

**DEMOCRATIC RESPONSE TO THE GOVERNOR'S STATE OF THE STATE**  
**January 17, 2017**

**\*\*REMARKS AS WRITTEN\*\***

Good evening. I'm Aaron Ford, the majority leader of the Nevada State Senate and the senator from District 11 in Las Vegas. On behalf of the Democrats in the state Senate and state Assembly, It is an honor to be here tonight giving the response to the Governor's State of the State address.

In 2016, Nevada voters sent a clear message, giving Democrats the majority of seats in the Nevada legislature, and the ability to shape the legislative agenda on behalf of Nevada families.

We want every Nevadan to know that we take this responsibility seriously, and we will work diligently to demonstrate that your legislators are working in your best interest.

Shortly after the session begins, Senate and Assembly Democrats will come together to outline our legislative priorities for the 2017 session. Our agenda - the Nevada Blueprint - will help expand and protect the middle class and build a Nevada that works for everyone.

Tonight, I'd like to take a few minutes to discuss some of the principles that will guide the Legislature during the 2017 legislative session.

As legislators, our first priority is to ensure the economic security of all Nevadans.

By nearly every measure, Nevada has made great strides in the economic recovery over the last few years. Our economy is more diverse and is creating more jobs than it was even just a few years ago.

We know, however, that many people continue to feel left behind, either because they're unemployed, underemployed, face stagnant incomes, or simply don't feel as if the same opportunities exist for them that exist for others.

Many of us hear daily from frustrated constituents who aren't looking for any handouts, but just want to be able to work hard, provide for their families, and share in Nevada's vast economic potential.

Over the coming years, Nevada has an opportunity to continue diversifying its economy and creating new jobs and higher wages by becoming a national leader in, for example, technology, clean energy, and advanced manufacturing.

Through a renewed focus on workforce development, apprenticeship and job training programs, and efforts to help Nevadans launch new small businesses, we will work to ensure that all Nevadans can partake in these opportunities.

Not only do we need to create new job opportunities for Nevadans, we must guarantee that Nevadans are treated fairly on the job.

That means legislators must take steps to ensure fair wages and to ensure that women earn equal pay for equal work in Nevada. We also believe that Nevadans shouldn't have to choose between their health or the health of a family member and their paycheck. That's why we support giving all Nevadans the ability to earn paid sick time on the job.

We also know that access to safe, affordable child care is a daily concern for many parents. Therefore, we'll look to enact policies to address these concerns.

Finally, we will protect Nevadans' right to advocate for safer and better working conditions.

For years, Democrats fought for increased education funding, only to find our efforts routinely blocked by Republican legislators. Last session, however, Democrats worked with Governor Sandoval, and we -- unlike our Republican legislative counterparts -- unanimously supported the 2015 plan to increase funding for Nevada public schools.

We did so because we believe that investing in children is more important than party labels.

In 2017, we again look forward to working with Governor Sandoval to ensure equitable access to a well-funded public education system.

We know we have more challenges within our public school system to ensure we give our kids the resources and opportunities they deserve, regardless of the neighborhood they grew up in or the size of their parents' paycheck.

Key among those challenges is finally implementing an updated weighted student funding formula. The weighted funding formula will ensure that our education dollars are allocated more fairly, particularly towards our most at-risk kids.

Where we disagree, we will have a respectful debate and try to work towards a consensus.

Tonight, the Governor proposed allocating \$60 million in his budget for a private school voucher program. We believe that this is the wrong priority for Nevada's kids.

It is not fair to Nevada families to divert our limited resources towards private schools. Any amount of money directed toward a voucher program will result in less money being made available to public schools.

This session, legislative Democrats will be focused on ensuring an adequately and equitably funded public school system.

We look forward to working with the Governor on funding public schools, continuing the upward trajectory of Nevada's public school system, and giving parents more say and more choices within the public school system.

But K through 12 education will not be our only focus. We will also have an enhanced focus on expanding access to higher education.

We made great progress in 2015 when we invested money to build a medical school at UNLV. Continuing that investment is critical, both as a means of providing more educational opportunities in-state and improving health outcomes in southern Nevada.

Nevada already has an extensive network of community colleges and technical schools that can -- and should -- be an economic engine for our state.

We know that our community college system has the potential to make more Nevadans career-ready in less time and for less money. This session, we will explore new opportunities to house workforce development programs within our community colleges and to create public-private partnerships that will help our students find stable, long-term employment.

We welcome the governor's proposal to invest in new job-training programs, particularly in fields like advanced manufacturing that can contribute further to economic development in Nevada.

We also recognize that increasing higher education costs are a major concern to families. At a time when Nevadans are carrying more than \$7 billion in student debt, we should provide more affordable options to our students. That means containing costs, both at community colleges and traditional universities.

And we should work to lessen the burden of that debt so that more Nevadans have the flexibility to pursue their dreams.

This week, our country will watch as a new president is sworn in. After a contentious campaign, many Nevadans are rightfully concerned about federal overreach and an incoming administration in Washington, D.C. that may trample on their basic rights.

Your democratic legislators will be a watchdog for your rights. Whether it is the right to affordable health care, the right to vote, the rights of minority communities and women, or the right to access our public lands, we will fight to ensure that the politicians now in charge in Washington do not leave Nevadans behind.

I want to make clear that our fight extends to the many members of Nevada's law-abiding immigrant community. Democratic legislators will fight to keep families together, protect DREAMers, and urge the federal government to finally pass comprehensive immigration reform that provides an equal and full path to citizenship.

Since our founding, state governments have served as a check on the federal government. Continuing our important federalist tradition, we will serve as a watchdog to make sure Nevada's interests are protected. When the federal government takes an action that we believe will hurt you or your family, we will speak up.

If the federal government won't stand up for all Nevadans, then we are here to say unequivocally that your democratic legislators will.

As Nevada's economy continues to recover, we have the opportunity to protect the investments that we have made in our residents and in our state.

Democrats look forward to working to replenish the state's rainy day fund and our state highway fund. We will also look for new opportunities to provide funding that would stabilize our K-12 education system in the face of another economic downturn.

Our state budget is a reflection of our priorities, and making smart funding decisions now can help protect us in the future.

My fellow Nevadans, 2017 is a year of great promise for the Silver State. We have wonderful opportunities to build on the progress we've made in economic development, job creation, and education. We agree with the Governor's notion of a "New Nevada." But every new plan needs a Blueprint, and your legislative democrats are dedicated to implementing our Blueprint to help expand and protect the middle class.

As the session begins, we invite each and every Nevadan to get involved with the legislative process and join us in working together to make Nevada a great place to live, work, and raise a family.

May God bless you, may God bless this Nation, and may God bless the Great State of Nevada. Thank you.