

Governor Chris Christie's 2017 State of the State Address

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Trenton, New Jersey

January 10, 2017

This is the seventh time I have had the honor to step before the Legislature and the people of New Jersey to perform one of my duties as Governor. Article V, Section I, Paragraph 12 creates the constitutional requirement to report on the State of the State. As the one person independently elected by all New Jerseyans to state government, the Governor is the only person truly able to give the people this report. For me, service to the people of this state has been my central responsibility every day of my life for the last fifteen years, first as U.S. Attorney and now as Governor. As I enter my eighth year as Governor, it is my honor and privilege to report on the State of the State I call home for me and my family.

The State of the State is good—having boldly dealt with so many of the long-term problems we inherited in 2010, having an economy which continues to grow and now ready to use 2017 to confront problems that still need solving. I stand here today prepared to give every ounce of energy I have to make 2017 a year where we solve more big problems for our citizens.

Let's start with the central issues of our economy. Since we entered office seven years ago in the depths of the recession, New Jersey has created 278,000 new private sector jobs. We now have had seven consecutive years of job growth in our private sector. All the jobs lost in the great recession have been recovered.

At the same time, we have kept our promise to reverse the outlandish growth of government which was created in the decade before our arrival. We have eliminated 10,000 government jobs at the state level and 21,000 thousand more in county and local government through our effective property tax cap. That is 31,000 jobs eliminated in seven years. We promised a smaller government and we have delivered. In state government, all of this was done without any layoffs; it was all done through effective management and fiscal discipline with the people's money.

Existing home sales, always a good barometer of the health of a state's economy, rose over 15% last year. Home sales are growing and New Jersey is growing with them.

As a result, look at what has happened to the state unemployment rate: at 9.8% when we entered office, to 5% today, nearly cut in half. 445,000 New Jerseyans out of work when we came to Trenton; 50% fewer unemployed today. While the pundits and prognosticators always see the glass half empty, for New Jersey families who were out of work in 2010, the glass is fuller; much, much fuller as we enter 2017 and we should be proud of the work we have done to make it so.

We have also restored responsible budgeting to New Jersey government. Discretionary spending by state government is \$2.3 billion less in actual dollars than it was nine years ago. That means that nearly every additional dollar we collected in taxes has gone to deal with our historic problems: pension payments, health insurance premiums and debt service.

This year, we will make a \$1.9 billion payment to the pension fund, the largest in state history. That will bring our total payments to the pension system to \$6.3 billion, twice as much as Governors Whitman, DiFrancesco, McGreevey, Codey and Corzine combined. This Administration has been, far and away, the most generous to the pension system in the last 23 years.

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Despite the fact that we have not been able to pay every penny we had hoped to after our landmark 2011 reforms, those reforms have been working. The Supreme Court supported our reforms despite a failed, expensive assault by the public sector unions. We have done more to restore solvency to this broken system than any recent group of leaders in this city. There is more to do and I will present more ideas to finish the job we started in 2011 when I present you with my 2018 budget. Until then, we should acknowledge and be proud of the fact that we have passed reforms that will save the pension system nearly \$120 billion over 30 years and that we have doubled the state's contribution to the system over what was paid into it in the sixteen years before we arrived. That is progress and there will be more to come.

Finally, 2017 will be the first year since 1996 that New Jersey citizens will see broad based tax cuts. That's right, for the first time in over 20 years, New Jerseyans will actually see taxes go down this year. This was a partisan fight for six years, as my Republican colleagues and I regularly called for tax cuts, and our Democratic colleagues regularly said no. I want to thank my Republican friends in this chamber for standing strong for six years, so that these tax cuts could finally become a reality in year seven.

To my Democratic friends in this chamber, thanks to you for making 2017 a year when New Jerseyans can finally get tax relief and it is tax relief we can all be proud of.

In 2017, our sales tax will be cut for the first time in decades. The even better news—it will be cut again on January 1, 2018. 520 million dollars in relief for every New Jerseyan who pays the sales tax—so that means each and every New Jerseyan.

In 2017, the working poor in New Jersey will get even more assistance to raise their families. When we entered office the Earned Income Tax Credit was 25%. In 2015, we increased the credit to 30% and last week we increased it again to 35%. We are in the top 10% of states in providing this tax relief to the working poor and we should be proud that we are helping families who are already helping themselves.

2017 will also be an even better year for seniors on a fixed income. We will begin to exclude from state income taxes even more retirement income for seniors. In four years, seniors will be able to make \$100,000 in retirement income and pay no state income taxes. This will help our seniors stay in our state and live an even better life after they choose to stay. This will keep families together and reward seniors who have planned for their retirement responsibly.

In 2017, the death tax will be put on life support and, by 2018, the death tax in New Jersey will officially be dead itself. People often flee our state in their senior years because we tax them to death while they live here. To add to the burden, we then tax them again more than any other state AFTER they die. People will now be able to choose New Jersey rather than one of the other 49 states in their later years because we will stop soaking them in their senior years. New Jersey's estate tax has risen from a \$675,000 exclusion to a \$2 million exclusion on January 1st. On January 1, 2018, New Jersey will no longer have any estate tax at all. This will be game changing tax reform for New Jersey's economy, our families and their small businesses.

Finally, in 2017, our veterans will be honored for their service in our military by our tax code. New Jersey veterans who are honorably discharged from service will get their own personal exemption from state income taxes. Their service to our nation deserves nothing less.

Imagine that—Republicans and Democrats coming together to lower taxes for all New Jerseyans. It took seven years to get it done but we should be proud that taxpayer's will get to keep more of their own money in 2017 than they did last year.

As people sit and listen to a State of the State speech they often wonder how many of the goals and aspirations a Governor details actually get accomplished? Let's review the goals I set in this speech in 2016 and what we were able to accomplish together.

I called on the legislature to finally eliminate the death tax in New Jersey and as you know we did it.

We know that in our cities charter schools are providing extraordinary opportunities to students and their families for a brighter future. That is why thousands of families are still on waiting lists to get in to a quality charter school. We promised to loosen regulations that are choking the growth and expansion of charter schools in our urban centers. This past week, the State Board of Education advanced efforts to make charter schools in New Jersey even more effective by allowing them to be even more innovative.

We promised a 100 million dollar increase in funding for mental health and substance abuse treatment. In this area we exceeded our promise by adding 127 million dollars to increase access to these vital human services for the most vulnerable in our state.

We promised to open the first certified drug abuse treatment facility for New Jersey prison inmates in state history. This spring, a 696 bed facility will open and every inmate who enters will receive first class drug and alcohol abuse treatment before they leave prison.

Our successful recovery coach program was working in 2015 in five counties, so we promised to more than double that amount in 2016 to 11 of our counties. The program puts counselors into hospital emergency rooms to help people begin the road to recovery in a way that gives them a greater chance of success. We promised greater opportunity for recovering addicts to reclaim their lives and now in more than half of New Jersey's counties, just as we promised, recovery coaches are doing just that.

Those were the five central promises of the 2016 State of the State speech and I am proud to say on each and every one of them we delivered. So when you listen to today's speech the people of New Jersey should have the same level

of confidence that we will achieve the goals we set today.

There are so many issues that I could look back on with pride. So many future issues I could look to with a sense of urgency. So many stories from the last year I could relate to you with wonder. But I am not going to do that today. For that, I guess you are all just going to have to wait for the book. And wait. And wait.

But seriously, I am not going to do it because our state faces a crisis which is more urgent to New Jersey's families than any other issue we could confront. A crisis which is destroying families. One that is ripping the very fabric of our state. The crisis of drug addiction.

On December 21st we held a candlelight vigil on the steps of the State House. Over 750 people from all over the state attended to show their solidarity with our efforts and their concern for their fellow citizens. In the group that night was Pam Garozzo, an employee of the Department of Education. Pam has been a passionate drug awareness and prevention advocate for years. Her reasons are personal. Her son Carlos has battled addiction since he was 16 years old. During his periods of sobriety, Carlos volunteered his time running support groups for fellow addicts and enjoying a successful job. He spent time with his family and friends and they fought his addiction with him as a family. Pam came to the vigil on December 21st to rejoice in Carlos's latest 10 ½ months of uninterrupted sobriety and the gifts that sobriety brought to Carlos and his family. Two days later, on December 23rd, Carlos had relapsed and was found in Pam's car—dead at 23 years old from a heroin overdose.

Today, I extend my deepest sympathy to Pam for her enormous loss and thank her for her advocacy for and support of other families whose lives have been ravaged by this awful disease. Today is for people like Pam—together we will save lives and by doing so honor the lives of those who we have lost like your dear son Carlos. Through the pain of her enormous loss, Pam still has the strength and courage to be here today with her husband. We owe her not only our sympathy but our gratitude for her commitment to others.

This is the face of the epidemic of addiction that is ravaging our state and its people. In fact, it is ravaging our entire country. Yet, very few people want to talk about it. We want to continue to pretend that it is isolated to one class of people or one type of family in our state. We want to continue to take the same approaches we have taken for thirty years or more—to jail those who have this disease. We want to close our eyes and hope this scourge passes by our own homes—if we hope and pray just hard enough to make it so.

Well, hoping and praying alone will not make it better. Arresting, jailing and stigmatizing the victims will not make it better.

Our friends are dying. Our neighbors are dying. Our co-workers are dying. Our children are dying. Every day. In numbers we can no longer ignore.

I am the leader of this state. I have been its leader for the last 2,546 days. I will be its leader for the next 373 days. I have been committed to this every day of my Governorship and I need you to join me today and feel the same sense of urgency.

Let me be clear to every New Jerseyan both in this chamber and in all of our 21 counties. Drug addiction is a disease. It is not a moral failing. It is a disease that can be treated. By treating the disease with the methods we know and treating its victims with understanding and compassion, we have a chance to save lives. And each of those lives are an individual gift from God. There can be no calling more clear, no matter your faith, than the calling to save lives.

We have taken some admirable steps. We have made some progress. But it is clearly not enough. I can tell by reading the growing statistics. I can see it by watching the growing costs to our budgets. I can feel it by looking into the eyes of too many loved ones who have lost someone so close and so dear that you can see their hearts actually breaking.

Beyond the human cost, which is incalculable, there is a real cost to every part of life in New Jersey.

You care about our children? Well, it is affecting our education system. Children coming to school high or tortured by a drug culture at home cannot learn.

You care about our health care system? Well, it is affecting the medical community. The costs of this epidemic is putting a burden on our system which we will not be able to bear in the years to come.

You care about law and order and safety in our streets? Well, it is affecting how we fight crime. Police are in danger, citizens are at risk as drug addiction causes behavior that law enforcement finds impossible to handle.

You care about the economy and jobs? Well, it is affecting the financial security of every person it touches. Jobs lost, savings wasted, potential ruined—all by a culture of addiction. None of it adds to our economy—it stalls it.

You care about your own family? Well, only through the grace of God has it not touched your family already. You are among the lucky ones and your luck could run out at any moment.

This Administration has done more than any in New Jersey history on the issue of addiction. We are proud of what we have done, but it has not been enough.

We must do more.

Drug overdose deaths escalated by nearly 22 percent in New Jersey between the year 2014 and 2015, largely due to opioids. There was a 30 percent increase in heroin deaths over the previous year, and triple the number of deaths caused by the synthetic opioid fentanyl, which has up to 50 times the potency of heroin.

Nearly 1,600 people lost their lives to drugs in New Jersey in 2015. That is more than four times the number of murders in New Jersey in 2015. That is three times the number of people that were killed in car accidents in 2015.

Nationally, for the very first time in 2015, deaths from heroin overdoses alone surpassed deaths by firearm homicides.

And the fatalities in New Jersey in 2015 would have been greater when you factor in the number of people whose lives were saved after receiving the overdose-reversal medication Narcan. It was this Administration which made Narcan available in every county. We also provided training for law enforcement and EMTs on how to safely use it to save lives. Has it worked? We had 10,000 Narcan deployments in 2016. Some 10,000 lives that would have been lost without Narcan. Add that to the 1,600 victims who didn't make it. That means we could have lost more than 10,000 lives without our aggressive action on Narcan. Absolutely unthinkable—but likely if we had not acted boldly. And then there are the countless lives of those who are addicted but not yet captured by a statistic – the ones we need to reach out to before it is too late.

According to the Surgeon General, an American dies every 19 minutes from an overdose of heroin or prescription opioids. Nearly 50,000 people died in 2014 of a drug overdose.

In that same report, the Surgeon General tells us that the age of first use of alcohol or any illicit drug vastly increases the rate of addiction. In other words, the earlier you try ANY illicit drug the greater the risk of addiction to other drugs. I want all the advocates of legalizing recreational marijuana to listen to these numbers. If you try any drug by the age of 13, you have a 70% chance of developing addiction in the next seven years. Addicted by the time you are twenty years old. I hope that this will give pause to those who are blindly pushing ahead to legalize another illicit drug in our state for tax revenue or by saying it will cause no harm. The statistics prove you wrong. Dead wrong.

One in twelve high school seniors report using Vicodin. One in twenty use OxyContin. 467,000 children between 12-17 years old use prescription pain medication; 168,000 are addicted. The prescribing rates for these drugs to this age group doubled between 1994 and 2007. Use of these drugs often leads to abuse of and addiction to heroin as a cheaper and more readily available alternative.

These are not just numbers; they are real people. The 17-year-old captain of the high school football team who hurts his knee and gets OxyContin. The nineteen year old girl who gets 30 Percocet for the removal of two wisdom teeth. Good, achieving, normal children on the path to a bright future until their lives are derailed and turned upside down by the careless abundance of opioids in our state.

I have a comprehensive plan to fight this fight more aggressively. There is nothing more important that I could do in my last 373 days as Governor. Let's work to save lives together and let's start today.

First, let's deal with the basics. If you don't know where to find help, you cannot get help for your family. We need to make treatment easier to locate and more accessible to families and individuals in crisis. We need one place every family in New Jersey can go for help.

Today, my Administration is launching a one-stop website and a hotline to make it easier to access treatment.

The website will put addiction information in one place and help eliminate the question families often face when seeking help – where do I go? Who do I turn to?

It will enhance public awareness regarding treatment options, provide insurance guidance, identify locations of state licensed rehabilitation facilities for children and adults, and share information on employment support programs for those in recovery. The website will include updates on the programs being offered by state agencies, and list private and nonprofit contact information.

One website and one phone number to help guide people through what can be a daunting bureaucracy, especially for those in crisis. We cannot reach those in need if the path to help is confusing. We will launch an aggressive public relations campaign to inform every family in need where they can go for help. After today, you can dial 1-844-REACH-NJ or go to REACHNJ.GOV. (The help line and website will be live after 2 p.m. today).

Next, in addition to providing better information access, last year, we increased funding for treatment by more than \$127 million dollars for behavioral health providers. We will propose that funding again for the next year's budget. While we are making progress on expanding capacity to meet the growing crisis, we need to do even more.

Current regulations do not allow us to treat 18 and 19 year olds as children in our system. This leaves us with empty treatment beds intended for our youth and overcrowding for those 18 years of age or older. We do not have the luxury of allowing any treatment beds to remain empty. Therefore, I am changing this rule. We will invest an additional \$12 million dollars to open more beds for this very vulnerable population.

This expansion by the Department of Children and Families to allow their licensed residential facilities to treat 18-and 19-year olds will open another 200 beds to hundreds of young people seeking help. We must do everything we can to keep our children off of waiting lists for treatment. The wait may be more than they can bear.

Next, I am directing Commissioner Harrington to develop new, specific curriculum in every school on opioids. We will implement a new, robust curriculum that will be tailored to every age group. The message will be simple and direct and start in kindergarten—the medicine in Mom and Dad's medicine cabinet is not safe for you to use just because a doctor gave it to them. We will also expand Commissioner Lanigan's Project Pride—which brings minimum security prisoners to middle schools and high schools to share how drug abuse lead them to addiction and prison.

Next, we need to acknowledge that the path to recovery is a lifelong one. We have many young people who enter our colleges and universities already having received treatment for addiction. How do we drop them into the life-changing

pressure cooker that college is for any student without the appropriate atmosphere of support?

In order to further support New Jersey's students who have been caught in the addiction epidemic, I will be increasing funding by \$1 million for college housing programs set up for students in recovery. They are called recovery dorms and they are a lifeline for students who want to succeed in the classroom and have their recovery continue as they learn. These housing programs provide a community for students in need of counseling and additional supports.

Attending college for any child can be challenging, but it can be particularly difficult for students in recovery; there is often a culture of "partying" and students living on campus may be exposed to added temptations in their dorms.

Safe havens such as recovery dorms are critical in our fight against addiction, which is a life-long battle to maintain sobriety.

Next, the effort to support those who exit treatment and are in recovery cannot stop at the college campus. Sober living homes need to be available throughout the state to give opportunities to those in recovery to live in a supportive setting during the very delicate early months of recovery. That's why I have been working with Senator Joe Vitale to create a more flexible environment that encourages Cooperative Sober Living Homes in New Jersey.

We need to ease an overly restrictive statutory, regulatory and code environment for residences that provide supportive and substance-free housing in our communities. And we need to welcome these supportive living arrangements into our neighborhoods. If we want to have a chance to defeat this epidemic, we cannot have a prejudicial attitude towards having these homes in any of our 565 municipalities. They serve a very beneficial use and purpose for our state. Remember, today the nonviolent recovering person in that home in your neighborhood may be a stranger; tomorrow, it may be your own child.

These residences provide yet another safe haven to help those in recovery get back on their feet and back into society sober and productive.

We cannot preach the benefits of treatment and then fail those in recovery by denying them access to a safe, supportive home.

The person who brought these ideas to me is another example of how this crisis can touch any family and how those who are in recovery can truly change lives if we give them the tools to help them to help themselves.

I first met AJ when he was 11 years old. I attended his bar mitzvah. When AJ graduated from the University of Pittsburgh, I hired him to work as a member of my advance team in the Governor's Office. I was proud to have him as a member of my team.

But AJ had a problem and a secret. He dabbled with alcohol in high school and college and then stumbled on to prescription pain killers. By age 19, painkillers and alcohol were a regular part of his life. By the time he came to work for me, he had become a full blown heroin addict.

He would travel to North Camden on his way to the State Capitol to buy heroin for the day. AJ got caught by a family friend buying drugs and went to a 28-day program. AJ found his way around the system, left the facility and lived on the street. AJ watched a close friend die from his addiction. He watched another one go to jail. He knew there were only two choices left for him—die or have the strength to get sober.

After much hard work and now having a few years of sobriety, AJ asked to come see me at the State House. He told me he came to make amends for the ways he felt he had disgraced the Office of the Governor by his conduct and how he had betrayed our relationship.

I asked AJ how he had done it and how I could use his experience to help others. He is the architect of the sober living reforms I just outlined based on his experience and the experience of others.

Now AJ is opening a substance abuse treatment center in February in New Jersey—Victory Bay Recovery Center in Laurel Springs, just 15 minutes from where AJ grew up and where he fell victim to addiction. AJ will continue to change and save lives. He told me that people think that being an addict is a death sentence or an unbearable burden. He disagrees. He is grateful to be in recovery and he believes that the fulfillment and joy that helping others brings to his life will keep him from relapsing and using drugs again.

Who is AJ? He is AJ Solomon, the son of BPU Commissioner Dianne Solomon and New Jersey Supreme Court Associate Justice Lee Solomon. Two extraordinary citizens. Two extraordinary parents.

You see, AJ's story is not an uncommon story; it just has an uncommon ending. AJ can't wait to see how the next chapters of his life unfold and neither can I—or his Mom and Dad. I love you AJ—and I am thrilled about how you have chosen to spend the rest of your life—your long and productive life.

Next, whether leaving a treatment center to a sober living home or leaving prison after having received treatment for the disease that led you to a life of crime, the road to recovery is made even longer and the road to relapse even shorter if the person in recovery cannot find a job.

That is why I advocated for the reforms we have made to the bail system effective just 10 days ago. We now have a criminal justice system that will permit our judges to keep the truly dangerous sociopath behind bars, will release those non-violent offenders who have only remained in jail because they are poor and end the predatory bail system that has lobbyists roaming these halls advocating to keep people behind bars unless their clients are permitted to profit from their release. We ended this antiquated system in a bi-partisan effort and starting in 2017, all of New Jersey will benefit from our efforts.

We know the greatest predictor of personal success in every way is a job. Employment is a long term factor towards reducing recidivism. Thanks to our bi-partisan efforts with Senator Cunningham, we have "banned the box", which was a barrier to employment.

As we all know there are many more barriers, which is why we will be working with Koch Industries and their General Counsel Mark Holden to work collaboratively with New Jersey based companies to challenge ourselves and long accepted exclusions for employment of the formerly incarcerated.

This March we will host an Employment Opportunity Summit of the business, legal, and human resources executives to ensure that New Jersey is at the forefront of helping people get back to work and become productive citizens and taxpayers. That will help those who have been incarcerated, been addicted and been left behind to have an opportunity to reclaim their lives and not go backwards to addiction and jail.

Next, we must honestly confront the economic barriers to receiving treatment for addiction.

The wealthy in our society have few, if any, economic barriers to treatment. They have the financial means to pay whatever the costs are to get treatment for their loved ones.

Through our efforts over the last three years, we have eliminated many of the barriers for the poor to receive treatment as well. When I expanded Medicaid eligibility in New Jersey by Executive Order in 2013, it created a sea change in the availability of drug treatment for the poor in New Jersey. In 2016, 14,357 Medicaid recipients are receiving drug addiction treatment. This represents a five-fold increase over 2013. A five-fold increase for the poor in New Jersey. Due to the reforms we advocated, the cost per recipient is also down 7.7 percent.

Who has the biggest economic barriers to treatment? The working men and women of the middle class of New Jersey. Not wealthy enough to pay privately. Too high an income to qualify for even expanded Medicaid. They are dependent on a health insurance industry that too often finds a way to say no. Well, as a guy who grew up in a middle class New Jersey family, I say that is unacceptable. Whether your child lives or dies should not be subject to a denial letter from an insurance company. On behalf of our middle class being attacked by the double whammy of the addiction crisis and denied coverage by our insurance industry, I demand we end this today together.

I am calling on Senate President Sweeney and Speaker Prieto to join with Republican Leaders Kean and Bramnick as the sponsors of a new law to mandate that no citizen with health insurance can be denied coverage for the first six months of in-patient or outpatient drug rehabilitation treatment. Let's face it; no family puts their loved one into in-patient drug treatment unless it is absolutely necessary, unless every other alternative has been tried. Rather than support, compassion and coverage, they are met too often by questioning, red tape and denials by insurers who happily take their premiums at the same time. No more pre-approvals. No more medical necessity reviews prior to admission by an insurance company bureaucrat. No more denials that can cost lives. Treatment first. Hope first. Let's end the insurance company run-around.

I challenge you to pass this law in the next 30 days. I will sign it the day you land it on my desk. Together, we can save lives immediately. Middle class families living the nightmare of addiction of a loved one do not deserve the double dose of agony—denial by an insurance company leading to the death of a loved one.

Next, I am announcing an additional \$5 million for the statewide expansion of a successful pilot program on pediatric behavioral health. This program provides telehealth hubs with a psychiatrist on call for pediatricians. The participating pediatricians receive training on how to screen our children for behavioral health conditions and substance abuse issues. The program then provides an immediate connection to a specialist while the parents and child are in the office. In urgent cases, a face-to-face consultation is available within hours on the very same day. No longer weeks of waiting for a specialist when we know that hours can make a difference between life and death.

Next, we must step up prevention efforts in all corners of New Jersey.

We know that the majority of heroin addicts first became addicted through the use of prescription opioids. According to the American Society of Addiction Medicine, four out of every five new heroin users got started by misusing prescription painkillers.

As a result, today I am directing Attorney General Porino to use emergency rule-making and other regulatory reform to limit the supply of opioid-based pain medications that physicians, dentists and other licensed health care providers prescribe to patients presenting with acute pain.

Presently in New Jersey, authorized health care providers can write initial prescriptions for opioid painkillers that provide up to a 30-day supply. This is dangerous, ill-advised and absolutely unnecessary. We know addiction to opioids can occur within days, we must work against potential addiction – and overdose – by limiting supply to five days that can be obtained at the outset of treatment. Prescribers would be required to consult the patient, assess their need and only then provide further authorization for additional quantities.

According to the CDC, in 2012, health care providers wrote 259 million prescriptions for opioid pain medication, enough for every adult in the United States to have a bottle of pills. Opioid prescriptions per capita increased 7.3 percent from 2007 to 2012, with opioid prescribing rates increasing more for family practice, general practice, and internal medicine compared with other specialties. This trend must be curbed.

A blanket 30-day opiate prescription window is excessive, and the ability of prescribers to order a month's worth of powerful, opiate-based pain medications is contributing to the drug crisis in a significant way. Limiting the supply of opioid-based pain medication is just one step to prevent addiction before it starts.

If necessary, Attorney General Porrino should open an investigation of the prescribing practices of our medical community and their interaction with the industry manufacturing these drugs. Profit, by physicians or the pharmaceutical industry, must never be a rationale for contributing to the death of our citizens by overprescribing of these drugs.

Our battle against the plague of addiction has been aided by powerful allies in the faith community, leaders who know that personal pain demands both a willingness to surrender to grace, and a caring community to lift up those in crisis.

I created the Facing Addiction Task Force in the private sector chaired by Pastor Joe Carter of The New Hope Baptist Church in Newark and former Governor Jim McGreevey to keep these issues front and center. They have worked together to address addiction from many angles—prevention, treatment, recovery, helping people as they leave rehab or incarceration, supporting individuals in recovery with housing, health care, employment. They are outstanding New Jerseyans who have answered the call from this Governor and their fellow citizens to serve families in desperate need and to save lives. They have my sincere thanks and I am confident that they have yours as well.

Since they cannot do it alone, I am also creating the Governor's Task Force on Drug Abuse Control— which will focus on mounting a coordinated attack on drug abuse by working with all areas of state government to fight this complex problem together.

How complex?

Within the Attorney General's Office alone, multiple agencies have a role to play in the effort to deter narcotics trafficking, drug diversion, drug abuse and drug addiction. The Departments of Education, Health, Corrections and Human Services also have crucial roles to play. And so, our response must utilize every tool available within state government as well as those at the federal level, in order to bring all we have to this fight. This Task Force will spearhead a multi-pronged, multi-agency attack on the addiction crisis.

As Chairman, I am naming my former Chief Counsel and current Schools Development Authority CEO Charles McKenna. His background as my Chief Counsel gives him the knowledge of every corner of state government. His experience as a federal prosecutor gives him an understanding on the role of enforcement. His history as the head of Homeland Security gives him an appreciation of how this crisis threatens our safety. His success at SDA in building schools on time and on budget has shown everyone that he knows how to solve seemingly intractable problems. I thank him for his willingness to take on this additional role—I know he will help us save lives.

Finally, we need some help from our federal partners to address this crisis. We need the federal government to remove outdated barriers to substance abuse care that limit access to the neediest. Federal Medicaid funds cannot currently be used for people who are receiving inpatient substance abuse treatment in a facility with more than 16 beds. The feds call these facilities "Institutes for Mental Diseases" and make us use only state funds for this type of treatment. This is ridiculous and antiquated thinking. If we remove this barrier and utilize the federal match, we could double the Medicaid beds available for drug abuse treatment.

I am directing Commissioner Connolly to call upon new CMS Administrator Seema Verma, a state innovator in Indiana and someone we worked closely with during the Trump transition, to remove this roadblock to care and call upon our congressional delegation to lead this fight in the Congress. Eligibility for drug abuse treatment should not be determined by how many beds are in the facility where you seek treatment.

This is the Christie plan to attack the epidemic of drug addiction in our state. I am ready to work with and listen to anyone with more ideas on how to address this issue. I am willing to accept ideas from any corner of this state; from any political party; from any level of government.

What I am absolutely unwilling to accept is inaction. I will not have the blood of addicted New Jerseyans on my hands by waiting to act. I will not willingly watch another 1,600 of our citizens die and watch their families mourn and suffer. We cannot waste another minute of our time in leadership on the next partisan-fueled fake scandal. While our friends are dying, we cannot permit the worst partisans in this town to lead the discussion towards politically motivated, media sensationalized nonsense. If we don't reject this conduct by the loudest few, we will be paralyzed by these self-interested actors who care more about the next attack of the day than about truly solving problems affecting New Jersey families.

Our fellow citizens who are facing the disease of addiction do not deserve to be stigmatized. They do not deserve to be locked up in jail purely due to their disease. They do not deserve to be living on the street. They do not deserve to be going without necessary treatment or medication because they slipped through the cracks of our complex and confusing health care system. They do not deserve a life without hope. They do not deserve this fate. They are our husbands and wives. They are our brothers and sisters. They are our sons and daughters. We have the capacity to give them the tools they need to recover and we cannot fail to do so.

This is perhaps the single most important issue to every New Jersey family we will have the chance to address while I am Governor. During our campaign for President, it was often said that we were the loudest voice discussing this challenge for our nation. Now, as I stand here in New Jersey in my final year as Governor, I want us to make New Jersey the example for our entire nation on how to compassionately and effectively help families through this personal hell. If we do it right, we will save lives not only in New Jersey, but all across America. Some will call this plan aggressive. I do not believe it is possible to be too aggressive in fighting this epidemic.

I know this is a very different State of the State address. But when our children are dying in the street, New Jersey should be offended if I came up here and gave a typical political speech. They will be even more offended if we do not act on my plan without delay.

The challenge is enormous but I know we have the resolve to meet it. That resolve, for me, is fueled by the memory of a friend.

When I entered law school at Seton Hall in the fall of 1984, I was lucky enough to meet a group of friends who I have kept for a lifetime. The closest were our first year study group; the people who I studied with for all of our first year final exams. There were nine of us. We have been fortunate and successful professionally. Three have become very successful private practice lawyers in New Jersey. One is an Assistant County Prosecutor. Three are New Jersey Superior Court Judges. One became US Attorney and Governor of New Jersey. We have been blessed personally. All of us have been married and we have 20 children among us.

One of us was particularly gifted. He had the best GPA. He was on the Law Review. He got a great judicial clerkship after graduation. He joined an outstanding law firm. He was the first among us to be named partner of his firm. In every way professionally, he was an outstanding lawyer and a great success.

He married a beautiful and talented woman. Together, they had three incredible children. They bought a great home in the New Jersey suburbs. They enjoyed family vacations together with many of us. We all grew into adulthood together.

By the way, he was also the best looking among us and even as we got older, he was an athlete that kept in great shape. He was an avid runner.

He was very annoying.

His running led to back pain. His back pain led to pain killers.

One night I got a call from his wife. She told me that he was addicted to the pills and alcohol and that she had asked him to leave. He was living with his parents and he needed us, his old friends, to have an intervention and convince him to seek treatment. A group of us went. We convinced him to go. That began a nearly 10-year odyssey. Multiple attempts at sobriety. Lots of counseling. Lots of help and support from those old friends and others.

In the process, he lost his job. He lost his license to drive. He lost his marriage. He lost the right to see his children. He lost a second home. He spent through all his money, including his retirement funds. Then nearly three years ago, Mary Pat and I got the call we had been dreading for years. Our friend had been found dead, alone in a motel room with an empty bottle of Percocet and an empty quart of vodka. He was 52 years old.

By every way we measure success in our society, our friend had made it. Great education. Great career. Wonderful wife. Beautiful children. Fabulous home. Plenty of money. Good looking. Successful. The American Dream.

I sat at his funeral with our friends and helplessly watched his family grieve. I thought to myself, there but for the grace of God go I. It can happen to anyone. We have to start treating this disease and not just jailing its victims. We need to give them the tools they need to recover. We need to stop judging and start understanding this simple truth—every life is precious, every life is an individual gift from God and no life is beyond redemption.

President Kennedy defined in his inaugural address nearly 56 years ago what public service and elective office should be all about, he said, "With a good conscience our only sure reward, with history the final judge of our deeds, let us go forth to lead the land we love, asking His blessing and His help, but knowing that here on earth God's work must truly be our own."

That is what public service is for me and what I will dedicate my final year as Governor to for all of New Jersey's families. Nothing could personify God's work here on earth more than saving lives—each and every life we can save.

That mission is my mission over the next 373 days as Governor. I hope you will join me in this mission.

God bless you. God bless America. And God bless the great state of New Jersey.

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