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Governor

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Secretary of State

Good afternoon, Chairwoman Pintor Marin, Vice-Chair Park and Honorable Members of the Assembly Budget Committee.

Thank you for the invitation to share more about the Department of State and the great work we do on behalf of the people of New Jersey, and to look ahead at what we have planned for the last months of this Administration and beyond.

It has been my great honor to serve the people of New Jersey as Secretary of State for more than seven years.

We are one of the smallest departments of State government, but with a portfolio that is broad and diverse. I have been uniquely positioned to observe and contribute in so many different ways to creating a stronger and fairer New Jersey.

One of the efforts I'm most proud of, particularly at a time when we're seeing aspects of history being erased across the country, is New Jersey's Black Heritage Trail. We first established the Trail informally as a set of itineraries offered by the Division of Travel and Tourism for Black visitors and heritage tourists to explore our state. The Legislature and the Governor then worked together to officially establish it under the New Jersey Historical Commission. Through public nomination and vetting from key historians, more than 60 locations for the Trail have been selected so far. I'm thrilled that next month we will begin putting the first Trail Markers in the ground.

Meanwhile, preparations for the Semiquincentennial have been ongoing since we took office in 2018. Early annual funding enabled the Historical Commission to build a strong foundation for programming and initiatives that are recognized as a model at the national level. The data accumulated and communities engaged will help guide history programming in the state for some time. As we approach 2026, a variety of programs are available. Tavern Talks were offered at eight microbreweries in New Jersey over the past year, including one at the Fort Nonsense Brewing Company, which I was proud to co-host with Assemblywoman Dunn.

Six schools around New Jersey successfully piloted our middle and high school program, *History Happened Here*. The new RevolutionNJ Race Series hosted four races around the state in its first series, and has six planned for 2025. Over 200 organizations have signed up to be RevolutionNJ Proud Partners, and 11 counties and more than 100 municipalities have become RevolutionNJ Communities. In the coming months, events will ramp up significantly, including hosting an event with documentarian Ken Burns, launching the traveling exhibit for communities, opening the State Archives gallery at 225 West State Street, launching a public arts project, and planning for a marquee event in July 2026 to celebrate New Jersey's history.

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In preparation for the celebrations this summer, we are upgrading several critical historical sites so they can welcome visitors. Over ten projects have already started across New Jersey.

The Archives, as well as the State Museum and Division of Travel and Tourism, are playing key roles as partners in our recognition of the 250th anniversary of our nation's founding. In addition to the gallery, the Archives will be digitizing many other major collections from the Revolutionary War Period, including: post-war inventories of damage done to private property by both the British and the American troops; New Jersey Supreme Court cases relating to treason, sedition, and the confiscation of Loyalist estates; and wartime oaths of allegiance and abjuration; records relating to the abolition of slavery and the rights of women and free African Americans during the Early Republic. These projects will enable in-depth historical scholarship on aspects of the war and post-war period previously not thoroughly explored.

In addition to being the Archives partner in the Semiquincentennial exhibit, The State Museum is set to host its own exhibit for the occasion. In fact, we are pleased that the Museum has seen a strong return for visitors after lower guest numbers due to COVID.

One of the most critical partners for the 250th is our Division of Travel and Tourism. NJTT has played a key role in the launch of the RevolutionNJ marketing campaign and has been vital in connecting our historical team with local tourism leaders as event planning progresses.

NJTT also continues to be an active participant in planning for the FIFA World Cup 2026. Beyond the historic significance, hosting the tournament will be tremendously beneficial to the region. FIFA World Cup 2026 matches played at MetLife Stadium, including the Final, are projected to generate over $2 billion in economic impact for the NY-NJ region and support over 14,000 jobs. In addition, our New Jersey Business Action Center team, which acts as advocates and mentors to businesses of all sizes, is also assisting local businesses to be part of FIFA's economic boost.

Among the many partners for World Cup preparations is our own Governor's Office of Volunteerism, which is working with the State Police and Office of Emergency Management to train volunteers to assist at games and related event venues across the tournament. The Office of Volunteerism is actively monitoring how cuts to federal funding will impact program operations, including Americorps New Jersey, moving forward.

Moreover, we are investing time, talent, and treasure in arts, culture, and heritage work across the state. In a field that experienced significant distress in 2020 and 2021 due to COVID, the State Council on the Arts continues to provide resources and stability as the largest funder of the arts in New Jersey. Last year, the Council granted more than $31 million, including funding provided directly to organizations and artists, as well as grants made through the 21 County Arts Agencies. This reflects our Administration's ongoing, historic support for the Council. Governor Murphy, in partnership with the Legislature, invested in the arts industry at historic levels. In FY2021, he approved the agency's first budgetary increase in over a decade, which infused much-needed recovery funds during the pandemic, and in FY2022, the State made the largest grantmaking budget in agency history. Since taking office, Governor Murphy and the Legislature have invested a combined $194,893,000 through the State Arts Council.

Additionally, the Arts Council's leadership on equitable access to the arts is a national model, with the establishment of the Families First Discovery Pass, which allows low-income individuals and families access to free or discounted arts and culture experiences across the state.

The Office of Faith Based Initiatives also focuses on support and expanding opportunities for constituents most in need. Last year, I visited one of the Freedom Schools, which provide summer literacy programs and school year tutoring programs to students in need. Established by the Office of Faith Based Initiatives, the number of New Jersey Freedom Schools has grown from 5 to 17.

The Center for Hispanic Policy, Research, and Development will welcome its biggest class of Governor's Hispanic Fellows this year with 35 students expected to participate in the program's 40th year. CHPRD expects to pilot the establishment of a year-round mentorship program led by Fellows program alumni.

Another of our cultural commissions, the New Jersey-India Commission, launched just last year and is already having an impact. This past December, I was proud to lead an economic mission trip to India that included members of the Commission and our friends at Choose New Jersey. We met with business, government, academic, and community leaders in key cities including Bengaluru, Hyderabad, Ahmedabad, Amritsar, and New Delhi, deepening cultural, educational, and economic ties between our state and India.

I want to note that the U.S. Census plays an important role in giving us information about who our constituents are and how we can best meet their needs, across all of these Divisions and agencies, and across the work of government more broadly at every level. I am immensely proud of the role I played, as chair of New Jersey's Complete Count Commission, in attaining New Jersey's most complete response in three decades in the 2020 Census. Our Census response secured our Congressional representation for the next 10 years and ensures that our state gets its fair share of federal funds. All of the work I'm discussing today has been positively impacted by our robust census participation.

And last, but certainly not least, due to my oversight of the New Jersey Division of Elections, I serve as New Jersey's chief election official. This year marks the eighth and final general election my team and I will lead. As attacks on the integrity of our democracy escalate, it is ever more important that we protect voters, support election workers, and secure our elections.

Since 2018, we have enhanced voter registration opportunities and expanded the ways people can vote in our elections. With automatic voter registration and the online voter registration tool, it is easier than ever to register. With election day voting, early voting, and vote by mail, every voter has three ways to vote.

In 2019 and 2024, we hosted statewide tabletop exercises where we convened county election officials and other elections stakeholders and practiced our responses to several different potential election-disrupting scenarios. These help the counties update their continuity of operations plans to ensure that they are prepared for the next election and beyond. Every year, the Division of Elections leads county election partners through the U.S. Department of Homeland Security federal election tabletop exercise.

In 2020, as the world faced a pandemic, we still had to hold elections. The Division internally created and implemented the electronic petition filing process and documentation for State, County, and Municipal candidates and clerks. The Division successfully reviewed and accepted petitions both electronically and in-person. Additionally, the Division effectively administered the postponement of multiple elections and their corresponding deadlines while facilitating multiple elections concurrently. Finally, the Division of Elections guided county election officials in the

state's first all mail-in ballot election during the 2020 Primary Election; followed by the General Election, which was primarily by mail. The Division devised multiple plans for PPE procurement and delivery to all county election officials across the 21 counties; along with engineering the State's implementation of ballot drop boxes and the ability for voters to track their ballot via the Secretary of State's website.

In 2021, early voting was established, giving my team and the Division of Elections just four months to lead implementation for the General Election. The Division hosted an early voting simulation in order to offer election officials the ability to familiarize themselves with the voting equipment, vendors, processes, and procedures. All 21 counties procured new electronic poll books and voter verified paper audit trail equipment, reimbursed by the State, along with establishing an updated poll worker training program to ensure the in-person early voting period was successfully supported. The Division established working groups to create guidelines and assist election officials in all early voting efforts. Over the four years since the inception of early voting, the Division has worked to educate voters about early voting. The 2024 Presidential General Election proved our voters listened as over 1 million voters cast their General Election ballot via this method. The Division is currently preparing to educate voters and support county election officials as the recently updated law now permits 6 days of early voting ahead of any primary election. The upcoming Primary will be the first to offer the extended early voting period.

As we conclude our time in office, I want to note how proud I am to lead a Department full of colleagues determined to reach, support, and reflect ALL of the people of New Jersey. I want to thank my Department of State team, our division directors, and all of our staff for their dedication and service. Every day, we work hard to serve our constituents in every community across our great state. I appreciate the opportunity to expand on these efforts during the question period.

Thank you.