

Mayor Levine Cava State of the County 2026

Good evening, Miami-Dade.

Buenas noches a todos.

Bon-swah toot moon.

Welcome to the historic Lou Rawls Center for the Performing Arts here at Florida Memorial University, South Florida's only HBCU and the birthplace of the Black National Anthem.

Thank you to Provost Hill and the entire FMU team for your hospitality and for welcoming us this evening.

To our great performers, faith leaders, honor guard, poet laureate, and our wonderful MC, thank you for sharing your talents with us tonight.

To our dedicated county workforce that keeps us running seamlessly, delivering excellence every day. Thank you for making us a county that cares.

To our amazing and engaged consular corps, and our state and local officials, whose leadership and partnership strengthen Miami-Dade and reflect the diversity of our community.

To my husband here tonight, my hero and biggest fan, thank you for always being by my side.

Thank you to my cousins Debi and Adi and all of my family and friends watching online.

This is my SIXTH State of the County, and over those 6 years, we've delivered this address in every corner of our county. Each year in a different place, but always with the same purpose. This year, we come together in thriving, culturally rich North Dade, represented by Commissioner Gilbert.

Mr. Chair, Commissioners, constitutional officers, community leaders, and most importantly, the people of Miami-Dade County, thank you for the honor of serving as your Mayor.

Thank you for placing your trust in me, especially at a time when trust matters more than ever.

This is an unsettled world. People are uncertain, and many are frustrated, angry or afraid.

We look around and see things happening that do not represent our values. Things that don't reflect the urgency of our community's concerns: rising costs, caring for family, and building a stable future.

Faith in institutions is fragile. And faith that government can deliver on its promises is even MORE strained.

But here in Miami-Dade County, we know who we are.

We are a county of dreamers and doers.

Of immigrants and entrepreneurs.

Of families who have been here for generations and families who arrived with little more than hope and determination.

And in a time of rapid change and rising challenges, one principle continues to guide me as your Mayor.

Leadership **MUST** be measured by results, and it **MUST** reflect our community's values - that everyone belongs in our shared future.

That was the first promise I made to you.

And it is how I govern today.

It is why we **HAVE** made real progress and **DELIVERED** on our promises.

It is why I can say, clearly and confidently, that the state of our county is strong.

We are strong because our community is united. Because our people meet difficult moments with purpose, compassion, and grit.

As I visit every corner of this county, I hear concerns about affordability, about safety, about our future.

But I also see something else.

I see people who want solutions.

That is why I am so focused on delivering results.

Results people can see and feel, in housing, transportation, jobs, safety, and keeping our air and water clean.

Some of those results are easy to see.

Like the parks where your children play.

More housing in your neighborhoods.

A brand-new rapid transit corridor connecting our community.

Other results are less visible, but just as important.

The drainage systems that protect those parks and neighborhoods.

The permitting process that determines how quickly a small business can open its doors, accelerating opportunity for our businesses and families.

The system of support that keeps vulnerable young people on the right track.

Big or small, what matters most is this: the work we are doing today is improving people's lives and laying the groundwork for a stronger future.

That is especially true when it comes to our economy.

Miami-Dade is a powerful economic engine, with one of the lowest unemployment rates in the country at 3.2%. More than 120,000 new jobs were created over the past year alone.

Behind those numbers are real people and real stories, especially small businesses that are the backbone of our economy.

People like Harrison Blume, the owner of MYKA, a frozen yogurt store in Miami Beach.

Before opening his business, Harrison ran into a familiar problem. His plans were stalled by red tape in city and county permitting.

So we fixed that.

Through STRIVE305's new permitting kiosks, Harrison was able to complete all his permits in just sixteen days.

Instead of burying people in paperwork, we simplified the process and got it done. Now, 11 cities and counting are on board!

Harrison, and our city and private sector partners who are here tonight, please stand to be recognized.

This is what it looks like when government removes barriers and creates opportunity.

Last year, the STRIVE305 initiative, which I proudly kickstarted in 2021, reached 75,000 small businesses in every corner of Miami-Dade.

Our RISE Miami-Dade fund, in partnership with Dade County Federal Credit Union, delivered over 10 million dollars in revolving loans and training for more than 250 businesses.

Miami-Dade is now the top county in the nation for small business growth, with nearly 5,000 new business applications for every 100,000 residents, and we are committed to staying on top.

A strong economy matters. But so does having a safe and affordable place to live.

I hear from residents every day about the pressure of housing costs and the difficult choices too many families are forced to make.

From the beginning, I knew this crisis required a new approach.

Since the start of my first term, we've DOUBLED our financial investment in housing that you can afford. More than 9,000 affordable and workforce housing units have been built, with 12,000 more in progress. That improves the lives of approximately 60,000 residents, now and in the future.

Take the River Parc Campus in Little Havana.

What was once outdated public housing is now a walkable mixed-income community with more homes, shops, green spaces, and support services.

But there's still more work to be done.

I directed our housing team to identify vacant county land that can be TRANSFORMED into housing. Through the PROSPER initiative, we have already identified sites with the potential to add 5,000 more homes, helping more families build stable lives. Thank you, Commissioner Hardemon, for being an enthusiastic early adopter.

And we are not slowing down.

For condo owners struggling to pay high special assessment fees, our zero-interest loan program has already helped nearly 2,000 families stay in their homes, delivering almost \$53 million in interest free support.

This is what it looks like to deliver results people can FEEL in their daily lives. Thank you, Commissioner Bastien, our housing committee chair, for always pushing us to do more to meet the critical need.

And it's not just about having a safe place to live – it's about HOW you live.
How you access work, school and family.
How you get around.

Last year, we ushered in a new era for transit riders.

Metro Express, our first bus rapid transit system and the longest fully electric one in the nation, is changing how South Dade moves.

Since the launch in October, ridership on the express has nearly DOUBLED, with roughly 10,000 riders each day.

For commuters like Calvin Gilles (Gill-is), a regular rider of the BRT who works at Baptist, his trip is now 30 minutes shorter each way. And we're grateful for partners like Baptist, who are encouraging transit by providing an employee shuttle to and from the MetroRail.

We're continually improving the system by listening to riders, including feedback from our CITT transit ambassadors, like MARLA Vinick-Valcarcel (Vin-ick Val-car-cell), who has been taking transit for 30 years, and gives Metro Express an A+!

Instead of sitting in traffic, all these residents are enjoying a faster, more enjoyable ride. And that time saved means more time with family, more time at home, and more time for life.

Calvin and MARLA, please stand as we thank you!

Transportation is also about opportunity. When transit works, we have access to jobs, schools, and everything that connects our daily lives.

To support a county that welcomes 28 million visitors each year, as well as our millions of residents and businesses, we must invest in infrastructure that is reliable, resilient, and built for the future.

PortMiami, the cruise capital of the world, welcomed a record 8 and a half million passengers last year and supports more than 300,000 jobs statewide.

Miami International Airport served over 55 million travelers last year alone, an increase of nearly 50%, since 2021 at the beginning of my first term. Thank you to the chairwoman of our airport and seaport committee, Commissioner Cohen Higgins, who is flying us into the future!

Last year, MIA was named the most improved large airport in the nation for customer satisfaction.

Service and rapid repair response times have improved, thanks to the Lightning Crew I launched.

The Ibis garage opened in December adding over 2,000 parking spaces, many with EV charging. The garage is just one of many signature projects within the airport's \$9 billion Modernization in Action Plan. We also broke ground on Concourse K last year, the first new terminal expansion at MIA in nearly 20 years.

MIA is more than an airport.

It is the front door to our community.

It is the major engine of not only our local economy but the state's too.

And for millions of people each year, it is their very first impression of us.

That impression matters.

With record growth, higher expectations, and millions of daily decisions happening across the airport, this is the moment to raise the standard even higher.

That is why tonight, I am announcing the MIA Forward Flight Team.

I am appointing a group of committed partners focused on one simple goal: making MIA work better for the people who use it and the people who keep it running.

We'll focus on short term visible results to improve the passenger experience and bring more art and beauty to MIA in time for the World Cup.

This team will complement the Chairman's proposed advisory board as part of a shared effort to strengthen MIA.

When you invest in world class infrastructure like we're doing, the world pays attention. Miami-Dade is the place where big moments happen and where global attention meets local pride.

2026 will be our biggest year yet.

Earlier this month, we hosted the College Football National Championship. Go Canes!

Formula 1 is returning.

The World Baseball Classic is back.

The Miami Open will once again bring the best tennis players in the world here.

And Inter Miami, led by the greatest player the sport has ever seen, will open its new home at Freedom Park.

We will also host the G20 Summit, welcoming world leaders to South Florida.

And this summer, fútbol will take center stage as we host seven games of the 2026 FIFA World Cup. Thank you, Commissioner Gilbert, for your outstanding leadership and service on the Host Committee.

Across those 7 games, Miami-Dade will welcome hundreds of thousands of visitors from around the world, generating up to \$1.3 billion in economic activity and supporting more than 9,000 jobs – many of them right here in North Dade.

Fan Fest at Bayfront Park will be our venue for residents AND visitors to have fun and watch with pride all month long!

As we prepare for the future, we must also protect what makes any of this possible.

Our ENVIRONMENT that connects us all.

The water we drink from the Everglades.

The bay and beaches we treasure.

The air we breathe.

Preserving our paradise is essential to our quality of life and our future.

That is why I increased environmental protection by making our Department of Environmental Resources Management, DERM, a standalone department and driving resilience strategies across all county departments.

It's why we are working with state and federal partners to protect Biscayne Bay and strengthen our infrastructure through initiatives like Connect2Protect, which expands our clean sewer service to residents now on old septic tanks. We are working toward more sustainable waste disposal, with Commissioner Regalado's relentless advocacy.

At the beginning of my first term, the state awarded us \$10 million in grants to protect our precious bay. Now, we've received almost \$60 million, – ensuring critical protection for our blue heart which generates tens of billions of dollars a year for our economy.

When it comes to flooding, water does not recognize boundaries, which is why we've been investing in innovative solutions for stormwater and wastewater. We have strengthened coordination and centralized stormwater planning to better protect communities across all 34 cities and our state. Thank you, Commissioner Steinberg, for all your work to keep our water clean, and in the bay where it belongs, not on the street.

Resilience is not only about big systems.

It's also about everyday actions.

Like tree planting.

Water conservation.

Cleaner neighborhoods.

That is why partnerships matter.

Since 2022, hundreds of Girls Scouts and community members have planted more than 3,000 trees at the historic Camp Mahachie on Old Cutler. Their goal is to plant 10,000 more trees by the end of the year!

Projects like this are changing our future one girl at a time.

Charlotte Kennedy is one of them. After volunteering at Mahachee, she became a County intern and helped plant a butterfly garden at Deering Estate. This inspired her to major in marine biology at UM, where she's now a sophomore.

Charlotte, please stand to be recognized!

Strong communities grow from care.

And that SHOWS UP in the ways we take care of people AND animals, including the building of a new South Dade animal shelter championed by Commissioner Bermudez.

It SHOWS UP at ZooMiami, with the leadership of Vice Chair McGhee. The zoo was recently re-accredited as one of the top zoos in the world and has announced a new tiger exhibit, marking the first step in a historic capital campaign we will launch later this year in partnership with the Zoo Foundation, following the opening of a new state of the art animal hospital next month.

It SHOWS UP in public safety.

We have built nationally recognized programs, work that's deeply personal to me as a social worker and community lawyer.

We have turned the page on our jail system, building a safer approach where justice and dignity go hand in hand, and where people get second chances. We are now recognized as a national leader.

We continue to work closely with Sheriff Rosie to keep communities safe, while also preventing people from entering the criminal justice system.

We do that with a No Wrong Door approach, where all departments work together rather than in silos to address people's needs. Thank you, Commissioner Gonzalez, who embraced this community focused model and was the first to open a No Wrong Door center in his district. That center brought together the full range of County services under one roof.

For vulnerable young people, THAT approach can change everything.

I want to share the story of a 17-year-old young woman who made a bad decision and was referred to our juvenile services division's nationally recognized diversion program.

In another community, that moment might have defined her future. But here, in our County, it became a turning point.

Instead of being pushed deeper into the system, she was met with support. She received mental healthcare, family therapy, and tutoring through our libraries, often the front door to county services. Thank you, Commissioner Orbis, for being such a strong champion for our libraries and our families.

With the right help, this young lady got life back on track; she graduated from high school and entered college.

That is the difference our No Wrong Door approach can make.

All of this work requires a government that is efficient, focused, and responsible with YOUR taxpayer dollars.

Through my WISE305 program, rolled out last year, we are reviewing every department for ways to work smarter, eliminating processes that no longer make sense, and leading in workforce AI training with Miami Dade College's support, to meet this moment.

Government accountability is an issue we're tackling head on alongside our County Commission, and I'd like to especially thank Chairman Rodriguez for the work he's done to improve procurement.

Last year, we secured a new healthcare plan for county employees which will save \$40 million. Thank you, Senator Garcia, for your leadership on health and fiscal responsibility.

Every dollar saved honors the trust taxpayers place in us and proves that government can work for YOU.

That's why the work of our Driver's License Suspension Task Force is so important. For too long, a broken system made it difficult for safe drivers to resolve fees and fines. The Task Force developed practical, safety-focused solutions to clear backlogs and improve notice and payment. This critical initiative, now led by Commissioner Lopez, has already helped thousands including people like Lesvia Lopez, a single mom who struggled to keep up with her insurance payments and had her license suspended. With the help of this program, she was able to enter a repayment program for her fines and have her license restored.

These stories prove why all this work matters. A good government acts as a foundation, building better quality of life for our communities.

Everything you have heard tonight comes back to one simple idea: belonging.

Miami-Dade is a place that makes room.

For work.

For family.

For opportunity.

For anyone to pursue their American Dream.

For all of us to belong.

This is the most diverse community in America, and that diversity is our greatest strength. To turn away from it would be to turn away from who we are.

As our nation nears its 250th anniversary, we are living in a time of constant change, new challenges, and real anxiety about the future.

We can give into fear and division.

Or we can stand for something better by choosing one another and our shared future.

If you agree, stand with me!

We can show that when we work together, there is no limit to what we can achieve together. And here in Miami-Dade, that choice is clear.

We CHOOSE to stand together, just as we always have. And THAT is why the state of our county is strong.

¡El estado de nuestro condado es fuerte!

Eh-ta kon-tay noo-ahh so-leed.

May God bless you, and may God continue to bless Miami-Dade County.