



# Investing in Our People

## 2025 Executive Budget Address

**Presented by Ulster County Executive Jen Metzger**  
**Tuesday, October 1, 2024**

Good afternoon everyone, thank you for joining me for the presentation of the 2025 Executive Budget; and a special thanks to Legislators Sperry and Harmon for the introduction and to the Town of New Paltz for hosting us today. Chair Criswell, I greatly appreciate your words and your leadership, and I look forward to working with you and the Legislature in the budget process. To all of the County Legislators and Department Heads joining us here today, thank you for all the work you do for the people of Ulster County. It's an honor to work with you.

The Executive Budget is a team effort, and I want to recognize Budget Director Ken Juras and the Budget Department, as well as my hardworking staff and our County departments for your contributions.

We are in a very strong fiscal position, and I'm proud to share that Ulster County received the lowest possible score of '**zero**' on the State Comptroller's annual fiscal stress score this year. While this is great news, I look not just at today's financial picture but also at what that picture could look like five years down the road. We have to be prudent stewards of the County's fiscal health and keep an eye on escalating costs. Several initiatives I am advancing today are intended to improve efficiency and reduce costs for the long term.

What we cannot do is balance the budget on the backs of our employees. We have to fairly compensate them and strengthen our ability to recruit and retain a quality workforce. To move us forward, we will work with all of our partners to develop a compensation plan based on recommendations of a soon-to-be-completed salary study, and we have also begun contract negotiations with our largest labor union, CSEA. I look forward to coming to agreements with all five of our unions in 2025 that are fair to our employees as well as our taxpayers.

At the same time, we continue our work to improve the well-being of our residents and make our county an even **better** place to live. I am excited to share with you today new initiatives on transportation, housing, EMS, climate, infrastructure, youth programs, and veterans' services. These initiatives will have a meaningful impact on our communities without adding significant costs.

## Budget Overview

Going into 2025, we have an unrestricted fund balance of \$106 million dollars. We are reserving 20% of operating expenditures as a "rainy day" fund, consistent with County policy.

When compared to last year's budget, the 2025 proposed Budget includes \$432 million in operating fund spending, up from \$412 million in 2024. Nearly \$9 million of this new spending is funded by federal and state grants. We also have additional anticipated revenue of \$3 million as a result of the occupancy tax increase from two to four percent.

Like last year, there will be no increase in property taxes.

## Improving Government Efficiency

Working with Deputy County Executive Jamie Capuano, we've identified opportunities for organizational improvements in County government that will enhance operational efficiency, better meet the needs of our departments, and produce long-term savings for taxpayers. In 2025, we will consolidate certain functions of government under two new departments--a Department of General Services and a Department of Risk Management.

The Department of General Services will include purchasing, central services like mail and printing, and a new business services division that centralizes contract and accounting support for the smaller County departments. This will reduce a major burden on these departments and the need to hire additional administrative staff while providing operational efficiencies.

We will also create a Department of Risk Management that combines the County's Safety and Insurance Departments. The new department will oversee the safety training program, ensure that County facilities and operations are compliant with regulations, monitor risk exposure, and develop risk mitigation plans that guard against financial losses.

## Transportation

Turning to our programs and services, our public transit system has been a priority focus of my administration. Not everyone has their own car, and quite frankly, it's better for people's pocketbooks and for the environment if they can rely on public transit to get where they need to go. For many seniors who no longer drive, Ulster County Area Transit – or UCAT, as we all know it – provides older residents with an independence they would not otherwise have.

We live in a very large, rural county, with many sparsely populated areas, and public transit is not going to be an option for everyone. But for those areas where it does make sense, we want to offer robust service. And we plan to keep it **free**.

### *Route Optimization Assessment*

The Ulster County Transportation Council is nearing completion of a Route Optimization Assessment to better meet riders' needs. I want to thank the many members of the public who provided input through the survey and stakeholder meetings. Based on this input – as well as a lot of data-crunching and analysis – we now have proposals before us to increase the frequency of service, extend certain routes, and reduce wait times at connections. Before making any final decisions, we are seeking public input on these proposals this month, and we intend to implement improvements over the next three years, beginning in 2025.

Service enhancements will likely require that we put more buses on the road, and we now have the dedicated funds to do it, thanks to the County's new occupancy tax policy, which assigns 25% of tax revenues from visitor stays to transportation.

### *Microtransit*

I am also excited to announce that we've applied for a \$3.4 million grant from the state Department of Transportation for a five-year pilot program to provide on-demand bus service in places where we have higher numbers of residents without personal transportation.

When Abe's taxi service closed its doors in Ellenville, many people who depended upon Abe's to get around were left without a good alternative. Ellie, one of the business owners, expressed concern in an interview with the *Shawangunk Journal* about her long-time dialysis clients and clients who took a taxi to mental health appointments. In our proposal, a small UCAT bus would help provide service to appointments, shopping plazas, and other local destinations, either directly or by connecting people to buses on fixed routes. What I love about this pilot is that it's **public**. We want to see if we can make this work as a public service.

## Housing

Addressing the housing crisis with real solutions remains a top priority for both me and the Legislature. This is a basic supply and demand issue. We do not have enough housing that our residents can afford to rent, and for many, owning a home is inconceivable in today's market.

## *Housing Action Fund*

We're working hard to change this. In my first year in office we created a \$15 million Housing Action Fund to expand the supply of housing that is both affordable and green, and this past month the Legislature approved the first round of recommendations, committing \$2M worth of projects that will provide affordable homes for more than 200 individuals and families. These projects represent the kind of diverse mix we need, with both home ownership and rental opportunities, with supportive housing for our homeless and most vulnerable residents, senior housing for our elders, and new homes for families for whom home-ownership has been out of reach. I want to thank the Legislature for approving these recommendations, and I want to recognize the excellent work of the Housing Oversight and Policy Review Committee, which carefully vetted and recommended these projects for funding. I also want to recognize Dennis Doyle and Kai Farmer in our Planning Department for the major role they played in supporting the committee's work.

The need for housing is not going away tomorrow, and I want to thank the Legislature for their partnership on a policy that commits 25% of occupancy tax revenues to housing annually, ensuring that we have the funds to support great projects like these in the future.

## *ADUs / Plus One Home Program*

Separately from the Housing Action Fund, our Planning Department has secured a \$5M state award to expand the "Plus One" Home Program. This program provides grants of up to \$125,000 to homeowners to build an Accessory Dwelling Unit in exchange for keeping the rent for the unit affordable. It's really a win-win, expanding housing while providing homeowners living on modest incomes with **more** income to pay the bills. We've made it even more cost-effective for homeowners with legislation to provide a 5-year tax exemption on the capital improvements associated with ADU construction, which the Legislature will vote on this month.

## *Homelessness Prevention*

Our County housing efforts are not just about expanding supply – we are also working to help keep people in their homes and prevent homelessness. I want to thank Majority Leader Abe Uchitelle, Chair of the Health, Human Services and Housing Committee, as well as Minority Leader Kevin Roberts, for their bipartisan legislation to expand legal services and assistance to residents facing eviction—including dedicating over \$150,000 in federal ARPA funding to assist with arrears.

Having a roof over your head is a basic human need **and right**, and we have a moral responsibility to help ensure this need is met.

## *"Better Homes for All" Program*

Having a home that is **healthy, energy-efficient, and climate-resilient** should also be within reach of everyone. That is why we required that all affordable housing projects funded through the Housing Action Fund meet strict sustainability standards.

But it's not just new buildings that need to be future-proofed – it is also our existing housing. New York's housing stock is among the oldest in the country, most of it built before there were any energy codes at all.

Many of these homes are poorly insulated and drafty, and there are often other issues, like leaky roofs and mold that are unhealthy. Residents who can afford it are improving their homes, insulating them, and making them more efficient. My house, like every other house on my road, was built in the 1880s and was an absolute bear to heat. We insulated the attic and basement, and our monthly energy bills dropped dramatically, but the upfront cost of that improvement is more than struggling households can afford.

This is why we are launching the "Better Homes for All" program – a climate equity initiative that directly connects struggling households with state and federal energy programs to cover the costs of weatherization and energy upgrades. New York's Climate Act requires that up to 40% of State clean energy investments benefit disadvantaged households, but there are really no existing models for how to achieve this. I believe Counties are in a unique position to advance this laudable goal because we already provide services to our most vulnerable residents. Through the Department of Social Services, Office of the Aging, and Veterans Services, we can connect residents directly with existing programs to affordably upgrade their homes – reducing their energy bills and carbon footprint, and improving their health, safety, and comfort.

These kinds of home improvements should be accessible to all – not just the well-off – and we're going to create the model New York needs to get there.

## *Mobile Home Resilience Grants Program*

I'm also proposing we create a \$140,000 grant program, thanks to federal grant funding, to fill a gap in state energy assistance for residents of mobile and manufactured homes, which is affordable housing in a rural county like ours. We will partner with Ulster Community Action, which administers the federal Weatherization Assistance Program locally, to help income-eligible households replace costly propane heat with an energy-efficient heat pump that can both heat **and** cool their homes more affordably.

Our "Better Homes for All" Program will be coordinated by our Climate Justice Fellow, Christina Van Dyke, who will work with County service departments, state agencies, and

community-based partners to implement this program. She will be assisted by Climate Corps interns doing outreach **in their own** communities as part of “Better Homes for All,” helping neighbors and fellow community members.

### *Protecting Children from Home Lead Hazards*

Creating better homes for all must also include addressing the health hazards of lead-based paint. A state law was recently passed to mitigate this hazard in rental housing, requiring County Health Departments to inspect rental units in designated communities of concern, and ensure that any lead hazards are remediated by building owners. In Ulster County, the Kingston 12401 zip code has been identified by the state as a community of concern, based on the age of rental buildings as well as cases of elevated lead levels in children's blood. There are over 4,200 buildings that need to be inspected, of which 85% are in the City of Kingston and the rest, in neighboring towns.

We are very pleased to be partnering with the City of Kingston in this effort, which will make inspections a lot more efficient since the City is already inspecting buildings for compliance with other codes. [Thank you so much, Mayor, for your partnership.] The program is expected to take three years to complete, and we have over \$500,000 in state funding allocated for the program in the 2025 budget.

## Climate

At every level of government, **we** are the generation of decision-makers that history will judge in our response to the climate crisis. We can't undo climate change, but there is a lot we can do to reduce the severity to protect our children's future, and adapt to the changes already underway. I look at every action we take as a County government through this lens.

In my 2023 Executive Order on Climate, I aligned our County climate goals with the State Climate Act, and we established an \$18M Decarbonization capital reserve – the first of its kind in the state – to reduce energy use in our County buildings, expand renewable energy, and replace inefficient fossil-fuel based systems **as** they age out. To augment our in-house capacity, we hired an Electrification Project Manager in DPW to plan and oversee this work and we've got a number of projects underway.

### *Helping Our Local Governments Go Green*

We're also helping local governments do the same, thanks to a \$2.5 million dollar ARPA-funded grant program spearheaded by Legislator Tom Corcoran and approved by the Legislature. This year, we made awards of up to \$100,000 to local governments for 12 projects, most of them

solar—including on this very building! Collectively, the projects will generate close to 1.7 million kwh of emissions-free power and offset 1,188 metric tons of greenhouse gas emissions annually. And both the solar and EV charging projects funded through the program will save taxpayers money – the solar, by reducing reliance on energy supply from Central Hudson, and EV charging, through savings at the pump and on maintenance.

In 2025, we'll continue to support municipal climate initiatives with funds from this program. The 70x30 Renewable Energy Implementation Working Group, spearheaded and chaired by Legislator Manna Jo Greene, has highlighted the critical role that local governments play in reaching the 2030 goal, as well as the obstacles they face.

One of the biggest challenges for them is a lack of staff and technical capacity. To address this, we will offer grants to offset the local share of a NYSERDA-funded program for local governments to hire their own on-site energy manager for up to two years. We will also establish an intermunicipal climate task force of the Environmental Management Council, with staff support from our Department of Environment, to coordinate and support municipal climate efforts and information-sharing. And we will continue to offer grants for public EV charging.

Our local governments are essential partners in climate solutions, and we're proud that **17 of 24** Ulster County municipalities are Climate Smart Communities. Few other counties in the state have shown such broad climate leadership.

## Investing in Our Infrastructure

The impacts of climate change we are already experiencing, including more storms and flooding and bigger swings in temperature, take a toll on our infrastructure. Preventive maintenance and resilient design are more important than ever.

### *Bridges*

Ulster County is water-rich and has more bridges than most other counties in the state – nearly 400 bridges in all. 157 of these are owned by the County. We are fortunate in that we are among the few counties that has its own bridge crew to replace portions of bridges and in some cases entire bridges. This saves taxpayers a lot of money compared to contracting all these projects out. This year we undertook 10 bridge projects, half of them done in house, and next year we plan to undertake another seven bridge projects. To support our in-house crew, we added three new bridge crew positions to the budget last year, and this year I am recommending that we add one more position, based on DPW's assessment of needs.

To ensure we are investing in our bridges at the lowest cost to taxpayers, I am proposing that we create a **\$10 million Bridge Reserve Fund** with surplus funds to reduce future borrowing costs for bridge repairs and replacements.

To address the growing wear and tear on our roads from changing weather patterns, I am adding three Machine Equipment Operator positions to DPW to bolster our in-house road maintenance and repair crews. These positions will also help with bridge maintenance.

### *Construction to Begin on Government Operations Center*

Another critical step we are taking is to strengthen the resilience of our emergency management operations. In the coming weeks, we will go out to bid to construct a new Government Operations Center on Paradies Lane, right here in New Paltz. This secure, state-of-the-art facility will house our Emergency Services, including our team of 9-1-1 dispatchers who work around the clock every day, and an Emergency Operation Center that can ensure a rapid and coordinated countywide response to a weather-related emergency or disaster – even if the grid or other critical infrastructure is down elsewhere in the county. Construction will start in early 2025, and the facility is expected to be completed in 2026.

To finance this project, we created an \$18M capital reserve last December that will cover more than half the costs, saving taxpayers \$1.1 million in borrowing costs over the next 30 years. Our grants team is also working to secure additional funding to offset County costs, including a recent grant from State Assembly Member Sarahana Shrestha. Congressman Pat Ryan and Senators Schumer and Gillibrand are all working to secure federal funding, as well.

[Representatives from their offices are with us today, and I want to thank you all for being here.]

## Emergency Medical Services

Our County's emergency delivery infrastructure includes emergency medical services, or EMS, and as we all should know, EMS is in crisis around the state and nation. While we have robust coverage in many areas of the county, we also have distressing gaps in certain geographic areas, due to recruitment challenges and rising costs. At the same time, the proportion of the population that is over 65 continues to increase, placing more demands on an already strained system.

In this budget, I am proposing a package of initiatives that will bolster local EMS recruitment, equip our volunteer EMS with needed training and equipment, and support a multijurisdictional approach to closing gaps in service.



## *ALS Shared Model*

This past month, several towns have expressed interest in partnering on a contract with a provider for first-call Advanced Life Support service to their communities. For those less familiar with the EMS system, the EMS personnel who show up at your door in response to a call may be Basic Life Support, or BLS, or they may be Advanced Life Support, or ALS. Both save lives but ALS comes into play when a higher level of medical care is required, such as in the case of a heart attack or stroke. Unfortunately, these calls account for about 60% of EMS calls in our County. The shared model being explored can help close gaps in coverage and reduce response times.

Our Emergency Services Department, ably led by Director Everett Erichsen, has been facilitating these discussions, and in the Executive Budget I propose that we supplement this support by contracting with a law firm specializing in EMS contracts and taxing jurisdictions to play an advisory role in these intermunicipal efforts.

## *EMS Recruitment & Training*

A second, critical issue we will address is local EMS recruitment. Ulster County, in partnership with SUNY Ulster, will seek State approval to offer EMS certification programs, and we will incentivize certification and service in the field with a work-study stipend, modeled on the State Fire Training Stipend. We will also create an EMS Training Unit within the Department of Emergency Services, similar to our Fire Training Unit, to provide an increased level of training.

## *EMS Grant Program*

The third initiative we are proposing is to establish a \$500,000 EMS Grant Program to assist BLS agencies in purchasing equipment to enable a higher level of patient care. When I was in the State Senate I secured funding for volunteer services like the Volunteer Wallkill Ambulance Corps, and know what a difference it can make when our first responders are raising funds one pancake breakfast at a time.

And lastly, I will establish an EMS Advisory Board so that we continue to collaboratively work with our partners to raise the level of emergency care for our residents. The Board will be led by our Department of Emergency Services and will include representation from the Ulster County Legislature, the Association of Town Supervisors and Village Mayors, Ulster County Fire Chiefs Association, our local hospitals, and the Ulster County EMS Council.

Public health, safety, and well-being are our collective responsibility, and the County has an important role to play in shoring up these essential life-saving services.

## Investing in Our People

One of the best investments we can make is in creating the conditions for our residents to thrive.

### *Supporting Veteran families*

This includes our active duty service members, veterans, and their families, who have made immeasurable sacrifices for us and for our country. One major gap in veteran services is support for their families. In this Executive Budget, I'm including \$50,000 for a new County program serving caregivers for current and former members of the military. These family caregivers often receive little to no formal support, and commonly care for individuals with service-related mental health struggles. The funding will be used to provide peer support and ensure they are accessing the local, state, and federal resources they need and deserve.

### *Investing in Our Youth*

We are also expanding our investments in opportunities for youth and young adults. Equal opportunity is a founding value of this country, but we know that the playing field is not level. Children in struggling families do not necessarily have access to the kinds of programs that can benefit their social, emotional, and physical well-being.

### *Supporting Youth in Emergency Housing*

This is especially true for the many children currently living in emergency housing. This summer we saw a very unique partnership come together for some 45 families placed in emergency housing at the Kingston Motel. We provided programming for youth and families on site, coordinated by our Ulster County Youth Bureau Director, Sugely Melenciano-Weed. So many great partners contributed to this effort, including the Department of Social Services and other County Departments, the Ulster County Sheriff's Office, Police Chief Berardi and the Town of Ulster Police Department, and community partners. We had different kids' activities every weekday afternoon, and the Bruderhof built a beautiful new playground with funding from the NoVo Foundation. And we provided other kinds of support, including mental health. The Sheriff's mental health specialist, who is part of the ORACLE program, met with youth and adults at the motel weekly.

I have visited with kids and families at the motel, and can tell you that this programming has been incredibly impactful for them. I am deeply grateful to all of our partners in this effort.

While most families in emergency housing are at the Kingston Motel, we also have families placed in emergency housing elsewhere in the County. I have directed Youth Bureau and

Department of Social Services staff to proactively ensure that as many youth in emergency housing as possible are connected with summer program opportunities in 2025, including reserving slots with summer camp providers.

### *SUNY Ulster*

When it comes to providing opportunities for young people, education is key, and my Executive Budget continues to reflect a strong commitment to our community college. We have increased annual operational support for SUNY Ulster by over \$200,000, for a total of \$7.1 million in County support. Community college provides an affordable pathway to higher education that many in our county wouldn't otherwise have. And our County's investment pays dividends for the long term, since many SUNY Ulster graduates **remain** here, contributing to the local economy and tax base, raising families here, and volunteering in our communities.

### *iPark*

In 2025, we will begin to build out educational and training opportunities at the new Workforce Innovation Center at iPark 87. The Executive Budget reclassifies a currently vacant position in the Office of Employment and Training to create a Program Coordinator position for the new center, which will work with our educational, business, and community-based partners.

I also want to take a moment to thank UCEDA for seeking private grant funding to create a truly inspiring space for our residents to learn and train, while saving taxpayers' money.

### *A Chance for a New Start for Incarcerated Individuals*

Everyone deserves opportunities for a productive and successful future, including individuals incarcerated in the County jail. This past year I worked with the Carpenters Union and Sheriff Figueroa to create a unique program called "Corrections to Careers." Matt Ross of the Carpenters Union Local 279 is here with us today, and I'd like to recognize him for coming up with the idea for the program and now leading it both in and outside the County jail. [Matt, if you could give a wave and be recognized.] Corrections to Careers provides a pathway to become an apprentice with the Carpenter's union or another trade upon release.

In July, I had the joy of watching 11 proud men and women be recognized for completing this program, as well as others who completed the GED and financial literacy programs as part of the Sheriff's inspiring IGNITE initiative. The graduation ceremony was incredibly moving – it meant so much to these men and women to wear a cap and gown, many for the first time. Thank you to the Sheriff for making this such a special experience.

We're going to help ensure that these individuals can continue on this productive path upon reentry into society. I have included \$38,000 in the Executive Budget for next-level training in the union apprenticeship program after their release.

### *Expanding Opportunities for New Entrepreneurs and Small Businesses*

We have many creative, entrepreneurial people in our county who dream of starting or expanding a small business, but face financial barriers to realizing this dream. Our Economic Development Department is applying for a \$300,000 federal grant to create the **Ulster County Entrepreneur Employment Grant Program**. The new program would provide micro-grants to entrepreneurs and businesses, along with training and other forms of support to ensure their long-term viability. More than half of these micro-grants will be dedicated to entrepreneurs with incomes at or below 80% of area median income. The goal is to widen opportunities, support a diverse, inclusive business environment, and create more jobs.

In addition to the micro-grant program, Economic Development Director Kevin Lynch, working with his staff and the UCEDA Board, will re-energize and re-structure the under-utilized Revolving Loan Fund, which is currently capitalized at about \$1.2 million dollars. The loan fund will prioritize small businesses facing barriers to accessing capital, including minority-, women-, and veteran-owned businesses. These low-interest loans can be used for working capital, energy efficiency and facility upgrades, machinery and equipment purchases, and reserve fund guarantees.

## Conclusion

You have no doubt sensed a theme in this Executive Budget. We are seeking to leverage our advantages as a County government to uplift and expand opportunities for our residents, improve people's health and quality of life, and be the best stewards of the planet and environment that we can be. The initiatives I've shared with you today are cost-effective, and a number of them will generate long-term savings to taxpayers.

Good financial management looks not just at how the financial picture looks today, but also how it will look five years down the road. I am keenly focused on the long-term fiscal health of our County government. In this Executive Budget we propose a prudent spending plan that furthers our vision of building a resilient, sustainable, thriving Ulster County that leaves no one behind.

Thank you.