

Introduction

Welcome to the NCJA Podcast. Listen to lively discussions with a variety of guests about promising criminal justice practices and programs worth taking closer look at. Your interesting ideas from around the country on a variety of important and timely topics, and learn how you can adjust or adapt your Beringia grant program for improved success. Thanks for joining us. We hope you enjoy.

Amanda Blasko:

Hi everyone, and welcome back to another episode of the NCJA Podcast. I'm thrilled to have special guest program director Ken Hardy from the National Governors Association or NGA as it's called, with me today to talk about the 2024 Governor's State of the State Speeches. Through this episode, we'll chart the importance of the State of the State's Speeches, especially for the public safety community, and dive into the key public safety trends and priorities among the speeches. We'll also discuss how these priorities and trends have evolved over the last several years. Ken, thank you so much for being on the podcast. I'm so glad to have you here. Would you mind briefly introducing yourself?

Ken Hardy:

Sure. Thank you for the opportunity to talk with you today and provide some thoughts on the ways that governors do consider criminal justice issues and express them through their State of the State addresses. My name is Ken Hardy and I'm the program director for the National Governors Association Public Safety and Legal Counsel's Division. After graduating Boston University School of Law, I got my start working in public safety and criminal justice issues as legal counsel to the speaker of the main House of Representatives. Before that, I spent five years at the Pew Charitable Trust as a manager for their public safety performance project. Where we help states to make comprehensive analysis of their adult and juvenile justice systems, find ways to protect public safety, hold offenders accountable and control corrections costs in a responsible manner based on good data and research. I've been an NGA for about two and a half years now, and maybe for your listeners, I'll just give you a little bit about what NGA does.

Founded in 1908, the National Governors Association is the voice of the nation's state and territorial governors, and it's a leading forum for bipartisan policy solutions. Every governor is a member. Right now, Governor Spencer Cox of Utah is our current chair and Governor Jared Polis of Colorado is our co-chair, and every year the chair and the Vice-chair switch back and forth between parties because it really is a bipartisan organization. Governors by their very nature and their very position have to accomplish things and get things done. The roads have to be paved, criminal justice institutes have to run, police academies have to be recruited, and so it's a really small club, the governors, and they really do have a great deal of respect for each other, and there's a lot of camaraderie between them. At NGA, we have two branches. One represents the governor's shared interest to the White House, the administration of Congress.

These shared interests are defined by our executive committee and three governor-led task forces that look at education, workforce and community investment, economic development and revitalization, and then public health and disaster response. An example of the work they do is a recent briefing we held on the hill outlining our shared environmental priorities across the states and territories. The other part of NGA is the Center for Best Practices, which is the only research

and development firm that provides practices and innovative policy solutions directly to governors offices. There are 14 different policy areas at the center. In my policy area, the Public Safety and Legal Counsel's division, we serve governors through three different networks of advisors. The first is our criminal justice and public safety advisors, our CJPAs, we're kind of the highest level member of the governor's staff who advise on criminal justice and public safety issues.

Our second network is a consortium of public safety executives, and those are sort of members of the governor's cabinet, usually either a secretary or commissioner level who handle criminal justice and public safety issues. Finally, we have a network of governors chief legal counsels. Because while legal counsels touch so many issues in a governor's office, really anything criminal justice or public safety usually falls in their value as well. And we staff all three of those networks by providing them with data and research kind of best practices from across all 50 states and five territories. And we do that in a bipartisan fashion and I have to say, put a little plug in that I have a really phenomenal team and it helps me do that at NGA and really provides great research and data for the governors.

Amanda Blasko:

Excellent. Thank you for diving into your background a little bit and also for just kind of providing an overview of all the value and all of the different elements that NGA does, especially with the different networks. That was really interesting. Thank you. So before we get started with the meat of our discussion, would you mind providing a brief overview of what the governor's State of the State Speeches are and ultimately what their importance is for the public safety community, especially for those planning for administering out or spending federal funds?

Ken Hardy:

Sure. So state of the state's a really a unique chance for governors to talk about their accomplishments, set priorities for the next year, kind of demonstrate their values and really establish a broad visionary direction for the state. They're given almost every year when legislatures are in session, sometimes an election year or an off year when the legislature's not in, they won't be given or if there's an inaugural that year, they won't be given. But if you've never seen one in person, they're really a great demonstration of democracy, the atmosphere, the pomp and the tradition. For governors, governing a modern state is increasingly complicated and governors have to be both big picture thinkers and they have to be responsible for the small details of what's going on in their state. As a result, they see things as totally interconnected. So even when they're proposing initiatives and programs in one area, they're really seeing the results they will have in other areas.

So just an example would be right now, childhood health and wellness programs. To a governor, while they may talk about that in their State of the State, they're really thinking about how childhood wellness will lead to better educational outcomes. And then that leads to preventing youth from interacting with the criminal justice system, which leads into kind of their adult lives and them entering the workforce, which then strengthens the economy and increases economic growth. And then that helps them keep taxes low, but gives them more resources to reinvest into more programs, which would help childhood health and so on. Governors really see things on that level. So everything they're talking about, even if it's criminal justice touches everything

else in a State of the State. A current example of this would be, I think the new focus or the renewed focus on housing that a lot of governors have been expressing in their State of the States.

Governors are really seeing the lack of affordable housing through the lens of economic development, mental health and criminal justice all at the same time. So when they talk about that one issue, they're really talking about them all. As for the delivery of State of the State addresses, there are really three audiences I think that governors typically have. The first is the legislature, and to some degree their own administration. Legislature. And those administrations are reactive to what the address and what the legislative priorities and the legislative agenda the governor is setting in a State of the State. State of the States are typically paired with a budget and specific legislation that flows out of them. State of the States, you could say are kind of the poetry of a governor's agenda. And then the budgets and the legislation are really the pros. And the state budget is where broader priorities are translated directly into policy.

But it's important for your listeners, I think, to look at both, to look at the State of the State and then the budget. Especially as they consider how they're going to spend federal funds or new changes in state law, are going to kind of set new directions for them in the state, especially if new programs are being set in the State of the States. The second audience is the media where the governor is trying to get his principles and values out there and really influence the broad culture and the public zeitgeist, get that echo chamber going about what the things they care about are.

And then finally, I think the last audience, and maybe the most important is the public. State of the State addresses really give governors a chance to demonstrate their leadership and reflect what they think the needs of the state are. Governors take the responsibility for this incredibly seriously. And state of the states are one of the most impactful chances they have to really talk collectively to their constituents, especially in the modern kind of media landscape where everything's a bit fractured. To have this kind of event where they can speak directly is so important and that speaking to the public then leads to public support, which then translate into the political will to make change and get things done.

Amanda Blasko:

Thank you. That's super insightful. I also really like how you said the speech is the poetry of the governor's agenda and the budget is the prose. I feel like that's a really cool way of looking at it.

Ken Hardy:

Yeah. Yeah. I kind of stole it from... I think it's governing poetry and legislating prose or something like that.

Amanda Blasko:

That's fine. So I'm kind of curious about the process of listening to and analyzing all of these speeches. Because I know there's so much content there. Could you briefly speak to or talk about how NGA kind of records and analyzes the speeches and pulls out and extracts the key information for various stakeholders?

Ken Hardy:

Sure. We track all 55 of the addresses when they're available. As I said, some years there aren't some of them. But we read them and we listen to them and break them down by topic area, and we really try to see where there are first broad areas of agreement. And I'll say in addition to reading them, we listen to most of them as well when they're on YouTube or on the governor's web pages. And that's a really, I think, important part of the address. Reading something and the delivery of it are very different a lot of the time. And it's important to hear where the governor is putting emphasis on words or on programs. And when you're watching it too, just to see where the shared applause or the shared audience reaction is because that can tell you a lot about where the governors are putting emphasis on programs.

We then kind of categorize them amongst the 14 different program areas I talked about at the center for best practices. And then after that, we just analyze them. We reach out to some governor's offices to ask them if we see something new, where are you taking this? How are you thinking you're going to deliver on this? And if something is mentioned by a number of governors, we know that that's probably going to be something that's going to have our attention and our focus for the upcoming year. And we know that we're probably going to have to start collecting data and some of those best practices that other states... Because if one state's doing something well or if there's a new program, chances are another state's going to be coming to us in a few months and saying, "Hey, we saw they're doing this. How can we do it? How are they getting good results out of it? And what can we do to do better?"

Amanda Blasko:

So in terms of analyzing the State of the State priorities and trends, what kinds of patterns are you seeing for 2024?

Ken Hardy:

Sure. So the other day I looked, and I think there were 44 of them that had been completed at this point. And saw I think four bigger buckets of different areas that were being hit on. Mental health kind of got 19 mentions throughout the addresses, substance and opioid use got about the same 19. Law enforcement, recruitment, retention, that kind of thing, got 16, violent crime, got 13, and then there were other priorities that varied from seven or eight mentions down to two or three mentions. But for your listeners and for grant funding and policy purposes, I think the three that are most important are probably the law enforcement, the violent crime, and of course mental health and substance use. As the unemployment rate stays very low, I think law enforcement recruitment attention is just of vast importance in keeping the basic services of police on the streets and corrections staffed up.

They're experiencing the same issues every other industry is in trying to get people in the door and to keep people there. So generally, governors have been talking about this in areas of giving it more direct funding, but also expanding financial incentives for people who are being recruited in and who are staying and expanding training opportunities for them. So looking across the governors that talked about that, Governor Shapiro mentioned in his address, talked about how he provided funding in last year's budget to help local police recruit and retain more officers. And talked about the investments he was going to make this year, and mentioned that last year he saw a 258% increase in the number of applicants that the state had received to be a state trooper.

So continuing to keep those trends going. Governor McMaster in South Carolina talked about it, talked about the... As I said before, they kind of talked about the successes they've had. So talked about last year how he had put money into recruitment and retention in the General Appropriation Fund, but then this year he wanted to build on that additional success and was allocating \$17.8 million for recruitment and retention pay raises in the next year to keep those experienced officers there.

And then was proposing a \$2,000 state income tax credit for every active duty law enforcement officer, kind of keep the force stable. Governor Ivey of Alabama talked about how she was kind of doubling down on their enforcement efforts and they were seeing record numbers of graduating classes of officers because of things they had done in past years to keep recruitment and retention going. Governor Inslee also talked about his recruitment and retention efforts and the investments he was making in his budget and talked about the new training centers they were trying to build up and increase across the state so that they could give the new recruits the best training and best de-escalation training they could. And Governor Huckabee Sander really talked about it as something she was proud of. They said ranks had increased by 17% in just the first year, she had kind of made investments. Set a specific target that she was trying to grow the force by more than a hundred digital officers.

So a lot of money being invested there, a lot of specific programs being proposed there, and it just kind of demonstrates that governors see that this is employment area that they need to focus on because they know that the direct impact that these officers and these corrections officers and everyone else have on their communities and just want to make sure that they're continuing to provide the best service they possibly can. The second one I mentioned was violent crime. And as of course, across the country, crime statistics have continued to evolve. Focus on violent crime continues to be something that governors look at and ways that they can kind of specifically address it. And I think an interesting thing that we saw was really the... And for your listeners will be really the necessity for there to be state and local partnerships on violent crime. It's not necessarily a statewide increase all the time.

It's sometimes more specific areas, more specific localities. So the state and those localities working together is really what is going to help get the resources to the places needed to get those rates down. For example, Governor Murphy of New Jersey talked about this and he specifically mentioned some investments they were making in different localities for violence prevention efforts. And he specifically mentioned empowering residents in places like Newark, Patterson, Jersey City, Trenton, and other places where maybe those rates were going up. But getting the resources there in those state and local partnerships to help them on a local level address those issues is the best way that maybe states can help to lower that violent crime rate. Governor DeWine of Ohio talked about the hundreds of millions of dollars that he's channeled through cities and local law enforcement offices to protect Ohio citizens and was talking about technology as another way to help target violent crime.

He talked about the new state-of-the-art crime prevention technology and higher staffing levels for those programs across Ohio. He lauded the Ohio State Patrol, the adult Parole authority in the Ohio Investigative unit as places that were using that new technology to help address the violent crime rate. It's not just states. Governor Albert Bryan from the US Virgin Islands kind of talked about violence reduction programs, mentoring at-risk youths, community service activities, going into schools, making presentations on violent crime. And he was also talking about partnerships that again, he was having at the local level with Project Safe neighborhoods,

the National Network for Safer Communities and the way that he was bringing in the various departments of his government to partner with them to help on the ground in localities, target specific violence prevention programs.

Amanda Blasko:

Thank you for going through those main trends in more detail. That was very insightful. So within those main trends that you did mention, are there any additional sub patterns, if you will? So behavioral health you mentioned is a big trend slash priority across the speeches. Did the speeches lend any further insight into the kinds of priorities within behavioral health more broadly?

Ken Hardy:

Yeah, I think there, the shift is more to thinking of behavioral health systems as full systems. Again, when I talked about governors seeing everything as being interconnected and behavioral health and criminal justice and public safety are now... I think in their minds really want more and more becoming one system. So taking a comprehensive look at them to make sure that they're working at all levels, I think is kind of what I've seen coming out of the State of the States this year and how the criminal justice system and those behavioral health systems interact.

A lot of talk of 988 crisis intervention alternates to actually keeping people from interacting with the criminal justice systems. And really here it's the broadest infusion of funding, which I think your listeners will be interested in. Resources are always scarce. So when governors are putting those resources into something, that's kind of demonstrating the priority of them. For example, Governor Youngkin kind of talked about in I think his last day of the state, he had started this out with a transformation program, was a road to opportunity, and then this year he kind of talked about how he'd followed up and thinks of it as a three-year journey.

And on the one-year anniversary he said, "Our right to help right now transformation." He'd hoped to have two new emergency room alternatives, and today they had eight in the state of Virginia. He talked about how the 988 line in Virginia had 8,300 calls to it indicating it was starting to work and people were starting to know about it. And the good that was coming out of that, he talked about having 36 mobile crisis units across the state with a goal of doubling them. And today they're 97. So kind of the results of the funding and that broader sense that they were interjecting was having results. Governor Evers of Wisconsin talked about the investment and the kind of policy push he was making the year before on mental health, and he declared sort of the year of mental health then. And this year, he announced that he was creating a new interagency council on mental health and kind of directing all of his agencies to work together to decrease barriers, access to mental health.

So again, creating kind of that statewide look at behavioral health and mental health to make sure that it's all being viewed as one system. Governor Hochul talked about the goal she had set the year before of investing \$1 billion, which is a massive investment to kind of transform the continuum of mental health care in New York City. Here, governors using numbers like that, like I said, demonstrates their real commitment. Governor Lee of Tennessee, talked about efforts he had taken on mental health to kind of cross statewide to save money, but was investing a hundred million dollars in shared savings that he had generated to beef up behavioral health and substance use support in Tennessee. So again, there it's the funding that they're talking about

and it's the statewide broad overlook on it, and then it's directing their statewide agencies to make this a priority that really, I think indicates the importance that governors putting on behavioral mental health this year.

Amanda Blasko:

Thank you. So I know NGA has been collecting and analyzing governor's State of the State speeches for a handful of years now. And you kind of mentioned it in your previous response about the way governors are talking about behavioral health systems is a little bit different. It used to be, but beyond, or in addition to that, what kinds of priority shifts or evolutions have you seen over the years that NGA has done this work?

Ken Hardy:

Yeah, I think the largest one I've seen would probably be the way that governors talk about opioids and mental health in general. In 2014, Former Governor Shumlin of Vermont gave a really unique state of the state address where he said, I'm going to devote my entire state of the state exclusively on the rising tide of opioid addiction. And at the time, it was brave and it was sort of unique to have someone devoted to one topic. He outlined a multipoint plan there largely focusing on expanding the state's recovery centers and increasing addiction and access to opioid addiction treatment. And I think that was like a precursor. If you look now, I think people are talking the way he did about it at the time and the language that've used and the understanding about addiction and kind of destigmatizing it and looking at it as both a healthcare problem, but a mental health problem and all the things that go onto that has kind of been taken up by everybody else.

So what you hear in one year that may be unique, I think generally a lot of the time is something you'll hear in the next five or six years that other people start to adopt. Another thing I think that's changed a little bit is the way on law enforcement recruitment, retention, first it was a lot of just like how do we get bonuses and how do we increase pay? But now you're starting to hear more wellness issues and quality of life issues be taken up as something that's important for law enforcement officers. Things like annual leave and mental health counseling and other things. So they're getting kind of the opportunities to make sure that their quality of life is good. In Guam. Governor Leon Guerrero, she had an interesting quote. She kind of talked about law enforcement's job. She said, when it's your job to save lives or place your own life and harm's way, you deserve the time off to rest, reset and get back to work.

And she was asking the legislature there to increase annual leave for officers so that they had time to spend with their families and that they had time to make sure that they were taking care of themselves. I think you'll start to see that appear more in State of the States and more in policy directives from governors, making sure those quality of life issues are important for officers.

Amanda Blasko:

Thank you. So it was really interesting when you were kind of talking about how something you may see in one year that might be innovative that a governor talks about or new, a new way of thinking about it trickles into future years into how people kind of discuss things in future state

of the state speeches. In your review and collection of these 2024 speeches, did you hear any governors speak about any new or innovative priorities or programs or approaches?

Ken Hardy:

Sure. Governor Polis in Colorado... All politics is local. The old saying goes, but it also, those local things tend to then become larger issues. But Governor Polis talked about his efforts to address stolen vehicles because an issue they're dealing with there, and he talked about an auto theft task force he had, providing more money for district attorneys to successfully prosecute criminals who were stealing cars. And I think that's probably something you're going to hear a little bit more about in the next coming years. I think it's something we're hearing about it in other places too, but I think the actual policies to directly address that is something you'll probably hear as a trend we'll see kind of take off. There's a renewed effort or renewed interest in reentry for people coming out of the criminal justice system. It's always something that's there, but I think it's starting to take on some urgency again.

And the best policy is usually when numerous different policies kind of come together. So I think this is three things intersecting the low unemployment rate, a true belief in redemption and second chances, and then just kind of economic development and wanting to give people a chance to get a job and be able to provide for their families. So we've heard that in a couple of speeches. Governor Stitt talked a lot about the work he's done in second chances and the different areas he's done with drug courts to help people get their feet under them again. I know he was particularly proud. He's mentioned in this year in his speech, the Sarah Stitt Act and was able to say kind of giving people those second chances had led to Oklahoma having the second-lowest recidivism rates in the nation. Finally, I think the issue of homelessness and unhoused populations is a major issue that's coming on a lot of state of the states.

And as I mentioned at the top of our discussion, governors really kind of see all issues as interconnected. And the connection between unhoused populations and the challenges that they face in the criminal justice and public safety systems, I think are starting to really bubble up to the top of people's agendas. Governor Cox in Utah talked a lot about this in his address, talked about his efforts to increase the housing stock in Utah. Proposed a Utah first housing program, which had a really bold goal to build 35,000 starter homes over the next five years in Utah to help address supply. But he also talked about the crisis of homelessness kind of in his state. And he said, I think very eloquently that we can't just give in to the crisis and have our iconic cities and just give in to having people suffering and dying on the streets.

We have to start taking efforts to address that and housing is going to be a part of that. Hawaii, Governor Green talked about having the second highest per capita homeless rate in the country and the effects that had in his state. He mentioned that homeless people in Hawaii have a life expectancy of just 53 years and really wanted to take some immediate actions to help address that. He talked about setting a goal to reduce homelessness in the state by 50% over four years and that they were directly... He had signed an executive order to cut some red tape, and they were beginning to build 20 villages statewide in the next couple of years that were going to specifically help to address that issue. A lot of other governors talked about this as well. Governor Healy of Massachusetts, Governor Lujan Grisham of New Mexico, Whitmer of Michigan, Pillen of Nebraska, Scott of Vermont, and Governor Bergen of North Dakota also really highlighted housing and homelessness in their addresses. So again, I think something that's

rising to the top is sort of one of those system-wide areas they have to look at that really touches everything.

Amanda Blasko:

Thank you for that very thorough overview and analysis of some of the more up-and-coming innovative things that governors are talking about doing. So if listeners want to learn more about the State of the State Speeches more broadly and all the great work that you all at NGA are doing, where do you suggest they kind of look first?

Ken Hardy:

Sure. We post some synthesis of these on our own webpage, so www.nga.org. And we have links to the text where it's available and then also to the video where it's available. So I encourage everyone, at the very least, go watch their own states, kind of state the state speech and see what's said in it. When there's some common themes, we try and post some digestible summaries of them in one place. So there's one on housing and homelessness up there. Our partners at the council and state governments also do a really great job tracking this through their CSGJusticeCenter.org, and they kind of break it up by policy area and you can click and see the different quotes, pull it from there. So that's very helpful and they've done a great job.

Amanda Blasko:

Thank you so much for being on the NCJA Podcast, Ken. This has been an incredibly insightful conversation and overview of the 2024 Governor State of the State Speeches and how holistic their approaches to these speeches really are and the work they do in general. Thanks so much to you and NGA for doing this important work and sharing it with the public safety community.

Ken Hardy:

Thank you for having me, and we really appreciate the work NCJA does, and you guys are a great partner to us. So happy to always talk.