



Speaker's Press Clips
Wednesday, January 29, 2014

- AP: [Alabama Legislature cancels Wednesday activities](#)
- Anniston Star: [Snow storm freezes action in Alabama Legislature](#)
- Montgomery Advertiser: [Snow and icy weather cause cancellation of Alabama House session](#)
- AP: [Alabama Senate works despite icy weather](#)
- Al.com: [Alabama Department of Transportation: Stay off roads until noon -- at earliest](#)
- Montgomery Advertiser: [Update: ALDOT deems I-65 North to I-85 interchange passable](#)
- Al.com: [Want to help those stuck in snow? You can use these spreadsheets, built by volunteers](#)
- Al.com: [Governor's office says search and rescue teams in state aircraft sent to Jefferson, Shelby counties](#)
- Al.com: [During Birmingham snow, these good Samaritan stories will warm your heart](#)
- Al.com: [Stranded at schools, teachers and students do what it takes to make it through the night](#)
- Al.com: [95 weather-related crashes reported in Montgomery; most roads still impassable](#)
- Al.com: [Driving conditions 'worst they've ever been' in Mobile area](#)
- WSFA: [Alabama reps react to President Obama's State of the Union Address](#)
- AP: [GOP focuses on 'empowering Americans'](#)
- Al.com: [Congressman Byrne signs on to bill to ban federal abortion funding](#)
- Yellowhammer News: [Roby & Bachus speak against govt. funded abortions, pro-abortion activists freak out](#)
- New York Times: [Text and Video of Obama's State of the Union Address](#)

FULL TEXT

Alabama Legislature cancels Wednesday activities

The Associated Press

January 29, 2014

MONTGOMERY, Ala. (AP) — The Alabama Legislature has canceled all activities Wednesday due to icy roads.

The House couldn't get enough members to Montgomery to meet on Tuesday. The Senate got barely enough members to the Statehouse and had a busy afternoon.

House Speaker Mike Hubbard and Senate President Pro Tem Del Marsh say the Legislature will waste a meeting day Wednesday, but it's best for safety reasons. They are planning for the House and Senate to try to meet at 10 a.m. Thursday. But Hubbard said it may be Thursday afternoon before roads are clear enough for enough members to arrive for a meeting.

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Snow and icy weather cause cancellation of Alabama House session

Montgomery Advertiser

January 28, 2014

Brian Lyman

With icy weather making travel from many parts of the state impossible, the Alabama House of Representatives Tuesday adjourned without having a quorum of members present.

Only 40 of the House's 102 current members answered the roll when the chamber convened after 1 p.m. Tuesday. The House needs a majority of representatives present to conduct business.

House Speaker Mike Hubbard, R-Auburn, said he had spoken to members in the previous few days, and urged them to put safety first.

"We can plan for many things, but the weather is not one of them," he said.

Under law, the House will have to return for business at 10 a.m. Wednesday. But Hubbard, again stressing the need for safety, asked members not to come in Wednesday, and said they would aim to reconvene Thursday morning at 10 a.m. The speaker said he did not expect a quorum to be present until 1 p.m. that day.

House committee meetings scheduled for this week will be reposted, he said.

"There's not enough of us here today," said Rep. Dimitri Polizos, R-Montgomery. "It's crazy weather, and we can't control it."

The Senate convened at 2 p.m., with 22 of the chamber's 35 members present. Senate President Pro Tem Del Marsh, R-Anniston, said they hoped to work relatively quickly to allow staff members to get home. After working today, the Senate planned to reconvene at 10 a.m. Thursday.

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Snow storm freezes action in Alabama Legislature

Anniston Star

January 28, 2014
Tim Lockette

MONTGOMERY – For more than a year, Rep. Koven L. Brown, R-Jacksonville, has been trying to pass a bill that would toughen penalties for funeral home directors who cheat their customers.

Brown hoped to get the bill through a House committee this week, but Jack Frost had other ideas.

“We’re not going to have enough people to do anything,” said Brown, one of the few local lawmakers who actually made it to Montgomery on Tuesday.

A statewide snow-and-ice storm hit nearly every part of the state Tuesday, and it chilled action in the Alabama Legislature. Only 40 of the 105 members of the state House of Representatives showed up Tuesday – 13 short of the quorum needed to convene. In the Senate, where 22 of the 35 members made it through the storm, senators quickly dispatched more than a dozen bills. Perhaps the most controversial among them was a measure to ban the state Department of Education from regulating most aspects of private schools. The bill passed, according to Senate records, and is headed for the House.

Some lawmakers set out for the state capital Tuesday morning, but were turned back by the weather. Rep. Randy Wood, R-Saks, said he traveled as far as Rockford – about halfway between Anniston and Montgomery – the roads were too icy to go on. Rep. Steve Hurst, R-Munford, said he too tried to travel down U.S. 231 but was forced to turn back. Rep. Barbara Boyd decided not to leave Anniston after heavy snow began there.

The snow will cost legislators at least one day of deliberation this year. By law, the Alabama Legislature meets for exactly 30 days per year. Tuesday’s Senate meeting, and the failed House meeting, will count one day off that total. Legislative rules require both houses to try to convene tomorrow, though House and Senate leaders urged lawmakers not to show up for safety reasons. Both Hubbard and Senate President Pro Tem Del Marsh, R- Anniston, said the House and Senate would try to convene at 10 a.m. Thursday – and would wait as long as it takes to get a quorum.

Brown, the Jacksonville lawmaker, said the delay was typical of the legislative process, in which the most unlikely things emerge to delay or derail a bill.

“Everything down here is the luck of the draw,” he said.

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Alabama Senate works despite icy weather

The Associated Press

January 28, 2014

Phillip Rawls and Kim Chandler

MONTGOMERY, Ala. (AP) — The Alabama House couldn't hold its scheduled meeting Tuesday because many members were blocked by icy roads, but the Senate had an unusually busy day without bickering between Democrats and Republicans.

Tuesday is the first meeting day each week for the Legislature. Twenty-two of the 35 senators showed up Tuesday — one more than the number required by state law to conduct business. The Senate gave final approval to a bill that moves up Alabama's deadline for Democratic and Republican candidates to sign up for elections by two months. The bill is the result of a lawsuit filed against the state by the U.S. Justice Department over problems getting absentee ballots to the military and other Alabamians living overseas in time to be counted in elections.

The two sides recently reached agreement to move up the candidate qualifying deadline, which will give county election officials more time to prepare and send absentee ballots. The bill passed by the Senate implements that agreement and moves this year's deadline for candidates from April 4 to Feb. 7. The bill now goes to the governor for signing into law.

The bill was one of 20 non-controversial measures that passed on unanimous votes Tuesday. Senate President Pro Tem Del Marsh, R-Anniston, and Senate Minority Leader Vivian Figures, D-Mobile, said that after senators drove over terrible roads to get to Montgomery, they decided to put together a work agenda of bills that members of both parties could support. The result was a busy day without the delaying tactics that have marked most days of the 2014 session.

In the House, 40 of the 105 members were present when House Speaker Mike Hubbard, R-Auburn, gavelled the chamber to order. That was 12 short of the number needed to meet. Legislative rules require the House to keep trying to meet every day at 10 a.m. until 52 members show up. Hubbard said the House wouldn't try Wednesday because roads are supposed to remain treacherous. But another attempt will be made Thursday, when the snow and ice are expected to clear.

The Senate canceled all activities Wednesday, but will meet Thursday. Skipping Wednesday will result in the Legislature wasting one of its 30 meeting days, but Hubbard and Marsh said it's best for safety reasons.

Some legislators began driving to Montgomery on Tuesday morning but gave up when the snow and ice turned out to be worse than expected.

Republican Reps. Ed Henry of Hartselle and Terri Collins of Decatur were carpooling south on Interstate 65 to Montgomery, but they turned around near Warrior because of numerous wrecks. "We could see semis spinning out and sliding," Henry said.

He said traffic was moving less than 10 mph when they gave up. "We decided at that point it was only going to get worse," he said in a phone interview.

In the Senate, members passed a bill to require circuit clerks' offices to take debit and credit cards. The bill's sponsor, Republican Sen. Arthur Orr of Decatur, said it will make it easier for people to make payments because many people don't carry checks any more. Under his bill, the

person using the debit or credit card will have to pay the transaction fee. His bill now goes to the House for consideration.

The Senate also passed a bill clarifying that the state Department of Education doesn't regulate private schools, but the schools have to comply with state laws on school attendance and child safety. Another bill that cleared the Senate allows the military to renew a car tag without paying a late fee if the tag expired while they were deployed elsewhere and they renew it within 30 days of returning to Alabama. Both bills now go to the House for consideration.

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Alabama Department of Transportation: Stay off roads until noon -- at earliest

Al.com

January 29, 2014

Jeremy Gray

BIRMINGHAM, Alabama -- Brian Davis, division engineer with the Alabama Department of Transportation, has seen worse storms than this.

Unfortunately, this one came without warning.

"The forecast called for a dusting," Davis said this morning. "This caught us by surprise."

ALDOT began sanding roads at 9 a.m. Just before 3 a.m., Davis said ALDOT was working with Jefferson County Emergency Management Agency to find buses to get stranded motorists off of snow and ice covered roads.

Several area police and fire departments are also working to get drivers off of the road and into shelters.

With freezing temperatures expected to last through the morning, Davis is asking people to stay off of the roads until noon Wednesday -- at a minimum -- and follow news reports before venturing out.

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Update: ALDOT deems I-65 North to I-85 interchange passable

Montgomery Advertiser

January 29, 2014

Scott Johnson

The Alabama Department of Transportation has sanded Interstate 65 North to the Interstate 85 interchange and deems it passable, according to Montgomery officials.

The U.S. 80 exit to I-65 North remains iced over and blocked to traffic.

Update 7:40 a.m.

Montgomery public safety patrols continue to report iced roads, and most roadways still are considered impassable.

The Alabama Department of Transportation began deploying trucks at daybreak on heavily traveled areas of Interstate 65, Interstate 85 and U.S. 231, said Martha Earnhardt, spokeswoman for the city's Public Safety Department.

The Montgomery Police Department recorded a total of 95 crashes Tuesday, with 18 minor injuries reported, she said.

Montgomery Fire and Rescue responded to 98 calls, including medical calls, alarms and crashes.

There also were two fires, one at Smiley Court and another at the Montgomery Zoo, she said.

Alabama Power reported no major outages in the city.

Montgomery County closed all county roads Tuesday night because of black ice.

If you must venture out, drive slowly, said Montgomery County Sheriff's Office Chief Deputy Derrick Cunningham.

"Please slow down and stop tailgating people," Cunningham said. "If the person in front of you loses it, there is nothing you can do."

Cunningham advised drivers to keep speeds to within 20 to 25 miles per hour.

There were no serious crashes in the county Wednesday morning. Most people appeared to be staying home for the most part early on, and things were quiet early on, he said.

People should continue to be wary of ice on the roads, and especially on low-lying rural roads, Cunningham said.

Deputies are out assisting crews laying down sand on roads.

The county courthouse remains closed, which frees up those deputies who work in the courthouse to be available for patrols, Cunningham said.

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Want to help those stuck in snow? You can use these spreadsheets, built by volunteers

Al.com

January 29, 2014

Alex Walsh

If you're available to help some of those folks who have been stranded by snow in and around Birmingham, you could take a look at this link.

The link points to a publicly available Google spreadsheet with nearly hundreds of rows, each representing the story of a stranded person or family trying to get home from the weather.

The page is an offshoot of a Facebook page, called "Stranded Motorists Help Jan 28, 2014." Trey Edwards, a Florence resident, created the Google doc after seeing an endless stream of updates on the social networking website.

"The volume was too high, anything being posted would disappear in seconds," Edwards explained through a Facebook chat.

The spreadsheets are populated using Google forms. To sign up as a rescuer, click here. If you or someone you know is stranded, use this form. And use this form to offer shelter.

When Edwards created the spreadsheets in Google, the Facebook page for stranded motorists had roughly 3,000 members. By 6 a.m. Wednesday, that figure had more than doubled, to nearly 7,000.

"Just a wonderful group of people all pulling together," he said.

Georgia Smith Slade is one of the original group that got the Facebook page going, Edwards says. And fellow volunteer Tollie Williams helped improve the lists. She "really made the tech side work," Edwards says.

The spreadsheet itself had nearly 200 entries around 6 a.m. Many of those had been tagged overnight with updates indicating the person had been helped, with either the word "SAFE" or "Rescued" added on to their entry.

But not everyone has been helped. At 5:57 a.m., an entry was added for a diabetic man stuck on I-20 near exit 140. Edwards says the volunteer group has at least been in contact with many of those with serious conditions, and is continuing to work through its list.

Many of those volunteers have been at it for quite some time, but Edwards says the success stories are helpful motivation.

One woman posted her success story to the group's Facebook page. "I have been trying to get help from emergency personnel for literally hours," her story reads. "Everyone from multiple EMA offices to local police in Leeds to 911 in her area. It took one guy who thought to start this page (Thank you Trey Edwards) and bring people together.

"Randall Moore was our rescuer (and whoever the gentleman was who was with him) and he was really on it. Didn't take him long at all to find my niece Paige and her son TJ. I was able to speak to her on his cell phone and he is taking her to a local church shelter."

"We are so grateful to you all for your help and support," she wrote.

Access the Facebook page for stranded motorists here. Access the Google doc for stranded motorists here.

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Governor's office says search and rescue teams in state aircraft sent to Jefferson, Shelby counties

Al.com

January 29, 2014

Mike Cason

MONTGOMERY, Alabama --- Gov. Robert Bentley's office has announced that rescue personnel and trained medics in state aircraft have been sent to Jefferson and Shelby counties because of the winter storm.

Motorists have been stranded throughout the Birmingham metro area since Tuesday because of the frozen roadways.

The governor's office also tweeted that about 4,000 students remain in schools statewide. The schools are warm, have food and have "great teachers and principals caring for children," the governor's office tweeted.

In another tweet, the governor's office said roads remain treacherous and that Interstate 20 in the the Leeds area is a priority.

This story will be updated.

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During Birmingham snow, these good Samaritan stories will warm your heart

Al.com

January 28, 2014

Julie McKinney

BIRMINGHAM, Alabama -- Sitting here at the Alabama Media Group office in downtown Birmingham, I'm hearing heartwarming stories of strangers helping strangers in this icy weather. I want to share them with you here, and I hope you'll share yours in the comments.

A group of citizens started a Facebook page, and then a Google document, to organize rescues throughout Birmingham. "Just a wonderful group of people all pulling together," Trey Edwards

said of a group organizing the Facebook page, called "Stranded Motorists Help Jan 28, 2014." Read more about their efforts here.

I was walking from my car which I had to abandon on the side of Caldwell Mill, to my house which is just below Heatherwood on Oak Glen. A saint in a 4x4 Jeep Gran Cherokee picked me up, bobbed and weaved around a couple hundred other abandoned cars, and drove me all the way home.

I made a point to ask his name but forgot it within about 10 minutes of getting home as my 2 children and their mom were (and still are) stranded on Valleydale and I was trying to make sure they got somewhere safe for the night.

Sir, I apologize for forgetting your name, but you saved me from a freezing walk when my spirit was already shot. Thank you so much. - PrincePaul Goodall via Facebook

We were pulled from the ditch twice on 36 right past the senior center by a man with a dually truck. There were 4 wheelers out pulling smaller cars too. It was scary, but so nice to see the true concern for your neighbors, to get out in the cold and rescue people when you could be inside safe and warm. Much appreciated. My church The Connection was helping collect the kids from school and also fed us last night and anyone else who could get there. - Sarah Parish Mccoy via Facebook

A sweet elderly man walked down a large hill from his house to the road offering those of us stuck on 39 just past Chelsea Recreational park his home/potty/food/drink yesterday afternoon. - Tracie Rowe via Facebook

For the gentleman with a 4wheel drive truck and new mud tires on Lorna Rd last night who picked up a boy and his dad and brought them the rest of the way home and up our Big icy hill after they had been walking from Riverchase Pkwy THANK YOU THANK YOU. - Libby Schodroski Fortenberry via Facebook

A pregnant woman, her husband and mother left a sonogram visit at St. Vincent's and quickly found themselves stuck near Highway 280. "I knew there was no way I would let my pregnant daughter walk on that treacherous ice." That's when Brasfield and Gorrie contractor Scotty Parvin pulled up and gave offered "the breeziest ride ever" home to Greystone. "I still cannot believe the heart of a company like Brasfield and Gorrie that absolutely goes out on a limb to help this community, and again thanks to skillful driving by son-in-law Sandor Cheka." -- Michelle Holmes

My husband's office building is right off an I-65 exit, and as people started abandoning their cars on the interstate and other nearby roads, several spotted that building. Those who were seeking warmth and food received it from my husband, who served them barbecue sandwiches in the lobby from a luncheon at the Hometown Lenders office earlier in the day. -- Julie McKinney

It was a sold-out crowd at the Annual Birmingham Business Alliance Lunch at the Sheraton Hotel Tuesday, but snow meant more than 300 ticket holders were unable to attend. Quick

thinking by the BBA and the hotel staff meant the hot meals went next door to the Boutwell Auditorium warming center. -- Michelle Holmes

The Courtyard Marriott was fully booked, but offered 20 employees stuck at Bridgewood Financial at the Colonnade boxes of pillows and blankets to stay warm for the night. "The generosity and spirit is amazing" said Bridgeworth Managing Principal DeLynn Zell. -- Michelle Holmes

Alabama Power opened up its company café to 100 hungry students, staff and parents from the nearby Alabama School of Fine Arts, which was in turn sheltering parents (as well as students) stuck in the storm. -- Michelle Holmes

My daughter got completely stuck in the ice leaving EBSCO in Mount Laurel. Our #snowangel is Paige Thompson and her family in Highland Park. They took her into their home for the night! Made her dinner and hot chocolate. I can't thank them enough. -- Wayne Rogers

I thought I was going to be spending the night in my car at the Chevron on Old Springville Rd, but a nice man named Herman drove me home! If it wasn't for him, I wouldn't be home safe and sound with my family. He went above and beyond and extremely far out of his way to help me. Thank you Herman!!! -- Misty Murphy Westover

Stopped in Alabaster...driving a front wheel drive, left my purse at home ...no money...I get to the gas station...gentleman offered to pay my gas & something to eat...this is truly my #snowangel! Grateful for blessings such as him! -- Naomi Raye Rabago

I am pregnant with twins, my husband and I had been stuck on Daniel Payne and decided to walk. We walked four miles to a subway in Forestdale where a group of men offered to let me wear their jacket until we decided to walk again, and laughed while I was on the phone with my mother crying. 911 told us they were not sure if they could get a body to us and subway planned on closing. At that point I was panicked, and a man and a woman and an elderly couple came in and offered to take us home. I didn't get their last name. But Mr. Randall and Mrs. Debby thank you so much for getting us home safe. God bless you. -- Jessica Mills Earnest

There were a great group of guys in front of the Home Depot on 280 helping vehicles get over the hill. Thanks! -- Melanie Prater Doss

I saw so many UAB students helping car after car that got stuck in front of the Chemistry building. It was wonderful to see them helping so many people get up or down the hill by working together and pushing them sometimes for almost an hour at a time. -- Mary Patterson

This morning I left work in Homewood at 10:20 and it took two hours to make it to the Colonnade. I parked my car-went into the Hilton to use the restroom and check on room availability in which they were sold out. While there I noticed my phone died. I decided that I

could take my time and walk home to the Narrows over Double Oak Mtn. Walking down the hill back to 280 I hit ice and fell. I am overweight and 58 yrs old- I could not get up. A Range Rover with an angel named Samir pulled over and picked me up-I was sobbing. He helped me into the car with his beautiful wife-Angie. From there we made a five hour trek to my home-they lived right past my neighborhood. He was the most competent driver never once did we skid and he skillfully drove up double oak Mtn. I truly believe an angel picked me up today. -- Jean Bendall

Read more touching stories in the comments under AL.com's #snowangel Facebook post.

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95 weather-related crashes reported in Montgomery; most roads still impassable

Al.com

January 29, 2014

Erin Edgemon

MONTGOMERY, Alabama -- Montgomery police recorded a total of 95 crashes, 18 of them with minor injuries reported due to icy roadways.

Patrol officers are still reporting seeing ice covered roads across the city with most roadways considered impassable, Montgomery Department of Safety spokeswoman Martha Earnhardt said.

The Department of Transportation began deploying trucks at daybreak to sand heavily traveled areas of Interstate 65, Interstate 85 and 231.

The city of Montgomery also is sanding icy patches this morning, and the Montgomery County Sheriff's Office is working to coordinate on sanding state roads in the county.

Earnhardt said Fire/Rescue responded to 98 emergency calls and two fires, one at South Smiley and another at the zoo.

No wide-spread power outages have been reported in Montgomery County.

Montgomery Police Lt. Regina Duckett said the city continues to urge the public to stay off the roadways.

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Stranded at schools, teachers and students do what it takes to make it through the night

Al.com

January 29, 2014

Madison Underwood

BIRMINGHAM, Alabama - At Grantswood Community School in Irondale, eight teachers are getting ready to prepare breakfast for five students who spent the night sheltered at the school.

"The kids are still asleep," Don Garrett, a teacher at the K-2 school, told AL.com Wednesday morning. "We're going to go in there and make breakfast when they get up and do what we have to do."

Snow that turned to ice and made roadways an obstacle course of icy patches and abandoned cars on Tuesday night meant that many parents, at Grantswood and elsewhere, were simply unable to reach their child's school to pick up their children. Buses were unable to safely run at many schools without risking getting stranded with scared kids.

So teachers and students did what they had to do. At Grantswood, Garrett says teachers prepared a meal meant for Wednesday's lunch - lasagna, salad, green beans, fruit, bread - and did what it took to keep their young students' minds on the positive.

"We had a good dinner, and the kids were so excited," Garrett said. "We're not looking at the negative. We were just saying we get to have a slumber party tonight, and y'all are so lucky to be the few kids that do this."

The situation can be scary, especially to the five children ages 6 to 8 who spent the night at the school.

"We had one little girl briefly wondering where she was," Garrett said. But a school counselor, Nancy Foshee, was able to calm her.

Outside, road conditions are so bad that a stranded stranger walked up to the school from the interstate, seeking shelter for the night. The faculty fed her, too, and she stayed, Garrett said.

Parents want to be with their kids, kids want their parents, and teachers, too, need to see their families and get home. But Garrett says they're staying positive, no matter what Wednesday will bring.

"We're looking at the glass half-full instead of half-empty," Garrett said, noting that they are warm and have plenty of food. "It could be worse."

Solo principal at Princeton Elementary

At Princeton Elementary, Principal Cynthia Ward is the lone staffer who took care of three children through the night - and she said they had a fun night full of movies and games.

"The kids are still asleep," Ward told AL.com Wednesday morning just after 8 a.m. "They're still asleep and I'm making sure I have breakfast for them ready today."

"We have three kids, and we're just hanging in there," Ward said.

She kept the kids occupied with her Netflix account and games, like a scavenger hunt, which she used to help find something for the students to sleep on.

"We had fun having a scavenger hunt," Ward said. "We were hunting for bedding, and everything was a hunt."

"We just made a night of it. We took pictures and sent them to moms," Ward said. "It's a first-time experience and these kids will have something to share with their kids and grandkids."

All four of them hunkered down and had a slumber party in one warm room, Ward said. But she's not sure what will happen today.

"Right now, we're just waiting to see what happens with ALDOT and the city, because one parent is still stranded," Ward said. The other two parents have plans for getting to the school, she said.

According to Ward, communication among Birmingham City Schools staff has been a boon for morale.

"I'm just grateful for all the district people working together and keeping us encouraged," she said.

An adventure at Shades Mountain Elementary

Around 28 faculty and staff members and a Hoover police officer stayed with about 150 students last night at Shades Mountain Elementary, said teacher Julie Altmark. That number was made up of Shades Mountain's own students, along with kindergartners and first-graders Shades Mountain took in from two other Hoover schools.

"It's an adventure," Altmark said. Like Ward, she said the teachers and staff there worked hard to entertain the kids with "a variety of things."

"We have movies, and of course we have computers in every room," Altmark told AL.com Wednesday morning.

Like Grantswood, Altmark said Shades Mountain took in stranded people as well - around a half-dozen, she said. And several parents picked up kids in the middle of night.

Altmark is keeping the kids positive. "We're safe, warm, dry and well fed, and so we just hope there's nobody out there in danger," she said.

But there is worry, too. The kids are from three different schools, which means parents have to travel farther to reach them. And the teachers, too - they live in many different places around the area, how are they going to get home?

"We don't know what's going to happen today," Altmark said. "We could be here another night is what I'm saying."

A worried parent

Steven Marshall has two kids stranded overnight at Hoover schools: a 12-year-old at Bumpus Middle School, and a 6-year-old at Gwin Elementary.

"I'm thinking about the teachers that are with them, but am very appreciative that they are keeping the children calm," Marshall wrote in an e-mail.

In order to get his children, he first has to make his own solo journey to his car. Marshall said he abandoned it about a mile from his apartment last night. After that, he said he's going to try and pick up the 6-year-old first, since Gwin is closer, at about 11 a.m. when things warm up a bit.

"I will pack a backpack with coats and socks and pants and try to get my car as far as possible without getting stuck, then walk to get him," Marshall wrote. "My only concern is him walking in the freezing temps."

He's worried that geography could make reaching his son at Bumpus difficult.

"With the hills around Bumpus, I don't know how I will safely get him today," Marshall wrote. "I'm hoping the sun comes out a little and helps."

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Driving conditions 'worst they've ever been' in Mobile area

Al.com

January 29, 2014

Thyrie Bland

The sheets of frozen precipitation covering roadways in Mobile and Baldwin counties will make for treacherous driving conditions on Wednesday.

"They will be about the worst they've ever been," said Jeffrey Medlin, a National Weather Service Meteorologist in Mobile.

The ice has forced the closing of at least two area bridges — the Foley Beach Express bridge in Baldwin County and the Cochrane-Africatown bridge in Mobile County.

The ice on the roadways is a result of a wintry precipitation that fell in Mobile and Baldwin counties on Tuesday and freezing overnight temperatures.

Baldwin and Mobile counties were included in a winter storm warning that stretched from southwest Mississippi to the western Florida Panhandle. The warning is no longer in effect.

But officials are warning that roads are not yet safe for travel.

"The problem is you have got about an inch and a half of packed sleet on top of anywhere from a tenth to about three tenths of an inch of freezing rain," Medlin said. "It did not melt. It has turned into a sheet overnight."

The Foley Beach Express closed about 10:30 p.m. Tuesday.

"It's mainly due to it has a unique curve it, and it's iced over," said Ken Grimes, Orange Beach's city administrator. "We were unable to keep it from freezing solid last night."

The Perdido Pass Bridge in Orange Beach is open, but motorists are being asked to avoid it. Crews are putting sand on the bridge to make it safer, Grimes said.

"It also has a high incline and a curve," he said. "(Motorists) that are not used to driving on any kind of ice, if they hit the ice patch they'll easily slide into the wall."

In Mobile County, there are ice ice accumulations of about an inch on some bridges, said Nancy Johnson, a Mobile County spokeswoman.

"It's not navigable right now," she said. "Our crews are out there, and they are calling ambulances for people going off roads every which way. It's really dire out there."

Even for work crews, traveling is proving difficult, Johnson said.

"It's very hard to go up some hills," she said. "They are doing the best they can."

The forecast for Wednesday calls for highs in the 30s and lows in the teens.

"It's going to barely making it to freezing," Medlin said. "Some places will not get above freezing, so there is not going to be a whole heck of a lot of melting today."

Medlin said driving conditions for early Thursday morning are going to be bad, too, but things should improve later in the day.

"Tonight, if there is any melting at all, it's going to quickly refreeze into the black ice on the roadways and bridges again," he said. "That's going to be with us through tonight into tomorrow morning. We are going to go through this all over again."

The forecast Thursday calls for a high temperature near 50.

"The temperature rise will be more on Thursday," Medlin said. "We will certainly more easily go above freezing. That ought to mostly take care of everything on Thursday ice wise."

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Alabama reps react to President Obama's State of the Union Address

WSFA

January 28, 2014

WASHINGTON, D.C. -

The following are official statements from Alabama's representatives following President Obama's State of the Union Address Tuesday evening.

The full text from the White House Office of the Press Secretary. A fact sheet for all initiatives mentioned can be found here:

THE PRESIDENT: Mr. Speaker, Mr. Vice President, members of Congress, my fellow Americans:

U.S. Senator Jeff Sessions (R-Alabama)

"President Obama says he is concerned about low wages and chronic unemployment for American workers. Yet his signature second-term legislative item is an immigration bill that would immediately and permanently double the flow of new immigrant workers competing against unemployed Americans—reducing wages, increasing unemployment, and further shrinking the middle class. Experts tell us that the current, very high immigration flow is already a factor in declining wages.

His other policy proposals—more government spending, public assistance, and wage controls—are a continued attempt to deal with the symptoms of an economy that is failing and stagnant, rather than with the causes. This agenda will not only do little for those it is designed to assist in the short run, but will actually do harm to many in the long run.

With a record 1 in 5 households on food stamps, and with 92 million Americans outside the work force, it is clear what we must do: a focused national effort to help transition millions of Americans off of welfare, off of unemployment, and into good-paying jobs. This must be done without adding to the debt. Such an effort would include more American energy; better trade and immigration enforcement; welfare and tax reform; a leaner, more productive government; the elimination of regulations that destroy jobs; and the growth and confidence created by balancing the federal budget."

U.S. Representative Martha Roby (R-District 2)

"Everyone knows President Obama is a gifted speaker, but too often his rhetoric doesn't match reality. He brags about the unemployment rate, but fails to mention that participation in the labor force is at its lowest level since the 70s. He talks about income inequality, but won't acknowledge that his immigration and minimum wage proposals would undermine the middle class and working poor. He calls for 'action' on jobs, but ignores the more than 30 bi-partisan, House-passed jobs bills still stuck in the Senate.

"I was pleased to hear the President mention problems with our nation's surveillance activities. There is no question reforms are needed to ensure we can gather vital intelligence to stop terrorists while also protecting the privacy of law-abiding Americans. And those reforms need to be enacted into law, not ordered by presidential pen stroke.

"It should concern all Americans – Republicans and Democrats – that the president is promising more unilateral executive actions that circumvent the Legislative Branch. Our system of checks and balances may not be convenient for President Obama's political agenda, but they exist to protect Americans from an encroaching federal government. I will not stand by and watch President Obama erode this country's constitutional separation of powers, and that's why I'm supporting the STOP Resolution to rein in executive overreaches."

U.S. Representative Mike Rogers (R-District 3)

"President Obama's plans to further expand the Federal government via regulation and executive orders are deeply troubling. Americans need jobs, not a bigger government.

"He is advocating making 2014 a Year of Action, and I would hope one of his first actions would be to help support the common sense jobs bills passed by the House of Representatives.

"Hard working families across East Alabama and the nation are suffering in these uncertain economic times, and deserve a government that works for everyone."

U.S. Representative Spencer Bachus (R-District 6)

"The best anti-poverty program is a job. What I'd like to see after tonight is a determined effort to remove barriers to private sector job creation. There are many pending bills with bipartisan support that would reduce the enormous number of federal regulations that are raising costs and creating uncertainty for employers. In the construction industry alone, tens of thousands of good-paying jobs could be created almost immediately by building the Keystone Pipeline and reforming the lengthy and often duplicative permitting process for infrastructure projects that need to be done. We should make the private sector bigger, not the federal government.

"It is also my hope that the President will work with Congress in a serious way to achieve results, rather than do an end-run through executive orders. The way to build lasting support and success for a policy is to use the legislative process as our Founders intended."

U.S. Representative Terry Sewell (D-District 7)

"I am encouraged by the President's message tonight of economic empowerment by providing ladders of opportunity for all Americans. I share President Obama's belief that we must invest in America's future by providing a livable wage, promoting education and investing in skills training and job readiness. Tonight, the President outlined a powerful vision of this nation and

provided a concrete plan to grow the economy, strengthen the middle class, and enhance opportunities for all Americans. His agenda is rooted in the American Dream and fueled by the ideal that if you work hard and take responsibility, you can make it in America.

President Obama challenged Congress to join him in taking action on the most pressing issues we face as a nation. Together we must work to close the opportunity gap that exists in this country. I stand ready to do my part and hope my Republican colleagues will too. The state of this union is made stronger when we focus on our common interest and put partisanship aside."

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GOP focuses on 'empowering Americans'

The Associated Press

January 28, 2014

WASHINGTON — Rep. Cathy McMorris Rodgers is offering a kinder, gentler vision of Republicans who are determined to empower Americans and close the gap “between where you are and where you want to be.”

Tapped to deliver the GOP response to President Barack Obama's State of the Union address, McMorris Rodgers touched on the daily routines of average Americans that overshadow Washington, from kissing children goodnight to preparing for a doctor's visit, and complained that Obama's policies are making life harder.

The highest-ranking Republican woman in Congress said the GOP believes “in a government that trusts people and doesn't limit where you finish because of where you started. That is what we stand for — for an America that is every bit as compassionate as it is exceptional. Our plan is one that dreams big for everyone and turns its back on no one.”

McMorris Rodgers said that under the president's economic policies “more Americans stopped looking for a job than found one,” and criticized his health care overhaul for leading to canceled insurance coverage and patients unable to see their regular doctors.

“Republicans believe health care choices should be yours, not the government's,” said the five-term congresswoman from eastern Washington. “And that whether you're a boy with Down syndrome or a woman with breast cancer, you can find coverage and a doctor who will treat you.”

McMorris Rodgers' son Cole, 6, has Down syndrome, and she co-founded the Congressional Down Syndrome Caucus six years ago to try to raise awareness of the difficulties that children with the syndrome face. The 44-year-old lawmaker delivered her third child just eight weeks ago.

Countering recent Democratic defenses of government, McMorris Rodgers said the mission is “to ensure that we are not bound by where we come from, but empowered by what we can

become. That is the gap Republicans are working to close. It's the gap we all face: between where you are and where you want to be.”

Republicans have struggled to shed Democratic criticism that they've waged a “war on women,” a difficulty reflected in the 2012 presidential vote in which Obama captured 55 percent of the female vote.

Hours before the president's speech, the House voted to bar federal subsidies to Americans signing up to health care plans that cover abortion, and Democrats accused the GOP of undercutting women's reproductive rights.

The annual response to the president's address is often awarded to up-and-coming politicians, including ones with presidential ambitions. But delivering the speech to a camera after the president's applause-interrupted address can sometimes prove problematic.

Louisiana Gov. Bobby Jindal's stiff response in 2009 was widely panned, and the lasting image from Sen. Marco Rubio's speech last year was his desperate grab for water.

McMorris Rodgers was not the lone GOP voice Tuesday night. Sen. Mike Lee, R-Utah, was giving the tea party response to the president, and Sen. Rand Paul, R-Ky., was delivering his views.

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Congressman Byrne signs on to bill to ban federal abortion funding

Al.com

January 28, 2014

Brendan Kirby

Taking another step to solidify his conservative credentials, U.S. Rep. Bradley Byrne this week co-sponsored legislation to prohibit federal funding of abortion.

Byrne, R-Fairhope, became the 171st member of Congress to sign on to the No Taxpayer Funding for Abortion Act and voted with the 227-188 majority to pass the it Tuesday. But it faces a near-certain death in the Senate, where abortion-rights Democrats control the chamber. Among the Alabama delegation, only Rep. Terri Sewell, D-Birmingham, voted against the bill.

The House passed an earlier version by a 251-175 vote in 2011.

Sponsored by Rep. Chris Smith, R-N.J., the bill would ban federal funding for abortion. It also specifically prohibits the use of federal funds to pay for any health insurance benefits that include abortion coverage, a reference to the Affordable Care Act.

“As the parents of four wonderful children, Rebecca and I have been blessed to experience the joy of parenthood firsthand,” Byrne said in a prepared statement. “Every life is precious, and as a

United States Congressman I believe if we do not take action to create a culture of life in this country, it will fray the moral fabric that has sustained us for generations.”

Byrne called it “unacceptable” to use taxpayer funds to pay for a procedure that many southwest Alabama residents find “morally abhorrent.”

One provision of the bill that would prohibit people from deducting medical expenses related to abortion except in cases of rape, incest and endangerment of the mother’s life. Some critics raised the specter of the IRS determining whether a woman has been raped.

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Roby & Bachus speak against govt. funded abortions, pro-abortion activists freak out

Yellowhammer News

January 28, 2014

Cliff Sims

The U.S. House voted today to permanently ban federal spending on abortion and to block ObamaCare subsidies for insurance plans that cover abortion.

Shortly before the vote, Rep. Martha Roby, R-Montgomery, gave a one-minute speech on the House floor, briefly assessing the ongoing battles between pro-life and pro-abortion activists.

“I’ve been intrigued with the latest rhetoric in the so-called ‘war on women,’ Roby said. “I’m intrigued because at some point pro-abortion activists stopped using the word ‘abortion.’ Instead of using the ‘a-word,’ they started using terms like ‘women’s health’ or ‘reproductive rights.’ It’s a clever word game designed to disguise the truth and build artificial support. After all, who would be against the health of a woman? Who would oppose anyone’s right to reproduce? But what about the baby’s health? What about the unborn child’s right to live? They don’t call it abortion anymore because people understand what abortion is. It’s the taking of a life. It is death where life once existed. It is cruel and tragic. And there is no place in the federal budget for funding it.”

Needless to say, the pro-abortion crowd didn’t like what Roby had to say. Many of them took to Twitter to express their outrage and to make it clear how much they love abortion.

(Above: Rep. Spencer Bachus speaks out against federal funding for abortions)

Rep. Spencer Bachus, R-Vestavia Hills also spoke on the House floor in favor of the No Taxpayer Funding of Abortion Act.

“No child is unwanted. Let me repeat that: no child is unwanted,” Bachus said. “There are millions of American couples today that are waiting to give these unborn children a loving home. I don’t know all the circumstances, but I do know the unborn are little girls and little boys. While I don’t know about my colleagues, I believe that God has a plan for each of these unborn children and I don’t believe that plan includes terminating their lives. It may not be a popular

thing to say. But can't we focus on the unborn and the fact that there are millions of families out there, many of them childless, that would love to have these little girls and boys in their homes?"

All of this comes just days after the 41st Anniversary of the Supreme Court's decision in *Roe v. Wade* that made abortion legal in all 50 states. Since then, over 50,000,000 pregnancies have been aborted, including over 500,000 in Alabama alone.

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Text and Video of Obama's State of the Union Address

New York Times

January 28, 2014

Following is the transcript of President Obama's State of the Union address, as transcribed by the Federal News Service.

MR. OBAMA: Thank you. (Applause.) Thank you so much. Thank you. Thank you. (Applause.) Thank you so much.

Mr. Speaker, Mr. Vice President, members of Congress, my fellow Americans, today in America, a teacher spent extra time with a student who needed it and did her part to lift America's graduation rate to its highest levels in more than three decades.

An entrepreneur flipped on the lights in her tech startup and did her part to add to the more than 8 million new jobs our businesses have created over the past four years. (Applause.)

An autoworker fine-tuned some of the best, most fuel-efficient cars in the world and did his part to help America wean itself off foreign oil.

A farmer prepared for the spring after the strongest five-year stretch of farm exports in our history.

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A rural doctor gave a young child the first prescription to treat asthma that his mother could afford. (Applause.) A man took the bus home from the graveyard shift, bone-tired but dreaming big dreams for his son. And in tight-knit communities all across America, fathers and mothers will tuck in their kids, put an arm around their spouse, remember fallen comrades and give thanks for being home from a war that after twelve long years is finally coming to an end. (Applause.)

Tonight this chamber speaks with one voice to the people we represent: It is you, our citizens, who make the state of our union strong. (Applause.)

And here are the results of your efforts: the lowest unemployment rate in over five years; a rebounding housing market — (applause) — a manufacturing sector that's adding jobs for the first time since the 1990s — (applause) — more oil produced — more oil produced at home than we buy from the rest of the world, the first time that's happened in nearly twenty years — (applause) — our deficits cut by more than half; and for the first time — (applause) — for the first time in over a decade, business leaders around the world have declared that China is no longer the world's number one place to invest; America is.

(Cheers, applause.) That's why I believe this can be a breakthrough year for America. After five years of grit and determined effort, the United States is better-positioned for the 21st century than any other nation on Earth.

The question for everyone in this chamber, running through every decision we make this year, is whether we are going to help or hinder this progress. For several years now, this town has been consumed by a rancorous argument over the proper size of the federal government. It's an important debate — one that dates back to our very founding. But when that debate prevents us from carrying out even the most basic functions of our democracy — when our differences shut down government or threaten the full faith and credit of the United States — then we are not doing right by the American people. (Cheers, applause.)

Now, as president, I'm committed to making Washington work better, and rebuilding the trust of the people who sent us here. And I believe most of you are, too. Last month, thanks to the work of Democrats and Republicans, Congress finally produced a budget that undoes some of last year's severe cuts to priorities like education. Nobody got everything they wanted, and we can still do more to invest in this country's future while bringing down our deficit in a balanced way.

But the budget compromise should leave us freer to focus on creating new jobs, not creating new crises.

And in the coming months — (applause) — in the coming months, let's see where else we can make progress together. Let's make this a year of action. That's what most Americans want, for all of us in this chamber to focus on their lives, their hopes, their aspirations. And what I believe unites the people of this nation, regardless of race or region or party, young or old, rich or poor, is the simple, profound belief in opportunity for all, the notion that if you work hard and take responsibility, you can get ahead in America. (Applause.)

Now, let's face it: That belief has suffered some serious blows. Over more than three decades, even before the Great Recession hit, massive shifts in technology and global competition had eliminated a lot of good, middle-class jobs, and weakened the economic foundations that families depend on.

Today, after four years of economic growth, corporate profits and stock prices have rarely been higher, and those at the top have never done better. But average wages have barely budged.

Inequality has deepened. Upward mobility has stalled. The cold, hard fact is that even in the midst of recovery, too many Americans are working more than ever just to get by; let alone to get ahead. And too many still aren't working at all.

So our job is to reverse these trends.

It won't happen right away, and we won't agree on everything.

But what I offer tonight is a set of concrete, practical proposals to speed up growth, strengthen the middle class and build new ladders of opportunity into the middle class. Some require congressional action, and I'm eager to work with all of you. But America does not stand still, and neither will I. (Applause.) So wherever and whenever I can take steps without legislation to expand opportunity for more American families, that's what I'm going to do. (Cheers, applause.)

As usual, our first lady sets a good example. Michelle's — (applause) — well. (Chuckles.) (Cheers, applause.) Yeah. Michelle's Let's Move! partnership with schools, businesses, local leaders has helped bring down childhood obesity rates for the first time in thirty years, and that's an achievement — (applause) — that will improve lives and reduce health care costs for decades to come. The Joining Forces alliance that Michelle and Jill Biden launched has already encouraged employers to hire or train nearly 400,000 veterans and military spouses. (Applause.)

Taking a page from that playbook, the White House just organized a College Opportunity Summit, where already 150 universities, businesses, nonprofits have made concrete commitments to reduce inequality in access to higher education and to help every hardworking kid go to college and succeed when they get to campus.

And across the country — (applause) — we're partnering with mayors, governors and state legislatures on issues from homelessness to marriage equality.

The point is, there are millions of Americans outside Washington who are tired of stale political arguments and are moving this country forward. They believe, and I believe, that here in America, our success should depend not on accident of birth but the strength of our work ethic and the scope of our dreams. That's what drew our forebears here. It's how the daughter of a factory worker is CEO of America's largest automaker — (applause) — how the son of a barkeeper is speaker of the House — (cheers, applause) — how the son of a single mom can be president of the greatest nation on Earth. (Cheers, applause.)

Now — (sustained cheers and applause) — opportunity is who we are. And the defining project of our generation must be to restore that promise.

We know where to start. The best measure of opportunity is access to a good job. With the economy picking up speed, companies say they intend to hire more people this year.

And over half of big manufacturers say they're thinking of insourcing jobs from abroad. (Applause.)

So let's make that decision easier for more companies. Both Democrats and Republicans have argued that our tax code is riddled with wasteful, complicated loopholes that punish businesses investing here, and reward companies that keep profits abroad. Let's flip that equation. Let's work together to close those loopholes, end those incentives to ship jobs overseas, and lower tax rates for businesses that create jobs right here at home. (Cheers, applause.)

Moreover, we can take the money we save from this transition to tax reform to create jobs rebuilding our roads, upgrading our ports, unclogging our commutes — because in today's global economy, first-class jobs gravitate to first-class infrastructure. We'll need Congress to protect more than 3 million jobs by finishing transportation and waterways bills this summer. (Cheers, applause.) That can happen.

But, but I'll act on my own to slash bureaucracy and streamline the permitting process for key projects, so we can get more construction workers on the job as fast as possible. (Applause.)

We also have the chance, right now, to beat other countries in the race for the next wave of high-tech manufacturing jobs. And my administration's launched two hubs for high-tech manufacturing in Raleigh, North Carolina, and Youngstown, Ohio, where we've connected businesses to research universities that can help America lead the world in advanced technologies.

Tonight, I'm announcing we'll launch six more this year. Bipartisan bills in both houses could double the number of these hubs and the jobs they create. So, get those bills to my desk and put more Americans back to work. (Applause.)

Let's do more to help the entrepreneurs and small business owners who create most new jobs in America. Over the past five years, my administration has made more loans to small business owners than any other. And when 98 percent of our exporters are small businesses, new trade partnerships with Europe and the Asia-Pacific will help them create even more jobs. We need to work together on tools like bipartisan trade promotion authority to protect our workers, protect our environment and open new markets to new goods stamped "Made in the USA." (Applause.)

Listen, China and Europe aren't standing on the sidelines; and neither, neither should we. We know that the nation that goes all-in on innovation today will own the global economy tomorrow. This is an edge America cannot surrender. Federally-funded research helped lead to the ideas and inventions behind Google and smartphones. And that's why Congress should undo the damage done by last year's cuts to basic research so we can unleash the next great American discovery. (Cheers, applause.)

There are entire industries to be built based on vaccines that stay ahead of drug-resistant bacteria or paper-thin material that's stronger than steel. And let's pass a patent reform bill that allows our businesses to stay focused on innovation, not costly and needless litigation. (Applause.)

Now, one of the biggest factors in bringing more jobs back is our commitment to American energy. The "all the above" energy strategy I announced a few years ago is working, and today America is closer to energy independence than we have been in decades. (Applause.)

One of the reasons why is natural gas. If extracted safely, it's the bridge fuel that can power our economy with less of the carbon pollution that causes climate change. (Applause.) Businesses plan to invest almost a hundred billion dollars in new factories that use natural gas. I'll cut red tape to help states get those factories built and put folks to work, and this Congress can help by putting people to work building fueling stations that shift more cars and trucks from foreign oil to American natural gas. (Applause.)

Meanwhile, my administration will keep working with the industry to sustain production and jobs growth while strengthening protection of our air, our water, our communities. And while we're at it, I'll use my authority to protect more of our pristine federal lands for future generations. (Applause.)

Now, it's not just oil and natural gas production that's booming; we're becoming a global leader in solar too.

Every four minutes another American home or business goes solar, every panel pounded into place by a worker whose job can't be outsourced. Let's continue that progress with a smarter tax policy that stops giving \$4 billion a year to fossil fuel industries that don't need it so we can invest more in fuels of the future that do. (Cheers, applause.)

And even as we've increased energy production, we've partnered with businesses, builders and local communities to reduce the energy we consume. When we rescued our automakers, for example, we worked with them to set higher fuel efficiency standards for our cars. In the coming months I'll build on that success by setting new standards for our trucks so we can keep driving down oil imports and what we pay at the pump.

And taken together, our energy policy is creating jobs and leading to a cleaner, safer planet. Over the past eight years the United States has reduced our total carbon pollution more than any other nation on Earth. (Applause.)

But we have to act with more urgency because a changing climate is already harming western communities struggling with drought and coastal cities dealing with floods. That's why I directed my administration to work with states, utilities and others to set new standards on the amount of carbon pollution our power plants are allowed to dump into the air.

The shift — (applause) — the shift to a cleaner energy economy won't happen overnight, and it will require some tough choices along the way.

But the debate is settled. Climate change is a fact. (Applause.) And when our children's children look us in the eye and ask if we did all we could to leave them a safer, more stable world, with new sources of energy, I want us to be able to say yes, we did. (Cheers, applause.)

Finally, if we're serious about economic growth, it is time to heed the call of business leaders, labor leaders, faith leaders, law enforcement — and fix our broken immigration system. (Cheers, applause.) Republicans and Democrats in the Senate have acted, and I know that members of

both parties in the House want to do the same. Independent economists say immigration reform will grow our economy and shrink our deficits by almost \$1 trillion in the next two decades. And for good reason: When people come here to fulfill their dreams — to study, invent, contribute to our culture — they make our country a more attractive place for businesses to locate and create jobs for everybody. So let's get immigration reform done this year. (Cheers, applause.) Let's get it done. It's time.

The ideas I've outlined so far can speed up growth and create more jobs. But in this rapidly-changing economy, we have to make sure that every American has the skills to fill those jobs.

The good news is, we know how to do it. Two years ago, as the auto industry came roaring back, Andra Rush opened up a manufacturing firm in Detroit. She knew that Ford needed parts for the best-selling truck in America, and she knew how to make those parts. She just needed the workforce. So she dialed up what we call an American Job Center; places where folks can walk in to get the help or training they need to find a new job, or a better job. She was flooded with new workers, and today, Detroit Manufacturing Systems has more than 700 employees. And what Andra and her employees experienced is how it should be for every employer and every job seeker.

So tonight, I've asked Vice President Biden to lead an across-the-board reform of America's training programs to make sure they have one mission: train Americans with the skills employers need, and match them to good jobs that need to be filled right now. (Cheers, applause.) That means more on-the-job training, and more apprenticeships that set a young worker on an upward trajectory for life. It means connecting companies to community colleges that can help design training to fill their specific needs. And if Congress wants to help, you can concentrate funding on proven programs that connect more ready-to-work Americans with ready-to-be-filled jobs.

I'm also convinced we can help Americans return to the workforce faster by reforming unemployment insurance so that it's more effective in today's economy. But first, this Congress needs to restore the unemployment insurance you just let expire for 1.6 million people. (Cheers, applause.)

Let me tell you why.

Misty DeMars is a mother of two young boys. She'd been steadily employed since she was a teenager, put herself through college. She'd never collected unemployment benefits, but she's been paying taxes.

In May, she and her husband used their life savings to buy their first home. A week later, budget cuts claimed the job she loved. Last month, when their unemployment insurance was cut off, she sat down and wrote me a letter, the kind I get every day. "We are the face of the unemployment crisis," she wrote. "I'm not dependent on the government. Our country depends on people like us who build careers, contribute to society, care about our neighbors. I am confident that in time I will find a job, I will pay my taxes, and we will raise our children in their own home in the community we love. Please give us this chance."

Congress, give these hardworking, responsible Americans that chance. (Cheers, applause.) Give them that chance. Give them the chance. They need our help right now, but more important, this country needs them in the game. That's why I've been asking CEOs to give more long-term unemployed workers a fair shot at new jobs, a new chance to support their families. And in fact, this week many will come to the White House to make that commitment real.

Tonight I ask every business leader in America to join us and do the same because we are stronger when America fields a full team. (Applause.)

Of course, it's not enough to train today's workforce. We also have to prepare tomorrow's workforce, by guaranteeing every child access to a world-class education. (Applause.)

Estiven Rodriguez couldn't speak a word of English when he moved to New York City at age 9. But last month, thanks to the support of great teachers and an innovative tutoring program, he led a march of his classmates through a crowd of cheering parents and neighbors from their high school to the post office, where they mailed off their college applications. And this son of a factory worker just found out he's going to college this fall. (Applause.)

Five years ago we set out to change the odds for all our kids. We worked with lenders to reform student loans, and today more young people are earning college degrees than ever before. Race to the Top, with the help of governors from both parties, has helped states raise expectations and performance. Teachers and principals in schools from Tennessee to Washington, D.C., are making big strides in preparing students with the skills for the new economy — problem solving, critical thinking, science, technology, engineering, math.

Now, some of this change is hard.

It requires everything from more challenging curriculums and more demanding parents to better support for teachers and new ways to measure how well our kids think, not how well they can fill in a bubble on a test. But it is worth it — and it is working.

The problem is we're still not reaching enough kids, and we're not reaching them in time, and that has to change.

Research shows that one of the best investments we can make in a child's life is high-quality early education. (Applause.) Last year, I asked this Congress to help states make high-quality pre-K available to every 4-year-old. And as a parent as well as a president, I repeat that request tonight.

But in the meantime, 30 states have raised pre-k funding on their own. They know we can't wait. So just as we worked with states to reform our schools, this year we'll invest in new partnerships with states and communities across the country in a race to the top for our youngest children. And as Congress decides what it's going to do, I'm going to pull together a coalition of elected officials, business leaders, and philanthropists willing to help more kids access the high-quality pre-K that they need. (Applause.) It is right for America. We need to get this done.

Last year, I also pledged to connect 99 percent of our students to high-speed broadband over the next four years. Tonight I can announce that with the support of the FCC and companies like Apple, Microsoft, Sprint, and Verizon, we've got a down payment to start connecting more than 15,000 schools and 20 million students over the next two years, without adding a dime to the deficit. (Cheers, applause.)

We're working to redesign high schools and partner them with colleges and employers that offer the real-world education and hands-on training that can lead directly to a job and career. We're shaking up our system of higher education to give parents more information and colleges more incentives to offer better value, so that no middle-class kid is priced out of a college education. We're offering millions the opportunity to cap their monthly student loan payments to 10 percent of their income, and I want to work with Congress to see how we can help even more Americans who feel trapped by student loan debt. (Applause.)

And I'm reaching out to some of America's leading foundations and corporations on a new initiative to help more young men of color facing especially tough odds stay on track and reach their full potential.

The bottom line is, Michelle and I want every child to have the same chance this country gave us. But we know our opportunity agenda won't be complete, and too many young people entering the workforce today will see the American Dream as an empty promise, unless we also do more to make sure our economy honors the dignity of work, and hard work pays off for every single American.

You know, today, women make up about half our workforce, but they still make 77 cents for every dollar a man earns. That is wrong, and in 2014, it's an embarrassment.

Women deserve equal pay for equal work. (Cheers, applause.)

You know, she deserves to have a baby without sacrificing her job. (Cheers, applause.) A mother deserves a day off to care for a sick child or sick parent without running into hardship. (Applause.) And you know what, a father does too. It is time to do away with workplace policies that belong in a "Mad Men" episode. (Laughter, cheers, applause.) This year let's all come together, Congress, the White House, businesses from Wall Street to Main Street, to give every woman the opportunity she deserves, because I believe when women succeed, America succeeds. (Cheers, applause.)

Now, women hold a majority of lower-wage jobs, but they're not the only ones stifled by stagnant wages. Americans understand that some people will earn more money than others, and we don't resent those who, by virtue of their efforts, achieve incredible success. That's what America's all about. But Americans overwhelmingly agree that no one who works full-time should ever have to raise a family in poverty. (Applause.)

In the year since I asked this Congress to raise the minimum wage, five states have passed laws to raise theirs.

Many businesses have done it on their own. Nick Chute is here today with his boss, John Soranno. John's an owner of Punch Pizza in Minneapolis, and Nick helps make the dough. (Laughter.) Only now he makes more of it. (Laughter.) John just gave his employees a raise to 10 bucks an hour, and that's a decision that has eased their financial stress and boosted their morale.

Tonight I ask more of America's business leaders to follow John's lead. Do what you can to raise your employees' wages. (Applause.) It's good for the economy; it's good for America. (Sustained applause.)

To every mayor, governor, state legislator in America, I say, you don't have to wait for Congress to act; Americans will support you if you take this on. And as a chief executive, I intend to lead by example. Profitable corporations like Costco see higher wages as the smart way to boost productivity and reduce turnover. We should too. In the coming weeks I will issue an executive order requiring federal contractors to pay their federally-funded employees a fair wage of at least \$10.10 an hour because if you cook — (cheers, applause) — our troops' meals or wash their dishes, you should not have to live in poverty. (Sustained applause.)

Of course, to reach millions more, Congress does need to get on board.

Today the federal minimum wage is worth about twenty percent less than it was when Ronald Reagan first stood here. And Tom Harkin and George Miller have a bill to fix that by lifting the minimum wage to \$10.10. It's easy to remember: 10.10. This will help families. It will give businesses customers with more money to spend. It does not involve any new bureaucratic program. So join the rest of the country. Say yes. Give America a raise. (Cheers, applause.) Give 'em a raise.

There are other steps we can take to help families make ends meet, and few are more effective at reducing inequality and helping families pull themselves up through hard work than the Earned Income Tax Credit. Right now, it helps about half of all parents at some point. Think about that. It helps about half of all parents in America at some point in their lives.

But I agree with Republicans like Senator Rubio that it doesn't do enough for single workers who don't have kids. So let's work together to strengthen the credit, reward work, help more Americans get ahead.

Let's do more to help Americans save for retirement. Today most workers don't have a pension. A Social Security check often isn't enough on its own. And while the stock market has doubled over the last five years, that doesn't help folks who don't have 401(k)s. That's why tomorrow I will direct the Treasury to create a new way for working Americans to start their own retirement savings: MyRA. It's a -- it's a new savings bond that encourages folks to build a nest egg.

MyRA guarantees a decent return with no risk of losing what you put in. And if this Congress wants to help, work with me to fix an upside-down tax code that gives big tax breaks to help the wealthy save, but does little or nothing for middle-class Americans, offer every American access to an automatic IRA on the job, so they can save at work just like everybody in this chamber can.

And since the most important investment many families make is their home, send me legislation that protects taxpayers from footing the bill for a housing crisis ever again, and keeps the dream of homeownership alive for future generations. (Applause.)

One last point on financial security. For decades, few things exposed hard-working families to economic hardship more than a broken health care system. And in case you haven't heard, we're in the process of fixing that. (Scattered laughter, applause.)

Now -- a pre-existing condition used to mean that someone like Amanda Shelley, a physician's assistant and single mom from Arizona, couldn't get health insurance. But on January 1st, she got covered. (Applause.) On January 3rd, she felt a sharp pain. On January 6th, she had emergency surgery. Just one week earlier, Amanda said, that surgery would've meant bankruptcy. That's what health insurance reform is all about, the peace of mind that if misfortune strikes, you don't have to lose everything.

Already, because of the Affordable Care Act, more than 3 million Americans under age 26 have gained coverage under their parents' plans. (Applause.)

More than 9 million Americans have signed up for private health insurance or Medicaid coverage — 9 million. (Applause.)

And here's another number: zero. Because of this law, no American, none, zero, can ever again be dropped or denied coverage for a pre-existing condition like asthma or back pain or cancer. (Cheers, applause.) No woman can ever be charged more just because she's a woman. (Cheers, applause.) And we did all this while adding years to Medicare's finances, keeping Medicare premiums flat and lowering prescription costs for millions of seniors.

Now, I do not expect to convince my Republican friends on the merits of this law. (Laughter.) (Chuckles.) (Laughter.) But I know that the American people are not interested in refighting old battles. So again, if you have specific plans to cut costs, cover more people, increase choice, tell America what you'd do differently. Let's see if the numbers add up. (Applause.) But let's not have another 40- something votes to repeal a law that's already helping millions of Americans like Amanda.

(Cheers, applause.) The first 40 were plenty. We all owe it to the American people to say what we're for, not just what we're against.

And if you want to know the real impact this law is having, just talk to Governor Steve Beshear of Kentucky, who's here tonight. Now, Kentucky's not the most liberal part of the country. That's not where I got my highest vote totals. (Laughter.) But he's like a man possessed when it comes to covering his commonwealth's families. They're our neighbors and our friends, he said. They're people we shop and go to church with -- farmers out on the tractor, grocery clerks. They're people who go to work every morning praying they don't get sick. No one deserves to live that way.

Steve's right. That's why tonight I ask every American who knows someone without health insurance to help them get covered by March 31st. Help them get covered. (Applause.) Moms, get on your kids to sign up. Kids, call your mom and walk her through the application. It'll give her some peace of mind, and plus, she'll appreciate hearing from you. (Laughter.)

After all, that — that's the spirit that has always moved this nation forward.

It's the spirit of citizenship, the recognition that through hard work and responsibility, we can pursue our individual dreams, but still come together as one American family to make sure the next generation can pursue its dreams as well.

Citizenship means standing up for everyone's right to vote. (Applause.) Last year, part of the Voting Rights Act was weakened, but conservative Republicans and liberal Democrats are working together to strengthen it. And the bipartisan commission I appointed, chaired by my campaign lawyer and Governor Romney's campaign lawyer, came together and have offered reforms so that no one has to wait more than a half-hour to vote. Let's support these efforts. It should be the power of our vote, not the size of our bank account, that drives our democracy. (Cheers, applause.)

Citizenship means standing up for the lives that gun violence steals from us each day. I have seen the courage of parents, students, pastors, and police officers all over this country who say "we are not afraid," and I intend to keep trying, with or without Congress, to help stop more tragedies from visiting innocent Americans in our movie theaters and our shopping malls, or schools like Sandy Hook. (Applause.)

Citizenship demands a sense of common purpose; participation in the hard work of self-government; an obligation to serve to our communities.

And I know this chamber agrees that few Americans give more to their country than our diplomats and the men and women of the United States armed forces. (Extended applause.) Thank you.

Tonight, because of the extraordinary troops and civilians who risk and lay down their lives to keep us free, the United States is more secure. When I took office, nearly 180,000 Americans were serving in Iraq and Afghanistan. Today, all our troops are out of Iraq. More than 60,000 of our troops have already come home from Afghanistan. With Afghan forces now in the lead for their own security, our troops have moved to a support role. Together with our allies, we will complete our mission there by the end of this year, and America's longest war will finally be over. (Applause.)

After 2014, we will support a unified Afghanistan as it takes responsibility for its own future.

If the Afghan government signs a security agreement that we have negotiated, a small force of Americans could remain in Afghanistan with NATO allies to carry out two narrow missions: training and assisting Afghan forces and counterterrorism operations to pursue any remnants of

Al Qaeda. For while our relationship with Afghanistan will change, one thing will not: our resolve that terrorists do not launch attacks against our country. (Applause.)

The fact is that danger remains. While we've put Al Qaeda's core leadership on a path to defeat, the threat has evolved as Al Qaeda affiliates and other extremists take root in different parts of the world. In Yemen, Somalia, Iraq, Mali, we have to keep working with partners to disrupt and disable these networks. In Syria, we'll support the opposition that rejects the agenda of terrorist networks. Here at home, we'll keep strengthening our defenses and combat new threats like cyberattacks. And as we reform our defense budget, we have to keep faith with our men and women in uniform and invest in the capabilities they need to succeed in future missions. (Applause.)

We have to remain vigilant.

But I strongly believe our leadership and our security cannot depend on our outstanding military alone. As commander in chief, I have used force when needed to protect the American people, and I will never hesitate to do so as long as I hold this office. But I will not send our troops into harm's way unless it is truly necessary, nor will I allow our sons and daughters to be mired in open-ended conflicts. We must fight the battles — (applause) — that need to be fought, not those that terrorists prefer from us — large-scale deployments that drain our strength and may ultimately feed extremism.

So even as we actively and aggressively pursue terrorist networks, through more targeted efforts and by building the capacity of our foreign partners, America must move off a permanent war footing. (Applause.) That's why I've imposed prudent limits on the use of drones, for we will not be safer if people abroad believe we strike within their countries without regard for the consequence.

That's why, working with this Congress, I will reform our surveillance programs because the vital work of our intelligence community depends on public confidence, here and abroad, that privacy of ordinary people is not being violated. (Applause.) And with the Afghan war ending, this needs to be the year Congress lifts the remaining restrictions on detainee transfers and we close the prison at Guantanamo Bay — (applause) — because we counter terrorism not just through intelligence and military action but by remaining true to our constitutional ideals and setting an example for the rest of the world.

You see, in a world of complex threats, our security, our leadership depends on all elements of our power — including strong and principled diplomacy. American diplomacy has rallied more than 50 countries to prevent nuclear materials from falling into the wrong hands, and allowed us to reduce our own reliance on Cold War stockpiles.

American diplomacy, backed by the threat of force, is why Syria's chemical weapons are being eliminated. (Applause.) And we will continue to work with the international community to usher in the future the Syrian people deserve — a future free of dictatorship, terror and fear.

As we speak, American diplomacy is supporting Israelis and Palestinians as they engage in the difficult but necessary talks to end the conflict there; to achieve dignity and an independent state for Palestinians, and lasting peace and security for the state of Israel — a Jewish state that knows America will always be at their side. (Applause.)

And it is American diplomacy, backed by pressure, that has halted the progress of Iran's nuclear program — and rolled back parts of that program — for the very first time in a decade. As we gather here tonight, Iran has begun to eliminate its stockpile of higher levels of enriched uranium.

It's not installing advanced centrifuges. Unprecedented inspections help the world verify every day that Iran is not building a bomb. And with our allies and partners, we're engaged in negotiations to see if we can peacefully achieve a goal we all share: preventing Iran from obtaining a nuclear weapon. (Applause.)

These negotiations will be difficult; they may not succeed. We are clear-eyed about Iran's support for terrorist organizations like Hezbollah, which threaten our allies; and we're clear about the mistrust between our nations, mistrust that cannot be wished away. But these negotiations don't rely on trust; any long-term deal we agree to must be based on verifiable action that convinces us and the international community that Iran is not building a nuclear bomb. If John F. Kennedy and Ronald Reagan could negotiate with the Soviet Union, then surely a strong and confident America can negotiate with less powerful adversaries today. (Applause.)

The sanctions that we put in place helped make this opportunity possible. But let me be clear: if this Congress sends me a new sanctions bill now that threatens to derail these talks, I will veto it. (Applause.) For the sake of our national security, we must give diplomacy a chance to succeed.

(Applause.) If Iran's leaders do not seize this opportunity, then I will be the first to call for more sanctions and stand ready to exercise all options to make sure Iran does not build a nuclear weapon. But if Iran's leaders do seize the chance — and we'll know soon enough — then Iran could take an important step to rejoin the community of nations, and we will have resolved one of the leading security challenges of our time without the risks of war.

And finally, let's remember that our leadership is defined not just by our defense against threats but by the enormous opportunities to do good and promote understanding around the globe, to forge greater cooperation, to expand new markets, to free people from fear and want. And no one is better positioned to take advantage of those opportunities than America.

Our alliance with Europe remains the strongest the world has ever known. From Tunisia to Burma, we're supporting those who are willing to do the hard work of building democracy. In Ukraine, we stand for the principle that all people have the right to express themselves freely and peacefully and to have a say in their country's future. Across Africa, we're bringing together businesses and governments to double access to electricity and help end extreme poverty. In the

Americas, we're building new ties of commerce, but we're also expanding cultural and educational exchanges among young people.

And we will continue to focus on the Asia-Pacific, where we support our allies, shape a future of greater security and prosperity and extend a hand to those devastated by disaster, as we did in the Philippines, when our Marines and civilians rushed to aid those battered by a typhoon, and were greeted with words like, "We will never forget your kindness" and "God bless America."

We do these things because they help promote our long-term security. And we do them because we believe in the inherent dignity and equality of every human being, regardless of race or religion, creed or sexual orientation. And next week the world will see one expression of that commitment when Team USA marches the red, white and blue into the Olympic stadium and brings home the gold. (Cheers, applause.)

My fellow Americans, no other country in the world does what we do. On every issue, the world turns to us, not simply because of the size of our economy or our military might but because of the ideals we stand for and the burdens we bear to advance them.

No one knows this better than those who serve in uniform. As this time of war draws to a close, a new generation of heroes returns to civilian life. We'll keep slashing that backlog so our veterans receive the benefits they've earned and our wounded warriors receive the health care -- including the mental health care -- that they need. (Applause.) We'll keep working to help all our veterans translate their skills and leadership into jobs here at home, and we will all continue to join forces to honor and support our remarkable military families.

Let me tell you about one of those families I've come to know.

I first met Cory Remsburg, a proud Army Ranger, at Omaha Beach on the 65th anniversary of D-Day. Along with some of his fellow Rangers, he walked me through the program, the ceremony. He was a strong, impressive young man, had an easy manner. He was sharp as a tack. And we joked around, and took pictures, and I told him to stay in touch.

A few months later, on his 10th deployment, Cory was nearly killed by a massive roadside bomb in Afghanistan. His comrades found him in a canal, face down, underwater, shrapnel in his brain.

For months, he lay in a coma. And the next time I met him, in the hospital, he couldn't speak; he could barely move. Over the years, he's endured dozens of surgeries and procedures, hours of grueling rehab every day.

Even now, Cory is still blind in one eye. He still struggles on his left side. But slowly, steadily, with the support of caregivers like his dad Craig, and the community around him, Cory has grown stronger. Day by day, he's learned to speak again and stand again and walk again, and he's working toward the day when he can serve his country again.

"My recovery has not been easy," he says. "Nothing in life that's worth anything is easy."

Cory is here tonight. And like the Army he loves, like the America he serves, Sergeant First Class Cory Remsburg never gives up, and he does not quit. (Cheers, applause.) Cory. (Extended cheers and applause.)

My fellow Americans — my fellow Americans, men and women like Cory remind us that America has never come easy. Our freedom, our democracy, has never been easy. Sometimes we stumble; we make mistakes; we get frustrated or discouraged.

But for more than two hundred years, we have put those things aside and placed our collective shoulder to the wheel of progress: to create and build and expand the possibilities of individual achievement; to free other nations from tyranny and fear; to promote justice and fairness and equality under the law, so that the words set to paper by our founders are made real for every citizen.

The America we want for our kids — a rising America where honest work is plentiful and communities are strong; where prosperity is widely shared and opportunity for all lets us go as far as our dreams and toil will take us — none of it is easy. But if we work together; if we summon what is best in us, the way Cory summoned what is best in him, with our feet planted firmly in today but our eyes cast towards tomorrow, I know it's within our reach.

Believe it.

God bless you, and God bless the United States of America. (Cheers, applause.)