

Full Speech

STATE OF THE COUNTY 2025

Supervisor Terra Lawson-Remer's Address

Thank you Kimberly. Isn't she great?

Good evening, thank you everyone for coming.

I want to thank the San Diego Natural History Museum for hosting us tonight in beautiful Balboa Park.

I want to recognize all of our elected and appointed officials — including County Treasurer/Tax Collector Dan MacCallister, County Assessor/Recorder/Clerk Jordan Marks, Sheriff Kelly Martinez, District Attorney Summer Stephan, and all my colleagues on the County Board of Supervisors — as well as our local, state and national representatives, and binational delegation.

And I want to thank my daughter... in advance ... for *mostly* sitting still during mommy's speech. She's making progress.

So tonight, let's talk about progress. About taking one step forward... and one step back. About building things up... and tearing things down.

No, I'm not talking about the last few years at the County Board of Supervisors.

I'm talking about this moment we're all living through, where it feels like our entire nation is taking a big step backward.

But we've been here before. This dialectic is the arc of America's history — we've faced tough times, and we know how to lead through them.

Look around us — this very museum is a monument to how life adapts and thrives, even in harsh environments.

Balboa Park itself is a product of these forces. Over 150 years ago our civic leaders set aside these 1,400 acres to give city-dwellers a place for peace as the city grew around them. Yet the same people who were *creating* our city ... were *excluding* people from it.

For generations, Black, Jewish, Hispanic, Asian, and other minorities were banned from living in much of San Diego.

It was just the way things were. Until it wasn't.

In 1947, a young man named Leon became the first Black homeowner in Golden Hill — a 'Whites-only' neighborhood.

Through sheer determination and belief in his ability to make a change, Leon broke a barrier most thought was impossible.

Today, thanks to actions like his, exclusionary redlining laws in our County have been abolished.

And that trailblazing homeowner went on to be San Diego's first Black City Councilmember, first Black County Supervisor, and champion of justice for all — the late great Leon Williams.

And tonight we are joined by two of his family members, Angela Strong and Detra Williams. Our County thanks you and the entire Williams family.

He paved the way for so many, including my colleague that I am incredibly honored to serve with — Supervisor Monica Montgomery Steppe!

Leon Williams is proof that all of us can be a force for *change* and for *progress*.

But *progress* does not mean *completion*.

Just as San Diego's redlined communities still bear the scars of generations of neglect, our County — and our nation — are still striving to fulfill the promise of America.

The United States was founded on an extraordinary idea unparalleled in the history of the world: there are no kings and queens. We are all equal.

But a nation that was stitched together under the banner of freedom was built on the back of slavery. Wealthy Robber Barons of the Gilded Age paid workers barely enough to survive. Women could not vote, or own property.

Until people fought and marched and organized and demanded that the promise of America become real for ALL Americans. Demanded that we ALL be included.

Now, it's *our turn* to advance America's promise. *Our responsibility* to carry the torch in America's ongoing struggle between humanity's worst instincts and our highest ideals.

As we gather here tonight, we face another inflection point. The same forces that have always tried to make America work only for the wealthy and well-connected are once again rigging the system, cutting everyone else out of the American Dream.

The oligarchs now running Washington sell us on the lie that if we work just a little harder, we can join the billionaire's club too — that we're just one step away from being one of them.

But the truth is, they aren't getting their billions through hard work. They're stealing it — taking it from you, from your family, from all of us.

They want us to believe that government can't work — so they can take it for themselves. It's not mismanagement; it's sabotage.

If you're wondering what the chaos and corruption in Washington today has to do with local government, let me tell you: it has *everything* to do with it.

Right now, the federal government is slashing programs we rely on for healthcare, housing, clean air and water, public safety, and disease prevention. Every decision Washington makes impacts our ability to serve *you*.

And when federal leadership fails, local government must lead. Standing-up to institutions that harm the public good — whether it's Walmart or Washington D.C. — is one of our core duties.

Every time you weigh an apple at the grocery store, or check how many gallons you've pumped at the gas station, you can trust that the information is accurate — because the San Diego County Department of Ag, Weights, & Measures protects consumers from deceptive practices and enforces fairness.

It is quite literally the County's job to make sure that bad actors don't put their thumb on the scale.

We cannot fix everything that's broken in Washington, but we can ensure that, HERE in our own community:

- might does not equal right, and the playing field is level for everyone;
- the most marginalized are not scapegoated;
- our Constitution and due process are respected;
- you can see a doctor when you're sick, and know you won't get sent a surprise bill afterwards that could bankrupt your family;
- our air and water is clean and healthy and safe to drink and swim;
- young people, families, seniors, all of us can sleep with a decent roof over our heads;
- we're protected from measles and other deadly diseases;
- and that if you work hard, and with integrity, you can send your kids to a decent school, and someday retire with dignity and security, and build a better life for your family.

This moment calls for courage, and bold ideas.

For us to imagine the world as it should be, and to fight to make the impossible, possible.

As JFK once said: "we choose to go to the moon, not because it's easy — but because it's hard."

So San Diego County, here's our Game Plan.

Let's start with one of the County's biggest jobs – healthcare.

Five years ago, when I had my daughter, I was running my own small business and trying to make it work as a single mom. I went online to sign up for coverage under the Affordable Care Act. But we made too little to qualify. The only option was Medicaid.

And thank God for it.

Medicaid is a lifeline for nearly a third of San Diego County residents — over 900,000 people. That includes kids, seniors, working parents, people with disabilities — people like me.

Maybe people like you.

Now that lifeline is under threat. The administration wants to slash Medicaid by \$880 billion dollars — stripping healthcare from hundreds of thousands of San Diegans.

These cuts would show up in our emergency rooms, on our streets, in every neighborhood.

You deserve to be able to see a doctor when you're sick, and no one should have to choose between getting care and going bankrupt.

But Medicaid is not only bread & butter healthcare.

It is also the backbone of the County's funding to help the homeless, and the foundation of our region's entire behavioral health system.

Over the past four years, we've added more than five thousand new mental health and addiction treatment slots. THIS is how we help people in crisis on our streets.

We've opened four new crisis stabilization centers — so mental health emergencies, whether or not you're sleeping on the streets, don't lead to jail or the ER.

We launched a new kind of region-wide 911 response — Mobile Crisis Teams that show up to emergencies with mental health professionals, not handcuffs.

We've nearly doubled our behavioral health workforce — putting hundreds more counselors, nurses, and homeless outreach workers into our neighborhoods.

And we're just getting started.

Our new plan will double treatment slots again in five years — to more than 32,000 openings for San Diegans to get help.

That means more beds. More outpatient therapy. More ongoing support to make sure people stay housed and stable instead of homeless.

The technical name is Optimal Care Pathways — but you can just call it the Care Before Crisis Plan.

Because when we wait, people spiral. And we all pay the price. But when we meet people where they're at, and give them what they need? We save lives. We save money. We build a more humane system of care.

We are working now to make this system more efficient, and make sure every tax dollar is working for our community.

The County of San Diego County can do what other Counties have done: create our own Medicaid healthcare plan — so that our tax dollars are spent helping patients, not enriching private equity investors and corporate executives.

We can direct every Medicaid dollar be spent on patients — by cutting out the middlemen, the insurance companies who continue to rake in record profits even while regular Americans are paying rising healthcare costs and getting worse care.

So that is what we are doing, starting this year. It's a four year process, but by the time our health insurance plan is up for renewal by the State of California in 2028, San Diego County will be ready with a managed care plan that we offer to County residents.

But here's the bottom line: all the work we do to help the homeless get the care they need, all the investments we make so nearly a million San Diegans can see a doctor when they're sick, all of this depends on Medicaid funding.

These are your tax dollars — money you pay in and expect to get back. If our Medicaid money disappears to pay for tax cuts for billionaires, the behavioral health system we have spent four years building crumbles.

That's the threat.

But here's the opportunity: We can raise the money ourselves — right here at home. Not by waiting, or begging, for DC to do its job, but by taking the wheel of our own destiny and steering our own San Diego County ship through this storm.

A local revenue measure could leverage \$1 billion dollars a year, to support healthcare and other needs.

Enough to make sure that struggling San Diegans can see a doctor when they're sick, get treatment for addiction or mental health, and avoid financial ruin from medical bills.

Enough to keep building our behavioral health system to help the homeless on our streets.

Enough to make sure our firefighters and sheriffs have the resources they need for hoses and hydrants, fire stations, fire trucks and patrol cars and helicopters.

Enough to keep delivering on essential services, like emergency food assistance and protecting kids from child abuse.

Enough to invest in childcare for working families, and expand in-home supportive services for the elderly, across San Diego County.

And we can make sure every dollar is audited and lockboxed — with public oversight, transparency, and real accountability.

With a vote of the people, we can keep our families safe and healthy, no matter what happens in Washington.

But protecting our health isn't just about doctors and hospitals.

It's about clean air, safe water, and a public health system strong enough to stop the next epidemic before it begins.

San Diego County's public health department works quietly behind the scenes — tracking diseases, testing water, and keeping us safe.

And our public health department doesn't do it alone.

The Center for Disease Control is one of our biggest partners. And under this administration, the CDC is being dismantled.

The CDC has already fired over 700 experts. Last week they clawed back \$40 million that had been promised to San Diego's public health budget — gutting our disease tracking, Hepatitis A vaccine program, and emergency response.

That funding supported more than 90 public health workers — the team that tracks outbreaks, and tests water after sewage spills. The team that recently traced and vaccinated over 2,000 people exposed to measles, stopping an outbreak before it spread.

We cannot and will not allow San Diego to become like Texas, where preventable measles outbreaks are killing children.

But right now, our County's fiscal policy is too conservative to meet this moment.

We have more than \$100 million in excess reserves — just sitting in an account, above what's recommended by best fiscal practices.

That's public money — your money — collecting interest instead of saving lives.

So today, I'm calling for immediate reform of our County's reserve policy.

Because when Washington walks away, we need to be able to act — to protect public health, public safety, and essential services.

That includes using reserve funds to staff and pay for our new County Public Health Lab — a cutting-edge facility that allows us to test for measles, hepatitis, norovirus, even anthrax, right here in San Diego.

No more sending samples out of state. No more waiting for federal help.

With Washington slashing essential services, San Diego will step up — and put our reserves to work for the people they're meant to serve.

And on a healthy environment, we're not backing down — because we all expect to breathe clean air, swim in clean water, and not get sick just from going outside.

But in the Tijuana River Valley, that right has been violated for decades.

Raw sewage flows across the border, polluting coastlines from Imperial Beach to Oceanside. Families pay the price — breathing dirty air, and getting sick from swimming in the ocean.

That's why we declared a Countywide State of Emergency. That's why we expanded air and water testing. That's why we're distributing tens of thousands of air purifiers.

And that's why I led the push, alongside Imperial Beach Mayor Paloma Aguirre, to get the Tijuana River Valley designated as a Superfund site — to force the federal government to treat it like the health crisis is.

We've made real progress. Our dogged Congressional delegation secured \$650 million to fix the failing wastewater plant on our side of the border.

But we have to keep pushing—to protect that funding, speed-up plant construction, and get the Superfund designation for long-term cleanup dollars.

We also need funding that we control locally.

That's why I'm supporting Senator Padilla's bill to use border toll revenues for Tijuana River Valley clean-up.

And why I'm proposing a \$10 Million Matching County Fund, using our freed-up reserves, to match every grant dollar spent by the state or philanthropy to protect our communities from the sewage crisis.

But until Tijuana's sewage system is repaired, we're just putting a band-aid on a broken pipe. So I'm asking all of you to also join me in urging our friends and partners in Mexico, and international partners like the World Bank, to invest in long-term fixes for the Tijuana sewage system.

And we are coming for the toxic polluters, too. We're taking on PFAS—the invisible “forever chemicals” that don't break down, build up in our bodies, and are linked to cancer, liver damage, and hormone disruption.

These toxins are everywhere.

Take firefighters: they're exposed to forever chemicals in the very gear meant to protect them and the foam used to put out fires.

You can see these toxins in the frothy white foam floating on the surface of the Tijuana River, at the Saturn Blvd overpass.

These cancer-causing chemicals were made, sold, and defended by billion-dollar companies that knew the risks, and chose profit over public health.

So we're fighting back.

I'm calling to ban these ‘forever chemicals’ from every product the County buys.

And we're ready to sue the manufacturers who are poisoning our water and our people.

Environmental health is also about preparing for the next storm — and building systems that make our communities more resilient.

That's why we're investing in stormwater infrastructure — to reduce flooding, cut pollution, and protect homes.

It's why we're rethinking how we feed people, too. The County serves more than ten million meals a year. And for too long, that food came from corporate factory farms, who dump pesticides in our rivers and degrade the health of our soil.

Now we're using our food budget to support more sustainable local farmers.

That means keeping dollars in our community, cutting carbon emissions, and building a healthier food system.

And we're doing the same with energy. By joining San Diego Community Power — a public, not-for-profit energy provider — we're lowering energy rates for consumers, and putting ourselves on the path to 100% renewable energy by 2035.

But it's not just our environment we're fighting to defend. It's also our rights — our freedoms — the very principles that hold our democracy together.

The White House is forcing law firms to drop clients, and instead take cases that support its agenda — undermining our legal system's independence, and coercing lawyers to bow to political pressure rather than uphold the rule of law.

But our right to a lawyer shouldn't depend on whether your case is popular. It should depend on the Constitution.

And in March, ICE deported Kilmar Abrego Garcia, father of 3 special needs kids — a Maryland resident and Green Card holder who had lived here for more than a decade.

A court ordered them not to. ICE did it anyway.

Now he's locked in a maximum-security prison in El Salvador — and the administration is refusing to bring him back, even after the Supreme Court said they must.

Green Card holders. Longtime residents. People who live and work beside us — our neighbors, our coworkers, people we love.

On Monday Trump said that he wants to send US citizens to El Salvadoran prisons, too.

If they can deport someone like Kilmar, how long until they start ignoring the rules for everyone else?

That's why the San Diego County Immigrant Legal Defense Program is more vital now than ever.

We launched the program four years ago — because no one should lose their right to due process just because they can't afford an attorney.

This right to an attorney for everyone, even non-citizens, is enshrined in the Constitution. And here in San Diego, we're honoring this right.

Run by our fantastic County Public Defenders' Office, the Legal Defense Program has so far helped more than 2,500 immigrants get a fair day in court — keeping families together, and making sure no one faces unlawful deportation alone.

Like the Ethiopian engineer whistleblower who exposed a toxic leak by a Chinese state-owned oil company in his hometown. For speaking out, he was arrested, beaten, and tortured. He fled to the U.S. and was detained at Otay Mesa, facing deportation. Our program stepped in — and won his case in court.

And we're not doing it alone. Our sheriffs, our public defenders, our probation officers, and our district attorneys fight every single day to uphold the rule of law, and ensure justice for all — not just the powerful.

This is what it means to live our values of fairness, justice, and human dignity.

We can't talk about freedom and dignity without talking about housing.

All of us deserve a roof over our heads and a secure place to call home.

Yet in the richest country in the world, middle-class families can't afford even a small starter home.

Teachers, firefighters, and healthcare workers are being priced out of the communities they serve, forced into long commutes.

And for those living paycheck to paycheck, one small setback — a job loss, a rent hike, a medical bill — can mean sleeping in their car, or ending up on the street.

That's why housing has been a cornerstone of our work since I took office.

Over the last four years:

We've **tripled the pace of homebuilding**, and your county government is now leading the region in meeting our state housing goals.

We've **increased our affordable housing production by 500%**.

And we've launched new programs to help seniors and vulnerable residents stay in their homes.

But as most San Diegans can tell you on the first of every month: even this progress is insufficient for the scope and scale of our housing crisis.

Here in our region, we're bearing the brunt of America's rigged economy: rising home costs, job insecurity for white and blue collar workers alike, and a society and housing market tilted further toward those at the very top.

Wall Street corporations and hedge funds like Blackstone are snatching-up homes and apartments across San Diego County – outbidding first-time buyers, squeezing-out working families, jacking-up rents, and pushing-out tenants to boost profits.

So we're fighting back.

We're suing corporate landlords accused of tenant harassment, rent price-fixing, and illegal evictions.

And we're investigating Wall Street's homebuying spree in San Diego — tracking who owns what, where, and how they're driving up costs.

But we can and must do much more – with the help of those who've benefited the most from San Diego's real estate boom.

Homes in San Diego are now selling for \$7, \$10, even \$15 million after decades of soaring values, even without upgrades.

So we're proposing something simple: a small transfer fee on sales of the top 1% of properties in San Diego County, paid only once, when these properties change hands.

Those with homes in the top 1% can pay forward just a small share of that fortunate windfall, when their property is sold, to help break the stranglehold of our housing crisis.

And in return?

We could build affordable homes for teachers, nurses, and first responders — so they can live in the communities they serve.

Or we could help first-time home buyers and young families finally get a foot in the door.

Or we could move the 100,000 people stuck on San Diego's Section 8 waitlist into stable housing — a crisis created by years of federal inaction.

Or we could scale-up the programs that work — like Homeless Diversion and the Senior Shallow Rent Subsidy — to stop people from falling into homelessness in the first place.

And the fortunate few who've gained the most from this insane housing market? Some of whom are here in this room today?

They ... you ... we, can help build a housing system in our region that works for everyone else.

But even as we do the hard work to level the playing field, we need to ask — why is the game rigged in the first place?

Because the problem isn't just broken systems — it's people breaking them for profit.

The agencies built to protect working people — from predatory lenders, toxic polluters, monopolies, and worker exploitation — are now being gutted. And the professionals are being replaced with political loyalists.

When billionaires tell you, "they're just streamlining government bloat," there's one thing you need to know: We made these agencies. In fact, we demanded them.

These are the watchdog institutions that *we the people* fought to create — to protect us from corrupt politicians, unethical businesses, and dangerous industries that were harming Americans.

But this administration in Washington wants to catapult us back to the America of the past, where predatory corporations could do anything they wanted to make a buck.

We didn't always have food inspectors. It took public outrage to force the creation of the Food and Drug Administration — after meatpacking companies were caught selling rancid, diseased meat to families, and factory workers were found ground-up in the machinery.

We didn't always have labor laws, or workplace safety standards. It took a fire in a locked Manhattan garment factory — where 146 young women, mostly Italian and Jewish, burned to death or jumped from windows to escape the flames — to create OSHA and modern fire codes.

The sprinklers in your office... the emergency exits in this room... did not exist until people marched and demanded them.

It took a grassroots movement sparked by outrage over chemical companies spraying pesticides on our neighborhoods, poisoning our food and wildlife, to birth the Environmental Protection Agency, and ban DDT.

It took public fury against Wall Street collapsing the economy in 2008 to create the Consumer Financial Protection Bureau, charged with safeguarding regular people from shady financial practices.

Now, all of these protections are under attack.

But ... remember that we made these institutions — and just like our parents and grandparents did, we can take action to make things better.

As Washington guts the CFPB, we're building our own — right here.

I'm introducing legislation to create San Diego County's new Consumer Financial Protection Division to tackle price gouging, payday lending, delayed and denied health insurance claims, and deceptive advertising. We'll work with our fierce District Attorneys and the Insurance Commissioner to enforce the rules — and level the playing field for small businesses and working families.

Because if you think we're powerless in the face of these forces — think again.

We've already created the Office of Labor Standards and Enforcement to protect workers, and enacted new County contracting rules to guarantee fair wages and paid sick leave. Take Jesus Arriaga, who waited years for stolen wages. Our County stepped in, paid him directly, and took his employer to court for the rest.

We sued Big Pharma for fueling the opioid crisis — and won \$200 million for San Diegans.

We sued Apple for deliberately slowing down your old iPhone — and won a \$24 million settlement.

And now, we're suing the social media giants — Meta, TikTok, YouTube, and Snapchat — for deliberately addicting our kids and profiting off a youth mental health crisis they helped create.

Just this month, we won an injunction against a company making 3D printers designed to churn out untraceable ghost guns.

And we're not just cracking down on the shadiest companies, we're also making our reserve and public investment dollars work for our community — aligning our investments with our values, and exploring a Public Bank that could finance affordable housing.

Because here in San Diego County – might does not equal right, and we will keep fighting to make sure the playing field is level for everyone.

Let me conclude by saying, in what seems like a different life I was a professor – trying to understand why some countries prosper and others fail, why some enjoy stable democracies, while others are trapped in cycles of violence and poverty.

Some of the answers are surprisingly basic — and at the core of our County’s mission.

County workers keep our land records and birth certificates secure — so people can be recognized as citizens, buy and sell property, and prevent government looters from seizing our assets.

County workers are the sheriff’s deputies who keep us safe, the firefighters who train relentlessly to protect us from wildfires, the public defenders and district attorneys and probation officers who uphold the rule of law, the social workers and mental health teams who step in when a child or family is in crisis, the childcare and home healthcare providers who care for our loved ones with dignity.

There are over 20,000 County workers, some of which are working right now in this very room. So in the days ahead, thank a County worker. And join us in protecting what they do.

This moment we face is not about left or right. It’s about right or wrong.

It’s about choosing what kind of America, what kind of San Diego County we want to live in. And fighting for it.

I don’t know about you San Diego, but I do not want to live in a world that’s selfish and depraved, that’s every person for themselves. Where the more you can grab and steal and get away with, the more you get to keep.

I want to live in a world where everyone has an equal opportunity to build a good life. Where we respect the rights and freedoms of our neighbors, even, especially, when they look or think differently. Where we can breathe healthy air and our water is clean and safe to drink and swim.

Where we keep the promises we’ve made to each other – friend to friend, neighbor to neighbor – to be there for each other on our worst days. Where we stand together, and lift each other up – and we answer the call of our best selves.

Because we believe in a society that’s not every person for themselves, but all of us standing together to defend and fight for our highest ideals. This is the promise that we make to each other as Americans.

The work won’t be easy. Leon Williams knew that. And we know it too.

But when we fight, we win.

Cuando luchamos, ganamos.

Everyone can do something.

As the Dalai Lama said: “If you think you’re too small to make a difference, try sleeping with a mosquito.”

If you’re a judge or an educator or a doctor – stand your ground.

If you’re a lawyer, step-up, and take on a case or two pro bono.

If you’re a worker, join a union, and pay your dues, whether you’re a computer programmer or a healthcare provider or an electrician.

If you’re a parent, join your kid’s PTA.

Because here’s the truth: democracy does not live in Washington. It lives in us. In what we choose to fight for. In how we come together; in how we care for one another. And in the day-to-day, essential work of local government — the kind that doesn’t make headlines, but holds a society together.

So even if Washington is abandoning its responsibilities, *we – TOGETHER* – can still fulfill America’s promise. San Diego County’s promise.

It’s our choice. We can wait. Or — we can lead. San Diego County, let’s lead.