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EDITORIAL



ASSOCIATED PRESS
New York Gov. Kathy Hochul gives her State of the State address in Albany on Tuesday, outlining an agenda for the Legislature that focuses on crime, housing and education policies.

Basic needs, bold vision

Hochul's address is both down-to-earth and aspirational, with wide-ranging goals

It was a speech that did have one soaring aspirational moment.

Gov. Kathy Hochul mainly stuck to the basics and continued priorities from 2023 in Tuesday's 2024 State of the State address. And that's not a bad thing, because many of the 2023 priorities remain urgent.

But toward the end of the speech, she outlined a plan for New York State to dominate artificial intelligence technology, by establishing the Empire AI consortium, which would include scientists from seven of New York's leading academic research institutions: SUNY, CUNY, New York University, Columbia, Cornell, Rensselaer Polytechnic Institute and the Simons Foundation. These seven founding members of the consortium would receive \$400 million in funds, including \$270 million from the state, to help them acquire the necessary resources for, as Hochul terms it, "responsible innovation."

Noting that "Whoever dominates the AI industry will dominate the next era of human history," Hochul wants the power of AI research and development to be harnessed for the public good, yielding new development, new jobs and innovative programs that will make people's lives better. During her speech, she cited University at Buffalo student Holliday Sims, who is conducting research on how AI can improve the child welfare system.

Excitingly, the University at Buffalo is under consideration as the central site for Empire AI. Even if it wasn't, this would still be an important initiative for all residents. AI innovation should not be left to the control of private corporations.

Mental health initiatives continue

If AI innovation can help with New York's continuing mental health crisis — a crisis that reverberates across the U.S. — bring it on. Hochul rightly stated that this is the "defining challenge of our time." She hopes to continue pouring state resources into this cause with goals including:

- Legislation that protects children's privacy and attempts to regulate social media algorithms aimed at children.
- Specialized housing for mentally ill individuals who've been caught up in the criminal justice system.
- More mental health resources for schools, better insurance coverage for counseling and account-

ability for insurance companies that try to evade required reimbursements.

Missing: ambitious housing goals

Though Hochul offered a blunt summary of the state's severe housing shortage and cautioned that housing issues, more than taxation, was leading to outmigration, she was equally honest about her inability to find consensus on last year's goal of building 800,000 new homes over the next decade.

This year, she has a project that could bring 100,000 new units and plans to continue to utilize state-owned sites for housing projects. The governor rightly stressed that this is a fraction of what's needed and that statewide action on housing is crucial.

There was little mention of tenant protections, either in the speech or in the book that accompanied it. These are still important and are likely to emerge from the Legislature during the session.

A multifaceted emphasis on public safety

Domestic violence, hate crimes, illegal cannabis shops and retail theft are the major targets. Hochul's proposed initiatives sound sensible and well-targeted, including:

- More protections for victims of domestic abuse and help in prosecuting abusers.
- A wider definition of hate crimes, which have risen by 109% outside of New York City and 64% in the city.
- Help for small businesses to install better security.
- Elimination of an outdated cap on the number of State Supreme Court judges, which would speed up prosecutions.

Though retail theft has been painted by some as a universal scourge, such crime has actually gone down throughout much of the U.S. — but not in New York City, unfortunately.

New York's budget process will act as a trial by fire for these proposals, and some initiatives will likely fall by the wayside.

Nonetheless, given an election year, with lawmakers hesitant to take unpopular stands, Hochul has outlined sensible — even ambitious — goals that should help New Yorkers who need it most and move the state forward in interesting ways.

MY VIEW

Mom inspired love of musical theater

In 1985 my wife, Diane, suggested that we go to Toronto to see the touring production of "Cats." She loved theater and musicals, while I had an ambivalent attitude. I had been in high school plays and enjoyed reading them, but musicals — not so much. I had trouble identifying with gangs singing and dancing in the street and kids dressed in cutesy outfits singing in trees.

I grew up with cats because my mom loved to have at least one in the house. Each one had a distinctive personality, so I was somewhat curious to see what the show would be like. Besides, I loved T.S. Eliot's "The Waste Land," but had never read his "Old Possum's Book of Practical Cats." Since Diane assured me that I would love it, we got tickets, our girls went to her parents and we headed north for the show at the Elgin Theatre.

Before continuing, I must digress. My mom, with whom I was very close, was quite ill at the time. In fact, she died on Christmas Eve in 1986. She had been diagnosed with a form of Parkinson's called Shy Drager.

In addition to the usual Parkinsonian symptoms, mom was deteriorating rather quickly. She had lost her ability to speak and was confined to a wheelchair. When I was writing about my mom a few years ago, I researched this illness. It is terminal and causes systems to decline over a 7-year period from the date of onset. This information wasn't given to us or wasn't understood at the time.

Mom loved to laugh, entertain, socialize, and dance. Growing up, I saw her "work the room" at the bars we would visit or keep the party going, wherever it was. Mom also loved to dress up when she went out. She had a twinkle in her eye and a smile on her face. I cannot express the sadness and grief I felt as



Charles Schmidtke, of Tonawanda, remembers his mother through musicals.

Mom loved to laugh, entertain, socialize, and dance.

that twinkle left her eyes in her last years, and her laugh was tempered and quiet. Her childlike wonder at being entertained and enjoying other people's company slowly seeped away.

As the musical began and the different cat personalities presented themselves, I was thoroughly entertained and understood why Diane had pushed me to go. When I first saw Grizabella, the Glamour Cat, I knew I was watching my mom. The others were props for her, just as our cats through the years were props for Mom to help her deal with the tedium and struggles in her life.

However, life stopped when Grizabella sang "Memory." For the first time in my life, a theater production had touched my heart and my soul very deeply. Tears began to flow, and I was startled at my reaction. How could a character on a stage elicit such deep and raw emotion? By becoming my mom and telling her story as a glamour cat, now seeking rebirth. Since that day, musical theater has been an important part of my life. We've seen scores of musicals, sometimes with our daughters. Each show touches me differently. I've used my imagination to recreate characters from different musicals, including an "old Raoul" from the Phantom. My version of him is dedicated to Mom: He is in a wheel chair with Parkinson's and reflects on his life and relationships with others.

Musical theater can touch one's heart and soul.

My View is a first-person column open to all Western New Yorkers. If your article is selected for publication, a photo of you is required. Email submissions to editpage@buffnews.com.

ANOTHER VOICE | WORKFORCE ISSUES

Access to affordable child care is urgently needed

SHERI SCAVONE

Workforce data shows when we empower women to lead, everyone benefits. Yet, we often ignore one of the most important drivers of female workforce participation — access to affordable child care.

Over the last two years, the female labor force participation rate (LFPR) has risen, which is good news. However, in New York State, the LFPR for mothers with children under 6 is only 67.9%. By comparison, the LFPR for mothers of school-aged children (ages 6-17) is 76.1% — more in line with the overall participation rate.

A lack of access to affordable

child care fuels this trend. In Erie County, the average cost of child care for one child stands at \$16,766. As local parents know well, this increases every year. The U.S. Department of Health and Human Services considers child care to be "affordable" when it costs families no more than 7% of their household income. Yet, in Erie County, the cost stands at a whopping 19%.

In addition to cost, families often lack child care options, as child care centers struggle to stay open with fewer workers and low reimbursement rates. In Erie County, there are 3.6 children under 6 for every available child care slot.

Together with the John R. Oishei

Foundation and the Cornell University ILR Buffalo Co-lab, the WNY Women's Foundation has funded a child care map (available at www.wnychildcare.org) that helps link local employers with child care leaders to explore partnerships for expanding child care capacity throughout Erie and Niagara counties.

Most recently, we traveled to Washington, D.C. and delivered remarks about the impact of federal policy and stimulus dollars on child care for working women and child care small businesses.

We also will continue important work in Albany to support expanded access to child care in New

York state and drive efforts toward universal child care.

We are making strides. However, if we truly believe in workforce diversity and elevating women, we must start at the federal level. Congress must provide at least \$16 billion in emergency child care funds to stabilize a broken system that's nearing collapse. This funding would support more than 15,400 child care providers in New York State that serve over 676,000 children.

To empower women leaders, we must first address the child care crisis.

Sheri Scavone is CEO of the WNY Women's Foundation.

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The editorials on this page represent the opinion of The Buffalo News editorial board. Members are Publisher Tom Wiley; Executive Editor Sheila Rayam; Editorial Page Editor Kevin S. Walter; and editorial writers Dawn Marie Bracely and Elizabeth Licata.

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