



NEW YORK STATE SENATOR

Andrea Stewart-Cousins

## Senate Majority Leader Andrea Stewart-Cousins Opening Floor Remarks As Prepared

ANDREA STEWART-COUSINS January 5, 2022

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Thank you, Mr. President. It's so nice to be back with you all, though we were in these chambers just a few months ago!

I know that recent developments have felt like a step back on all of the progress we have made. We hoped New York would be completely opened up for the holidays, but COVID had other plans for us.

But this is not a repeat of March 2020. We now have a strong arsenal of tools to fight this virus and limit the human and economic toll of the pandemic. We need everyone to get vaccinated, get boosted, and wear masks as we push through this latest phase of the crisis.

Thank you to Governor Hochul for stepping up during uncertain times. Although this will be our first session with you at the helm, we've already accomplished so much together. I am eager for a year of collaboration.

And thank you to my Deputy, Senator Gianaris, who has always stood by my side in our efforts. And I want to thank all my wonderful members.

I want to acknowledge my partner in the Assembly, Speaker Carl Heastie, for standing on the side of justice and always seeking to better our state.

Thank you to Minority Leader Ortt. I look forward to working together once again. We don't always agree but we have a great relationship.

I would like to bid farewell to Senator Brian Benjamin and welcome Lt. Governor Brian Benjamin. As Senator, he was my main presiding officer for so many years and it is great to see you up there again this time as Lt. Gov.

And from the 30th district replacing Senator Benjamin, I am honored to welcome our newest member, Senator Cordell Cleare!

Senator Cleare is a time-tested activist and former Senate staffer with a heart for service to others. We are so lucky to have her joining our ranks. Welcome to Albany!

The New Year marks a natural reset, where we can reflect on previous events and apply new insight to the tasks that lie ahead.

We as a state have plenty to reflect upon. This past year tested us in new ways, revealed the depths of old wounds, and challenged each and every one of us, as elected officials, to step up on behalf of all New Yorkers.

2022 will mark the second anniversary of COVID-19. The hardships that we have endured cannot be understated. To date we have lost over 61,000 New Yorkers and we offer our condolences to those who have lost loved ones. This once in a lifetime crisis amplified pre-existing inequalities and brought our economic and social systems to a grinding halt.

Despite these historic challenges, the Senate Majority proved that we were up to the task of meeting them with decisive action.

We stabilized our health care system and rolled out one of the largest and fastest vaccine initiatives in the country; we bolstered our economy from the ground up with help from our federal partners through the Emergency Rental Assistance Program; we also were able to provide \$1 billion in small business grants, \$2 billion in the Excluded Workers Fund, and the most progressive budget in history, which successfully jump-started the most devastated sectors of our society.

And we didn't stop there, because COVID-19 did not just devastate our health system and economy. It revealed deep inequalities that have gone unaddressed for too long. Last year, we moved New York closer to a reality where every person has an equal shot regardless of their background and circumstances.

We took major steps to level the playing field for all New Yorkers by investing record funds in education, requiring the wealthy to pay their fair share in taxes, strengthening our gun safety laws, and recommitting ourselves to a greener future.

We may never return to our old sense of normal, but that's only because we are becoming more exceptional. Our conference has laid a strong foundation from which to grow. It's time for us to continue our collaborative work and deliver even bolder policies that will make New York a fairer haven for opportunity and success. This is our chance to step into a promising new era.

That begins with moving our state towards social and economic policies that acknowledge the changing nature of work and give New Yorkers the tools they need for the jobs of the future.

In order to fully support our workers, we need to ensure that parents aren't forced to choose between a paycheck and raising their children. Under this current system our children

ultimately pay the price.

It's time for us to make universal, affordable child care a reality in our state. This common sense policy will transform labor and give kids a head start that will change the course of their lives. New York stood out in 2016 by enacting the country's strongest and most comprehensive paid family leave program. We must once again lead the way.

I want New York to be a state that invests in the next generation from cradle to college. This can only happen with statewide, fully funded Pre-K to accompany universal childcare. I am proud of the advancements we have made, but let's go the final mile and ensure every district has this resource for generations to come.

COVID showed us the vast, untapped potential of remote working and learning. Unfortunately, roughly one million New Yorkers live without broadband access. A huge sector of our state is being excluded from the growing digital economy because they lack this utility. Just as the New Deal brought rural Americans out of darkness, we will do the same once again with internet.

As we strive for greater prosperity, we must remember that small businesses and workers alike are still suffering from the economic devastation of the pandemic. Our historic investments in small business grants and unemployment benefits helped stop the bleeding, and kept shops open and families fed. But now we need to help businesses and the workers that power them, not only survive, but thrive.

We need to stem the rising costs of unemployment insurance for small businesses while ensuring that workers receive benefit increases that have been delayed for years. We need to look at the tax rates on both small businesses and working and middle class taxpayers. And we need to provide mental health support for frontline personnel who bore the emotional

brunt of the COVID-19 crisis, and fair compensation to essential workers who are still being stretched to their limits.

Ultimately, we cannot reliably invest in our future without taking drastic steps to reverse climate change. We are running out of time to avoid the most catastrophic impacts of rising CO<sub>2</sub>, which would alter life as we know it. These “once in a lifetime” climate events are occurring every year with increasing ferocity.

This does not have to be our new normal. New York has been a trailblazer on environmental policy ever since we took the majority in 2019, and we aren’t slowing down now.

And as always, our conference will continue to fight for bedrock legislation that will protect the rights and freedoms of every New Yorker. We have seen other state legislatures take unprecedented steps to roll back voting rights and reproductive care. These anti-democratic attacks on our constitutional rights will not stand in New York.

As in the past, our conference will be expanding access to absentee ballots, increasing the number of polling sites—particularly on college campuses—and always working to curtail voter suppression wherever we see it. We will continue to rise up as a destination state for women’s reproductive care, so that every individual can make the choice best suited for their body. There is no alternative.

I know this is an ambitious agenda. That’s because we are ambitious people! Since taking the majority in 2019, we have proven time and again that no mandate is too big, nor any issue too small. That is why New Yorkers have chosen us to fight for them.

After the events of these past two years and in the wake of our own government revelations, we have a lot of healing to do. However, out of difficult chapters comes an incredible period of growth.

New York has never shied away from a challenge. We know as Leaders, we are meant to challenge the status quo and continuously build towards a bigger and brighter horizon.

That is why I am so excited to open up what I know will be another historic legislative session, and work with each and every one of you to reach the growing light at the end of the tunnel.

Together, we will emerge stronger than ever before. We have so much to look forward to.

Thank you Mr. President, and let's get to work!