



Governor Christopher T. Sununu
Inaugural Address
Thursday, January 7, 2021 at 7:00 p.m.

Good evening. Thank you for joining me. I appreciate the opportunity to take a few moments and talk directly with my fellow citizens to both cap off what we can agree has been an extraordinary year, and highlight the opportunities ahead for our great State.

My mom taught me, no matter what the situation, you always start with a thank you. And there are many people to thank tonight. I want to begin by first saying thank you to the people in New Hampshire for placing your trust in me to serve another term as your Governor. It's been a great honor to have the faith of the citizens, especially through such challenging times. And it's with that faith that our team remains humbled and vigilant in the tasks at-hand.

I'd also like to thank New Hampshire's amazing team of dedicated public servants who stood shoulder-to-shoulder with me throughout this pandemic. You've gotten to know a few of them, like Commissioner Shibinette, Dr. Chan, Dr. Daly, course David here. However, to the hundreds of individuals to make up their teams that have been working around-the-clock over these past 10 months, thank you for giving 110% regardless of the situation.

I want to thank the incredible men and women of the New Hampshire National Guard who consistently rise to the task, no matter what the mission called for. They've given countless hours at the foodbank, to the Veterans Home, Unemployment Hotline, PPE warehouse, our testing facilities, and now our vaccination clinics. No matter what the job, they stood tall and were there for us every time.

And most importantly, I want to thank New Hampshire's heroes of 2020, the true citizens of the year, our frontline Healthcare Workers: the Nurses and the Caretakers who never stopped, never slowed down. Put themselves at-risk when the chips were down, and they kept going. They were there for our loved ones, when many of us couldn't be. And for that, we will never be able to fully repay you for your service to our families.

Finally, while we could go on all night with the thank yous, of course, and the appreciation for so many, I do want to take a moment to address the 2020 election here in New Hampshire, as well as the complexity and the controversy we saw across this country surrounding the results, cumulating in the tragic events that unfolded yesterday in Washington.

Across the country, many States found their systems in turmoil, adding confusion and chaos to an already deepening public health crisis. But, here, in New Hampshire, we owe a debt of gratitude to all the Town Moderators, the volunteers, and our teams working with the Secretary of State, Bill Gardner, and Attorney General Gordon MacDonald for ensuring New Hampshire's elections went off exactly as we needed them to: with integrity and accountability. When it was all done, we had our votes counted on election night. And even with over a dozen hand recounts across the State, everyone came back verifying the winner. Virtually no issues out of the over 800,000 ballots cast, it was an incredible accomplishment, and it was paramount to giving our citizens the peace of mind they deserve, when it comes to the value and the credibility of our voting process.

Once again this year, New Hampshire has been ranked as not only having one of the highest voter turnouts, but also ranked as one of the most reliable and accurate voter systems in America. Where others struggled, New Hampshire set the gold standard.

But, as we know, life has a way of always challenging us in unexpected ways. 2020 was a very tough year. We all have our stories to tell on what appeared to be a constant barrage of never-ending hardships of angst and stress. And whether it was here in New Hampshire, or what we saw transpire across our great country, it was unlike anything we could have anticipated.

We had to invent new vocabulary to describe the uniqueness of the year: social distancing; PPE; N95; asymptomatic; antigen; super spreader. And then, it got nuanced. We had things like cluster versus outbreak, right, containment versus mitigation, pandemic versus epidemic. I'm still honestly figuring that one out. And we were faced with an entirely new world. And the stakes were and they remain extremely high.

Remember, just before we identified our first case of COVID back on March 2nd, New Hampshire was stronger than it ever had been before. We had the strongest economy in the northeast, the lowest unemployment rate, with more people working in our State than ever before, and the lowest poverty rate in the nation.

And our new, innovative programs, they were working across the State. Just a few years after inheriting a completely broken mental-health system, we had gotten our Emergency Room waitlist to zero. And that accomplishment, it's not just a statistic. That accomplishment saved lives.

And after inheriting a system that was literally ignoring many of our abused kids, the number of children in foster care had dropped, for the first time in a decade. The number of cases per Social Worker, it was cut by 75%. And in 2019, we saw a record of nearly 270 children adopted from DCYF care.

And after seeing the numerous years, the numbers of overdoses, I think 10 straight years of increasing overdoses from drugs across our state, our Doorway System, designed to help rural communities have equal access to care, it was paying dividends. And we were on-track for our third straight year of reduced overdoses.

The future of all those programs, it became very cloudy as the impact of this virus became apparent right around those first two weeks in March. And we knew it was going to take extraordinary effort to ensure that our system didn't come crashing down.

Now, I don't want to just review all the challenges we faced in 2020. You know them. Aside from the COVID crisis, we dealt with a presidential impeachment trial, divisive political elections, social injustice. I mean, the list goes on. And nearly every citizen in our State could write their own book on the trials of 2020.

We were there together every step of the way. And while I appreciate some of my press conferences would go on a bit long -- David knows that better than anybody -- I had a few dad jokes mixed in there, of course. But it was really to guarantee that complete transparency in everything that we were doing. That transparency, that connection is what has helped ensure public trust through these very frightening times. And it was a fulfillment of my pledge that we would be partners through this crisis.

We've experienced a lot of heartbreaking tragedies. Family members, family members' lives lost to COVID far too soon. For many individuals, life's plans took a very drastic turn. Jobs were lost. Businesses were upended. Weeks and sometimes months of isolation; massive disruptions in school and education.

But in this Inaugural Address, I'd like to focus on new beginnings and that next chapter that we're going to write for ourselves. And I believe our responsibility tonight, frankly, it's to capture the opportunities of tomorrow, not just dwell on those ordeals of the past. What we can never forget, though, is how the challenges of 2020, tough as they were, they actually unknowingly created opportunity to allow the best of Granite Staters to shine through.

There are literally hundreds of heartwarming stories: self-sacrifice; community altruism. Each one of these collectively defines that Live Free or Die spirit that we all cherish. There are two stories in particular that I do want to highlight tonight.

Early on in the pandemic, we realized that nursing and staffing, they were going to be a critical challenge as the virus spread. And working with Commissioner Shibinette, we utilized nhresponds.org. It's a website where individuals could volunteer to help out where staffing shortages may arise. And we weren't sure how well it would work. And we figured maybe a few people might be willing to step up and help out a few hours a week.

Within a couple weeks, literally hundreds of individuals had signed up. It was amazing. One particular individual was Jaime Adams. Jaime registered on NH Responds when we put out the call. And when a long-term care facility found itself with a staffing shortage in April of 2020, Jaime knew that she had to step up. She volunteered her time and expertise at the facility for six weeks straight working the third shift, over eight hours a day, four to six days a week. And that meant living in respite housing to avoid infecting her husband and their two-year-old daughter. And then, at the end, completing a two-week quarantine between the end of her service before finally being able to go home. Jaime made a tremendous difference in the lives of the residents and the Staff during her deployment. And it's that kind of sacrifice that told us, early on, that here, in New Hampshire, we were going to be okay.

Then, there's the story of Heidi Kukla. So, many of you know Heidi. She's one of the Lead Nurses over at Elliot Hospital. And Heidi has really just been caring for some of the sickest patients in Manchester. And when the pandemic hit, she was out on those frontlines, right out there as the ICU Nurse. And she and her colleagues saw the horrors, frankly, of what COVID could do to an individual. And it was Heidi and her team that were there when the patients, when the patients' families, when their family members weren't able to be there to comfort them. It was Heidi and her team that was there.

And as hospital beds filled up and the national shortage of PPE turned to a crisis here at home, it was Heidi who stepped up, took the initiative for her team, and made a plan to maintain appropriate care to New Hampshire's residents who desperately needed that medical attention. She committed to producing gowns, herself, and for her colleagues that were working on those frontlines. She created a pattern to make disposal gowns. Then, she recruited some volunteers and they began production. And in five weeks, her team produced 16,000 gowns, an incredible success for our healthcare workers.

But she wasn't done there. It was Heidi who stepped up once again, just a few weeks ago, frankly, to receive the first COVID-19 vaccine here in New Hampshire. And she did it, because after all she had seen, she wanted to reaffirm to the citizens of New Hampshire the importance of taking the right steps to end this pandemic. So, to Jaime and to Heidi, and to frankly all the countless individuals who collectively defined the sacrifices needed for our ultimate success, we, again, say thank you.

The importance of the stories is that they inspire. And I believe that, at the heart of the change that we all want to see in 2021 lies the need to be positive, to be uplifting, to lead by example. It's only through those practices that we can expect the changes necessary to create a new and more positive future.

2021 will not be better simply because we want it to be. It's not going to be better simply because we wish it to be. 2021, it will only be better if we're willing to kind of look in that mirror and first initiate the change within ourselves.

It's kind of like resolving to lose a few pounds, right, at the beginning of the New Year. We certainly need to eat healthier and to work out. But the truest catalyst of growth is to cultivate a healthy mindset and a healthy lifestyle. We have to shed the old habits that have failed us.

So how do we do it? Well, let's first start by accepting that the growing tensions that we see throughout the American culture right now, they're unfortunately nothing new. Much of the division that we see in our country, it has deep roots. It predates many of us. Yet, those divisions are our experiences today: the rich versus poor; denominational divisions within faith; ethnic and cultural differences; Democrats versus Republicans. Why must we continue to allow these differences not only divide us but to define us? Instead, these are differences that we should embrace through relationships, as citizens of New Hampshire, and not just geographically but more importantly as friends and as neighbors.

We read in scripture, in Genesis, that we are all made in the image and likeness of God. So no matter where we reside on the planet -- in our case here in New Hampshire -- that makes us neighbors. And as such, we can learn through our relationships that we share many of those same values and those core beliefs which, frankly, are just more reasons to be united.

We're all familiar with that golden rule. Remember that one? Do unto others as you would have others do unto you. Honestly, I hadn't really heard that one in a long time. It was my son, Leo, who had said it the other day. And frankly, it kind of gets to be almost a cliché over the years. We say it, but do we really listen to those words? But it's important to set a goal to live to those standards. And beyond that, as that old Christian song expounds, let there be peace. And let it begin with me.

Listen, I'm not trying to preach to anyone. Trust me. I am also a work in progress, to say the least. However, when I look at the condition of our nation today, and when we examine what transpired in Washington just yesterday, I know that it's going to take frankly the grace of God and all of us working together to bring about the changes I believe we all want.

We have to be transformational in our approach. To remain stuck in our own ways and our comfort zones, it's not logical, right? Let us never forget united we stand, divided we fall. And it's in that act of looking in the mirror and having an honest conversation about our role in the building of a more positive atmosphere for the next generation that is what will lead us into that next step.

Our growth, our evolution, our development, it can only start within our own hearts and minds. After all, the person whose verdict, frankly, that counts the most in life, it's the one who's staring us back in that mirror.

Now, while it's true that sometimes people may be motivated to action by anger or fear, frankly, no one is ever inspired for true transformation, frankly, unless it comes from a place of optimism, a place of compassion, a place of positivity. The belief that one's responsibility to the greater good can coexist with the personal freedoms and independence granted to us by the Founding Fathers, that's essential for a peaceful republic.

Holding people accountable to their actions is fine. It's an important feedback response system to getting better results. We understand that. But to do it in a way where we're tearing each other down, belittling, and devaluing others' views, and having a complete lack of empathy for our neighbors, well, that is not acceptable. And it will never persuade.

What is it that compels us to put aside our own instincts of self-preservation? What is it that allows us to make these sacrifices that we have? It's faith. It's love of our family. It's respect of those

who don't have the good fortunes of health and capacity. It's those individuals that silently wait in the wings praying for us to live up to our end of the bargain that comes with the Live Free or Die spirit.

It's naïve and selfish, frankly, to think that Live Free or Die speaks to the individual alone. No, with freedom comes great responsibility of fellowship and of care for one another. And in that, we may not depend solely on the unreliable compassions of a Government System, but on the steadfast durability of our Granite State neighbors.

I believe, frankly, we sometimes become so preoccupied in winning an argument that we're driven to this false security of political validation via our Political Party or maybe an Elected Leader. And we use those entities as our line in the sand. There's a tendency to show too much deference and wrongly believe that those individuals are somehow infallible, almost as if they're not people. They're somehow some sort of deity. And often, we see many of those Elected Officials and people in positions of power convince themselves, frankly, that they hold a higher status, simply because they chose a different career path than others.

We see individuals frankly trying to cut in line to get a vaccine, or demand that their job is more important than others'. And therefore, they need to be first. This is all a function of the cult-like status that we give them. But it isn't real. Let's remember, we are elected to serve those that we represent. It's not the other way around.

Some hide behind that Live Free or Die motto to justify actions and promote an agenda of discord. Frankly, they use it to defend their unwillingness to make sacrifices for the good of our communities. That is not what General John Stark envisioned when he spoke those perpetual words.

Live Free or Die, it might take on a subtly different meaning for all of us. But in general, I believe many agree that frankly it ties New Hampshire to the fundamentals of low taxes, limited government, local control. Yes, we treasure our Live Free or Die culture, but not at the expense of being good and a reasonable neighbor.

Even though it's not written on a license plate, the New Hampshire I grew up in always put others first. And in fact, I would argue that, when we put others first, frankly, that's what strengthens that Live Free or Die spirit.

Let's remember that our Founding Fathers, General John Stark, himself, pressed individuals into Military service to defend the Colonies and the ideals of independence, that those are the ideals that they were trying to preserve. They had Laws and Rules, just like everybody else. And they often asked individuals to make temporary sacrifices for the good of the preservation of independence and liberty for everyone, for the long-term health and safety of their communities. They weren't infringing on the Live Free or Die spirit. They were asking folks to make those sacrifices in order to preserve it.

Doesn't mean you have to agree with it, doesn't mean you have to believe it, and sometimes you don't even have to like it, of course. But those sacrifices have to be made. But that collective obligation at times, and in the course of limited events, to do what must be done, it's an essential ingredient to our freedoms, because we don't live alone. We are a community. We must make living together in relative harmony a priority.

This all hit home with me early on in the COVID crisis. I visit a school. It was an outdoor event to celebrate some energy efficiency upgrades that had come from a State Grant that they had put together. And after the event, due to social distancing, only a few students really had the chance to come up and chat with me.

So, we were under an outdoor tent. It was a bit rainy that day, a little bit cold. But we got a chance to meet with and chat. And there were about 5 or 6 of them between the ages of 9 or 10, or so. And through our conversations, we were just chatting about this-and-that.

And I asked one of them why they thought -- what they thought, frankly, why they were wearing the masks, and what they thought about wearing a mask in school. Was it easy? Was it too difficult to understand the Teacher? Did most kids keep it on? How was it working? And this little girl comes up to me. I apologize. I don't remember her name. But, she said, I really don't like wearing it, but I never take it off. And when I asked why, she said, well, because I don't want to let them down. And who, I asked. I said, who? Who don't you want to let down? Everybody else, she said. Everybody else. That's what it's all about.

It's the woman in the cereal aisle that you pass at the grocery store, or the Postal Worker that you pass in the hallway of your apartment building, maybe people you've never even met. Live Free or Die is all about our responsibility not just to ourselves but to them.

It is said that, as individuals, we need to seek less to be consoled than to console. We need to seek less to be understood than to understand. This is the freedom I envision for New Hampshire, our freedom enveloped in, frankly, neighborly caring. It's the New Hampshire way to join together within our communities and not let politics, or prejudice, divide us. It's in that effort that we, as citizens, can become more reliant on one another for solutions and less on the often inefficient approach of government. This is why we protect and we treasure our local control. It's the foundation for individual responsibility and living cooperatively.

Our motto of Live Free or Die, it comes with the obligation that we will put politics and prejudices aside and ensure our family and neighbors are supported. Look, when our side doesn't win, doesn't mean there's a conspiracy or the world's out to get us. It simply means we have to try harder next time. We must put forward better and more compelling arguments on that battlefield of ideas. And we mustn't let COVID or politics rob us of our passion for neighborliness.

The consistent cynical belief that an overwhelming public corruption at every turn, that results in a lasting damage to the public conscience, as a whole. It tears at the fabric of the Live Free or Die spirit. 2020 has unfortunately shown that there are individuals that take, frankly, a bit of pride out of such cynicism. Often, it's in that veil of technology and the unanimity of social media that gives this illusion of acceptance and the enthusiasm to criticize both action and ideas.

It was Teddy Roosevelt who said that it's not the untested critic that counts. The credit belongs to those who are in the arena and who toil tirelessly, often selflessly, against their own personal interests, or often their beliefs, to achieve that goal of a fulfilled community.

We all carry the responsibility to set the right example for others, especially our kids. No one's perfect, of course. But what we expect as a society is a genuine effort to be decent and just towards one another. Strength is not sacrificed because of decency. And it's precisely that strength combined with the virtue of community, that is what separates New Hampshire from everyone else.

Now, with the constant management of the State this past year, I really haven't been able to read as much as I always resolve to. I think a lot of us resolve to read more than we probably do. But, when I could, I did try to make it something positive, something inspirational. I found myself diving into the writings of a Winston Churchill or Martin Luther King, Abraham Lincoln, individuals I hadn't read for years, frankly. Now, those Leaders toiled through their own national crises. But let's remember. They began as ordinary individuals placed into extraordinary times.

And I was thinking about the times that we're in. I found Lincoln's second Inaugural Address. It's uniquely fitting, frankly. It's a small excerpt. And he said, "With malice toward none, with charity for all, with firmness in the right as God gives us to see the right, let us strive on to finish the work that we are in, to bind up the nation's wounds." That's it. Without conditions or exception, malice towards none, charity for all, it's well-within our ability to live to those standards. They aren't lofty. They're not unreasonable. They're human. And it only takes the will of our hearts to make it happen.

It's fitting that we remember, frankly, the hundreds of our fellow Granite Staters that are no longer with us due to this infernal disease, this disease that has brought so much of our world to a halt. But what a disservice it would be to them and to their families for us to slow down our efforts now. And in doing that, we will have earned the ability to step beyond this crisis and into a new day, and that any lessons that we might take from this perilous journey be ones that enhance our ability to expand our opportunities, and frankly reembrace our communities, and reexamine the values of the spirit of that Live Free or Die motto.

No battle is won without sacrifice. And remember, it is the Soldier on the frontlines that prays hardest for peace, not unlike our Doctors or our Nurses, or our elderly Caretakers. They've sacrificed the most. They have seen the worst. Is it no wonder that it is they who are standing up strongest, not just wishing for an end of the misery, not just waiting for it, but working to ensure that all who can and are willing can get this vaccine?

Finally, aside from the COVID pandemic, I do want to take a little bit of time, a few moments here, just to address some of the Policy challenges that are ahead of us. We have to work hard to fight for this expanded workforce housing that we see lacking across the State. We have additional student debt assistance that can become a reality for so many. We continue to clear out the waste and create a more streamlined and frankly just a more efficient government.

And as we look to the future, we will continue the work of rebuilding our economy, by reducing taxes, by growing jobs. We will work to maintain one of the best public education systems in the nation, while also expanding educational opportunity for students and families. And we will continue to lower the cost of prescription drugs and health insurance premiums. Paid family leave, it can and must be done without an income tax. More balance in our education funding, it has to be addressed.

But all the greatest Policies in the world will simply stall out and be left as nothing more than words on a forgotten page if we cannot resolve how to move forward with and frankly be inspired to accept that we each have a role to play that is bigger than ourselves. Our redemption lies in finding the path that leads us to fight for those tomorrow who may not be fighting with us today.

In closing, we are at the precipice of a paradigm shift. We really are. We each have the opportunity to live with independence and with freedom while fiercely fighting for the best interests of our neighbors and our State, and our Country. Let's not waste this chance. As we often do, let New Hampshire lead the way.

This COVID crisis is a very messy situation. And it shook our communities to the core. But sometimes a mess is an opportunity in disguise, a chance to reimagine what can be. But we must set an intention. And it's in that defined purpose that we create our own path of success in the future. Thank you for your time tonight and may God's blessing be bestowed upon the great State of New Hampshire as we move forth into this new year. Goodnight.