mine rescue equipment; and, continue the abandoned mine mapping project.

Likewise, the regulatory authority given to our inspectors needs to be updated. At times, state officials may observe individual violations at a facility that could collectively create an imminent danger. Unfortunately, our current response to these situations is limited by existing law. That is why, I am seeking legislation that would authorize the Director of the Office of Miners' Health, Safety and Training to shut down mines and levy appropriate penalties against repeat offenders where multiple violations continue to exist.

I am also pushing to better coordinate our inspection and other enforcement activities with the federal government. While we consistently communicate with the federal government and the Mine Safety and Health Administration (MSHA) at many levels, we are legally barred from communicating with one another on our inspection schedules and findings. It makes no sense for the State of West Virginia to be performing similar mine inspection duties as the federal government, yet be barred from discussing them with one another.

Additionally, the tragedies of the past 12 months have demonstrated certain deficiencies in our safety regulations – deficiencies that must be corrected. The explosion at Sago, as well as similar tragedies in other mining states, have raised significant concerns about the use of alternative seals in underground mines – concerns that prompted our Office of Miners' Health, Safety and Training, and then the federal government, to place a moratorium on the use of these alternative seals. Based on extensive research, I will now ask you to make this moratorium permanent, along with daily monitoring and extensive remediation requirements for existing sealed off areas.

Another common-sense approach we can take to protect miners, such as those at Aracoma, against the hazards of explosions or fires is to modify the manner in which we review and approve the use of "belt air" to ventilate our coal mines. The use of the belt-way to ventilate a mine could, in certain situations, exacerbate the hazards caused by a fire breaking out along the conveyor belt. Congress has recognized the dangers inherent in this practice and has created a panel to study the utilization of belt air. However, here in West Virginia, I believe we must do more and we should not wait. Accordingly, pending the completion of the federal government's study, the use of belt air in West Virginia's mines will no longer be given a blanket approval. Instead, each will go through an extensive review process and be approved by the Office of Miners' Health, Safety and Training on a case-by-case basis with input from the Board of Coal Mine Health and Safety.

Once fully implemented, these plans and proposals, coupled with other initiatives such as the continuation of the International Mining Health and Safety Symposium that will be hosted by Wheeling Jesuit University in April, will go a long way toward meeting our goal of making West Virginia the safest mining state in the nation.

However, while we have certainly been focused on improving mine safety, this year has also taught me that we can't, and shouldn't, take the safety of *any* of our West Virginia workplaces for granted.

First, I want to acknowledge the work of our Division of Homeland Security and Emergency Management. This division recently received the Disaster Recovery Award given by the All-Hazards Consortium and its grants monitoring system was named a "Best Practice" by the National Criminal Justice Association.

The division has also been collaborating closely with Verizon on several important emergency response projects. The first is expanding our Mine and Industrial Accident Rapid Response System to identify emergency response information for not only every mine but every industrial site in West Virginia. The goal is to store critical information into the system for as many work sites in West Virginia as possible, detailing the closest rescue teams and equipment as well as current mine or industrial site maps.

The second project underway is the development of a system that will allow for the electronic reporting of hazardous chemicals by businesses and industries in West Virginia. By automating this process, first responders including police, firefighters, EMTs and other critical personnel, will have access to the most current information when responding to accidents at Chemical facilities or other locations that store hazardous materials.

And, third, they are working to connect all Emergency Operations Centers in the state through a dedicated network system with video and audio conference calling capability.

Each of these projects will greatly enhance our state's ability to respond to a crisis and to protect our workers, our citizens and our first responders. At this time, I want to ask Stan Cavendish of Verizon to stand and be recognized as these efforts will be made possible through a grant from Verizon totaling \$1.7 million. Thank you, Stan.

We also need to acknowledge tonight the growing safety concern of workforce drug abuse. To highlight the importance of operating a drug free workplace, I am proposing that the Executive Branch of state government lead the way and start to address this issue by adding a drug test requirement to the hiring process for all new Executive Branch employees. For the safety of everyone involved, when hiring a child protective services worker, a daycare center screener, a homeland security employee or even a data entry clerk who has access to citizens' personal information, we must know that we are selecting only drug-free individuals to fill these

important state positions. And I would encourage our other two branches of government, along with our constitutional office holders, to do the same.

Turning attention to the most important people in our lives, our children and grandchildren, we are working to enhance our response to school emergencies - because as national events have sadly demonstrated, we must not only be committed to having safe workplaces, we must be committed to having safe schools.

This system will provide resources during a school emergency that can identify critical information such as school floor plans, locations of hazards and means of access for emergency responders. It will be web-based and give first responders the most vital and current information possible during a crisis.

Also, in an effort to limit the likelihood of such emergencies, I am asking the legislature to dedicate \$10 million towards the creation of a School Access Safety matching grant initiative to help county boards of education better secure and monitor access to our public schools. This initiative, which will be spearheaded by the School Building Authority, will provide funding to local boards for security upgrades, so that when an unknown person approaches a school, the appropriate people know about it and are prepared for it.

I also plan to work closely with our state's teachers on addressing the growing problem of classroom and student bullying. Schools should be places where you enjoy the process of growth and learning; not places of fear and intimidation. For the protection of students, teachers and school service personnel alike, I will do everything possible to make our schools bully-free.

Before going any further, I want to take time tonight to thank our state's veterans and those who are currently serving our country in the armed forces at home and abroad. Last Easter, I had the opportunity to travel to the Middle East to visit with our West Virginia troops stationed in Kuwait, Afghanistan and Iraq. No matter your feelings with regard to the purpose of their deployment, rest assured you can all feel proud of how they represent our state and their dedication to duty. As is the case with the West Virginia National Guard troops which I visited this past Christmas season in New Mexico, currently charged with protecting our country's border. We must never forget that we gather here freely tonight because of the tens of thousands of West Virginia men and women throughout history who have stepped up and answered the call of duty on behalf of our state and our nation.

But while mine safety, workplace safety, school safety and other safety issues have affected us greatly during these last 12 months and certainly deserve our continued attention, they are not the only issues that have defined us as a state this year.

Working together in 2006 with a very responsible legislature we were able to: record the first overall reduction in the growth of state government employment in more than a decade; put

close to \$1 billion towards debt reduction; increase our State Police's ability to get illegal drugs off of our streets; enact one of the toughest sex offender and child abuse and neglect laws in the nation; make health insurance more accessible and affordable; and, receive national recognition, with the assistance of groups such as AARP and the West Virginia Primary Care Association, for having the only state-sponsored call center in the country dedicated to helping seniors understand and enroll in the Medicare Prescription Drug Program.

And because of our recent economic growth as well as our collective commitment to running a Responsible Government, I am pleased to report that the State has a positive financial outlook for 2007 and Fiscal Year 2008.

(GIVE BUDGET BOOKS TO THE SPEAKER AND THE PRESIDENT)

Reviewing our five year budget forecast, while we are projecting challenging times ahead beginning in 2011 due to increases in public employees insurance, Medicaid, corrections spending and inflation, the responsible decisions made in fiscal years 2006 and 2007 have caused conditions to improve over last year's five year forecast. As you can see, positive changes have produced positive results. If we can continue to make good, responsible decisions, we will be able to contain spending growth so that future projected deficits can have minimal impact on taxpayers.

To that end, I am bringing to you recommendations of the cost savings reports my administration commissioned from the nationally recognized consulting firm Public Works. These reports identify areas within state government where millions of dollars of cost savings can be generated over the next five years. In fact, we have already saved more than \$26 million by administratively implementing several of these recommendations.

These savings and many others that we strive to achieve every day, along with our recent economic growth, add up. We have been able to return significant money to state taxpayers' pockets, most recently in the form of our tax modernization efforts. As you know, during November's special session, with the support of the AARP, Council of Churches, AFL-CIO and West Virginia Chamber of Commerce, we took action to cut our food tax in half by 2008; created a low-income family tax credit; doubled the Senior Citizen refundable property tax credit; cut our business franchise tax; and reduced our corporate net income tax.

And, we will be continuing our tax efforts during this regular session as well. For example, we will be proposing several initiatives recommended by the Tax Modernization Workgroup that will promote local autonomy and provide local governments with the tools necessary to enhance fairness and to have more control over their own destiny.

Another aspect of our tax modernization is designed to attract new businesses to this state through a targeted approach, as opposed to the shotgun approach of old. I am proposing an incentive that will provide significant, long-term tax credits to companies that create high-paying, special high tech manufacturing jobs in West Virginia. We must also continue to

modernize our tax system by eliminating elements that only serve as nuisances to our businesses.

And, I will propose a tax credit for the automobile privilege tax on individuals moving into West Virginia. Many people who move into this state, especially in our border counties, fail to register their car here either in an attempt to avoid paying the privilege tax or because of the manner in which we collect the tax. Not only does the State then lose the tax, but our counties lose precious personal property taxes needed for our school systems. Our new program will be designed to ensure that individuals with automobiles in West Virginia will register those cars properly.

Also as part of our Responsible Government efforts, we will once again dedicate a portion of our budget for salary increases and supplements. During my tenure as Governor, we have already put more than \$115 million towards teacher pay raises and supplements, including the first comprehensive teacher pay package in over 15 years, not to mention the \$672 million we have allocated to our Teacher's Retirement Fund, with another \$59 million above and beyond our normal payment schedule for this year. We have done our best to be fair, to be progressive – and to act responsibly. To continue those efforts, this year for our educators, I will be proposing a 2.5 percent across the board pay raise. In addition, we are also taking steps to ensure that no full-time teacher in West Virginia will make less than \$30,000 a year, including our starting teachers. These raises will bring the total amount of new dollars dedicated to our teachers, their benefits and their retirement since I first took office only two years ago to \$877 million. Working with our P-20 Jobs Cabinet, I will also propose an increase in the salary bonus for teachers who earn National Board Certification, the gold standard in measuring teacher quality. I also encourage communities across the state to follow the lead of Wood County's Mid-Ohio Valley Chamber of Commerce. This Chamber consistently matches the state salary bonus for any Wood County teacher that achieves National Board Certification, which I'm sure plays a role in Wood County having at least twice as many National Board Certified teachers as any other county.

And, because I believe that state government when possible should share a portion of the surplus funds generated during good times with its hard-working public employees who helped to make that year a success, I am proposing a 2.5 percent one-time employment incentive payment for our state employees and school service personnel, with a minimum incentive payment of \$600 and a maximum of \$1,200 dollars.

I would also hope that consideration would be given to a pay raise for our hard-working legislators, who have not had an adjustment to their annual salaries since 1994.

My budget also includes an additional \$2.7 million to provide more in-home services to our senior citizens as well as an additional \$1 million for in-home senior meals and \$700,000 for Alzheimer's respite care.

However, as we all know, the best thing that we can do to improve services and salaries and to positively impact our state's budget is to continue to grow our economy. In the last two years, employment in West Virginia has risen by more than 18,000 jobs with approximately \$3.5 billion worth of new business investments being made in our state. This is significant progress, but it is certainly not enough.

First of all, we are at an energy crossroads. The State of West Virginia and the entire nation is much too dependent on foreign oil, which puts all of us at risk.

That is why, as Chairman of the West Virginia Public Energy Authority, I have tasked my fellow members to develop an energy plan for West Virginia that promotes technologies that increase our energy supply, creates new employment opportunities, helps to protect the environment, and, most importantly, makes West Virginia independent of foreign oil by the year 2030.

In addition, we must also acknowledge the growing problem of illegal and undocumented workers that is affecting our workforce. Encouraging competition for jobs among hard-working West Virginians is good for our economy, but encouraging competition for jobs between legal and illegal workers is not only unfair, it is unacceptable. To combat this emerging issue, I have directed our Commissioner of Labor to hire additional inspectors. These new inspectors will focus their energies on stamping out the use of undocumented and illegal workers in West Virginia. So, if you're a company that currently utilizes these types of workers, or if you are paying your employees cash under the table, be on notice that you need to quickly come into compliance, because we are determined to make sure every business and every employee in West Virginia is competing on a fair and level playing field.

We also need to be at the forefront of technology. You will hear me mention tonight several initiatives that are technology-based, but these progressive concepts will only be accomplished if we continue our efforts to expand broadband access in West Virginia.

While progress has certainly been made in the last two years, the state still ranks close to last in broadband availability and use. However, I believe it is possible in the very near future to establish ourselves as a state that is broadband wired from border to border and that can effectively communicate, interact and compete with people and businesses not just across the country but around the world. Our goal as an administration, working with the legislature and service providers, is that by 2010 all West Virginians will have the opportunity to use broadband at home and at work. Just like our efforts to expand water and sewer availability in West Virginia, broadband access is an essential piece of infrastructure that is critical to our future success.

And speaking of water, just a few weeks ago, with the strong support of our West Virginia Congressional Delegation, Congress reauthorized the Abandoned Mine Lands fund, money critical to the health and safety of our citizens living near old mines. The reauthorization freed up nearly \$1 billion in funds over the next 18 years for West Virginia to clean up the effects of pre-law mining on our land and water. As a result, I am announcing tonight that I am committing over \$58 million of this appropriation to bring clean drinking water to all of the 38

communities currently listed on the Abandoned Mine Lands Waterline List by 2010. This will occur several years sooner than originally planned and will bring clean, running water to thousands of West Virginians.

We should also take pride in the appearance of our communities so that they are attractive to businesses, tourists and residents alike. As you know, one of my first actions as governor was to re-institute the state's Rehabilitation Environmental Action Plan - REAP.

I am pleased to report that in 2006, REAP, working with close to 30,000 West Virginia volunteers, has: cleaned up more than 1,000 open dumps, over 3,800 miles of roadways and 236 miles of streams; recycled over 1,300 tons of scrap steel; and, collected over 20,000 tons of solid waste and 340,000 used tires. Additionally, conservation officers have worked hard investigating violations of hazardous waste, highway litter, solid waste, stream litter and stream pollution laws.

And, I am announcing today a new REAP initiative. Under this plan, county governments will have a three-year timeframe to implement certain litter control measures in order to qualify for state economic development grants. Quite simply, if a county wants to receive state dollars for its economic development efforts, it must first demonstrate its commitment to keeping the county as clean as possible in order to show respect to their residents and attract and retain businesses and tourists.

I also want to take time tonight to tell what I think is a real West Virginia success story. Last year, in the city of Huntington, a Contact Center company went out of business, leaving behind approximately 400 employees, its leased building and many resources. One of the employees affected by this closing was Terri Duncan, a native West Virginian. Terri, like most West Virginians, went looking for work first in the Mountain State but discovered it was difficult to find opportunities in her chosen field, so she reluctantly began an out-of-state job search. This search led her to an interview with another Contact Center-based company called PRC – one of the nation's leading providers of outsourced customer management services to Fortune 500 companies. As she was talking to PRC, she told them it was unfortunate that they weren't based in West Virginia, because we had the perfect workforce, and perfect site, ready and waiting for them in Huntington. Well, to make a long story short, one discussion led to another . . . and then another . . . until Terri was not only able to stay in West Virginia and work in her hometown of Huntington, but she had helped convince PRC to come as well - and bring 600 to 700 new jobs with good benefits!

You hear me talk often about the need for our state, our government and our people to develop an "Open for Business" mentality – well, Terri Duncan is an example of how one person, with the right attitude, can make a tremendous difference in West Virginia. She had an opportunity to sell her own skills and assets to PRC, but she chose instead to go out of her way to sell the skills and assets of the entire State of West Virginia and its workforce. Terri, would you please stand and be recognized. And let's also give a great big West Virginia welcome to JoAnn Alencikas and Robert Johnson of PRC - a rapidly expanding company that took the time

to really listen to what Terri had to say and then did their research, and found out for themselves that West Virginia is Open for Business!

While I have other priorities for this legislative session, and for this year, you will soon see that everyday we are fighting to save the good jobs with healthcare benefits that we currently have, and aggressively looking for ways to create many, many more.

For example, as I'm sure PRC would agree, for our job creation efforts to be successful we need an educated workforce.

I can't travel anywhere on an economic development trip, whether it's in West Virginia, across the country or around the world, without hearing from companies about their need to find an educated and dedicated workforce.

As West Virginia native and Cisco President and CEO John Chambers has said, "Jobs will go wherever the best workforce is . . ."

And the abilities needed to secure a good job are changing. MIT economics professor Frank Levy told our P-20 Jobs Cabinet during October's West Virginia Competes Forum that jobs which rely on workers to follow simple instructions are disappearing, replaced by automation and low-cost overseas labor. Workers in today's economy must have the advanced thinking, language and reasoning skills to solve problems and adapt to changing conditions. So, with a changing world economic climate, we need to look closely at our state's education and workforce development programs.

The Jobs Cabinet, made up of state, business, community and education leaders, has issued a series of recommendations.

First, I will continue to work with the Cabinet to implement the 21st Century Learning initiative. As you will recall, my wife Gayle and I joined Superintendent Steve Paine and State Board President Lowell Johnson in late 2005 to announce that West Virginia was only the second state in the nation to become a 21st Century Skills partner. And in June, we will welcome the national board of the 21st Century Skills Partnership to Charleston for their annual meeting and best practices institute, which includes leaders from Apple, Dell, Microsoft, Cisco Systems and the National Education Association.

We will also establish a public outreach campaign to emphasize the value of education and the importance of pursuing a college degree. This campaign will show students why they should take a rigorous high school curriculum and how they can plan, and apply, for college.

I will also create by executive order the Governor's Workforce Planning Council. This council will identify current and future workforce needs, communicate these needs to our two-year colleges, and ensure that our academic programs are ready to meet these needs.

Of course, educators are critical to these efforts – educators like Sarah Morris, an English teacher at Berkeley Springs High School who is our 2007 West Virginia Teacher of the Year. Sarah represents the quality of educator we need in our classrooms in West Virginia. She both inspires and challenges her students, and I want to take time tonight to thank her – Sarah, will you please stand and be recognized.

I also want to acknowledge John Myers and LaQuita Harris of Toyota and Fred Early and Carl Callison of Blue Cross Blue Shield, representing two of our most successful West Virginia businesses, for once again supporting our state’s Teacher of the Year program. John, LaQuita, Fred and Carl please stand and be recognized.

We must continue to work together as educators, business leaders, parents and public servants to ensure that every West Virginia teacher and student has the knowledge and skills needed for this new economic world in which we now live.

Therefore, I am announcing tonight a new program called SEEDS – which stands for Student Educational and Economic Development Success. SEEDS draws from the best-practice program pioneered by the Council for Educational Change in Florida. In West Virginia, SEEDS will be a public/private partnership between the state of West Virginia and The Education Alliance, our statewide business/education partnership. Its objective is to transform struggling schools through the use of well-established business practices such as time management, goal setting and measurement of performance.

SEEDS will be used as a voluntary tool to help those schools that most need intervention and whose principals are open to change and are enthusiastic about the program’s infusion of new thinking and strategies.

In conjunction with the Jobs Cabinet, we will also utilize the State’s upcoming web portal to provide a place where workforce development resources can be centralized and where education, training, professional licensing and new job opportunity resources can be found.

Also, to reinforce our health and safety efforts as well as to better protect our local community schools, I am directing the School Building Authority to ensure that all of its funding guidelines are considered equally so that student health and safety is given just as much weight as economies of scale when making its funding decisions.

Additionally, through the generosity of Chesapeake Energy, a company I proudly welcomed to West Virginia last year at this time, we now have funding over a three year period for a statewide America’s Promise Director who will be working to assure that we kept these Five Promises to our children – that they have a caring adult in their life, a safe place, a healthy start, be taught a marketable skill and learn to give something back.

And once our children become well-rounded adults who are ready to enter into our expanding workforce, we need to provide them with the tools necessary to properly manage their healthcare needs.

The West Virginia Healthy Lifestyles Coalition, in conjunction with the Benedum Foundation and the West Virginia Main Street Program, is developing the infrastructure needed to implement consistent, comprehensive obesity prevention, community projects and control strategies at the local level.

In addition, a number of West Virginia-developed health initiatives, including the CARDIAC Project, a statewide health screening program, the popular Dance Dance Revolution program known as West Virginia Games for Health and the “I am Moving, I am Learning” Head Start series have received tremendous national attention, in part as the only statewide projects of their type in the nation, and the professionals who are leading them are now being sought to share their experiences and expertise throughout the country.

The Healthy Lifestyles Coalition and its partners are now exploring collaboration with the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation to conduct a comprehensive evaluation of the impact of our original Healthy Lifestyles legislation. I feel strongly that this endeavor, if successful, has the potential to showcase West Virginia as a national model and to promote the great health-based work that is being done daily across our state.

And to further the efforts of the Coalition, we are going to take advantage of the experience and knowledge of one of West Virginia’s best. As Honorary Chair of the West Virginia Healthy Lifestyles Coalition this individual will help with all facets of our efforts, including marshaling our resources, recognizing people who are making a difference and educating children on the importance of starting their healthy habits early. Ladies and gentlemen, please join with me in saluting, and welcoming, a West Virginia native, a respected member of the Charleston Fire Department, a lifelong drug-free athlete and the official and undisputed World’s Strongest Man Champion for 2006, Mr. Phil Pfister.

You also hear me speak often about the need to make our healthcare system more consumer-friendly. We are given very little opportunity, if any, to shop around for the best price and service, and then, once a medical procedure is complete, we are completely confused by the billing process. No wonder so many Americans are frustrated and concerned about their health care and health insurance.

So, in order to enable consumers to become more active in the management of their health care, I am announcing today the launch this month of a new healthcare effort called CompareCare West Virginia. By visiting the CompareCare website at comparecarewv.gov, consumers will be able to see timely and trustworthy information on how much West Virginia hospitals charge, on average, for the most common medical procedures and diagnostic testing.

The first version of this site, which will also include a selection of national Quality of Care reports, will be updated quarterly, with more procedures and testing choices added as the site continues to develop.

And, the West Virginia Hospital Association is working on a simplified “patient-friendly” bill for you to receive at the end of your next hospital procedure or stay. This hospital bill should be much easier to understand and will provide you with information on bills you might be receiving from other providers, separate from the hospital charges but related to your procedure. This will enable you to have a clearer idea of what bills you should expect and plan for.

I am also pleased to propose the next big step in West Virginia’s e-medical records work – the introduction of e-Prescribing. With the appropriate information technology, doctors will be able to safely and securely send prescriptions over the Internet or other networks to waiting pharmacists. By digitalizing the prescription process, health care providers, payers, pharmacies and, in turn, patients will realize cost-savings. In addition, e-Prescribing has been shown to significantly reduce the prescription error rate thereby enhancing overall patient health and safety.

It has certainly been a challenging year for West Virginia – but it has been a productive and encouraging one as well. While there have been tragedies, there have also been triumphs. Together, we have stood tall in the face of adversity and come out the other side stronger, and more committed to each other and our state, than ever before.

The eyes of the world have been focused upon us, and as a result the image of West Virginia has been forever changed. Millions now know not only who we are, but *where* we are. They know that our people are good-hearted and strong and that our workers are dedicated and true. They also know that we take pride in ourselves, our families, our communities, our faith and our work.

So many of those looking in on us from the outside last January were struck by these qualities – qualities that we here sometimes take for granted. However, it is these qualities that make us unique, and it is these qualities that will sustain us as we continue on our journey.

As Helen Keller once said, “Character cannot be developed in ease and quiet. Only through experience of trial and suffering can the soul be strengthened, ambition inspired and success achieved.”

Our state is definitely one of character – and so are our people. During the past two years, we have shown that character in many ways, not the least of which is choosing to put our differences aside and work together to bridge all barriers.

My main goal as your Governor is simply to make West Virginia the best that it can possibly be. With the help of many important partners such as A Vision Shared, we are reconstructing this state one brick at a time – with every year’s successes being placed upon the foundation formed by the ones that came before. We started on this path two years ago by reforming our ethics laws, modernizing our workers’ comp system and updating our insurance laws. We followed the next year by expanding access to health care, cracking down on sexual predators, beefing up enforcement of our drug laws and cutting the food tax. All the while staying focused on our two biggest challenges – job creation and managing our state’s long-term debts. And now the proposals I’ve outlined tonight, both large and small, are the newest bricks we add to this endeavor.

So with that in mind, and with the perseverance and pride of the people of West Virginia serving as the mortar binding our achievements together, let us once again follow the legacy of our state’s brave miners and put on our work clothes, strap on our boots and continue pushing forward.

Thank you, God bless you and may God save the great State of West Virginia.

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