

2026 State of the State Address
Gov. Kelly Armstrong
House chamber, State Capitol
Jan. 21, 2026

Good morning. Before we begin, I think it's important to pause to remember Governor Allen Olson, who served as North Dakota's 28th governor from 1981 to 1984 and as attorney general for the eight years before that.

Governor Olson passed away the day after Christmas, and tomorrow, his family and friends will gather in Edina, Minnesota, to pay their respects at his funeral. Flags will be flown at half-staff across our state in his honor.

To the Olson family, we extend our deepest sympathies and prayers, and our heartfelt thanks for his dedicated service to North Dakota. Please join me in a moment of silence as a mark of respect for the memory and legacy of Governor Allen Olson. *(pause)*

(STORY ABOUT UND FLAG)

Lieutenant Governor Strinden, Justices of the North Dakota Supreme Court, Mr. Speaker, legislators, elected officials, tribal leaders, family and friends, and fellow citizens. Thank you for joining us today, and welcome. And a special thanks to Senator Hoeven, the congressional delegation and President Trump for passing the legislation that gives us the opportunity to be here today.

It is my constitutional duty and great honor to address this special session of the 69th Legislative Assembly.

It is also my duty to set the scope of this session, and to that end, working with legislative leadership, we have identified a singular purpose: to address the \$199 million in federal funds awarded for the first year of our Rural Health Transformation Program.

This program is a pivotal step forward in strengthening North Dakota health care across the state.

The need is clear: Nearly 75% of North Dakota's rural counties face primary care shortages. Over the last 20 years, health care has concentrated in our largest

communities, leaving our rural residents without adequate services. These challenges demand bold action.

By expanding access, promoting long-term wellness and driving innovation, we have the chance to be the healthiest state in the nation.

I want to begin by thanking you all for your valuable input into North Dakota's application to the Centers for Medicare and Medicaid Services.

I'll admit, I was a bit skeptical when Senator Hogue told me he was forming a 34-member interim committee, given the complexity and short timeframe. So, to my team, HHS and, most of all, you legislators – thank you for accomplishing this goal in such a short period of time. This is definitely one time I am happy to be proven wrong.

Our application to CMS reflected thoughtful planning and collaboration. The priorities came directly from the people who know rural health care best – our residents, providers, tribal partners, and community leaders, along with the Legislature, Governor's Office, and especially our team at HHS.

We appreciate the Rural Health Transformation Committee for green-lighting four pieces of legislation that significantly helped improve our application score with CMS. Those four bills will:

- Require the Presidential Fitness test in P.E. courses;
- Require nutrition education as part of physicians' continuing education requirements;
- Join the physician assistant licensure compact; and
- Expand the scope of practice for pharmacists.

I look forward to signing these bills, along with the accompanying appropriations bill.

When we first learned about the funding that Congress and President Trump made available, we knew North Dakota was in line for at least \$100 million per year. To see that number doubled in the final award is a testament to the countless hours of hard work that went into the application.

From Bowman to Bathgate, from Wahpeton to Williston, and everywhere in between, North Dakotans deserve access to high-quality health care. This is a generational opportunity not only to improve how health care is delivered to our citizens, but also

help revitalize communities as people continue to seek out safe places to live with strong health care, great schools, and abundant economic opportunity.

Our plan is built on four pillars:

First, we want to Make North Dakota Healthy Again by promoting wellness and healthy lifestyles in communities across the state through initiatives focused on nutrition, exercise, and reducing the risk of substance abuse, just to name a few.

For all the advancements we've made in health care, far too often we treat symptoms and not people. Obesity is a killer. Sedentary lifestyles lead to negative health outcomes. It's time to shift the focus to front-end solutions: eating better, getting proper exercise, and building resilient and connected communities.

Second, we want to strengthen our communities and stabilize our rural health care workforce. That means keeping health care workers in rural North Dakota with training, support, and retention grants.

Third, we want to bring high-quality health care closer to home by expanding local access to essential health services through telehealth, transportation, virtual medical rooms, and mobile clinics for hard-to-reach populations.

And finally, we want to connect technology and data to create a health care system that is smarter, faster, and more responsive – one that meets our people where they are, when they need services.

Now, let me tell you what's not in the plan.

We are not constructing new buildings. We are not standing up unsustainable programs and hiring new employees that will become North Dakota taxpayer obligations when this federal funding runs out. And we are not propping up underperforming programs that haven't made North Dakotans healthier.

This is about transforming rural health, and that means embracing 21st century solutions – not repeating the policies of the past.

We aren't spraying federal dollars into North Dakota with a firehose.

All government money comes from taxpayers in one way or another. And we owe it to them to make the most of this investment. We must create lasting impact that we can sustain after this federal funding expires.

North Dakota is projected to receive at least \$500 million over five years. But as we saw in our first award, we could receive much more based on how we deploy those dollars. That's why this special session – and the work that will come after it to implement these programs – is so important.

This process began last summer with a statewide survey. We had three listening sessions last fall. The interim committee wrote and endorsed the four bills in October. We filed our application to CMS in early November and received our award right before the New Year.

Now it's barely the end of January, and we'll have nine months to obligate \$199 million. The Year 2 award will start Oct. 1. While we don't know that exact amount yet, we are asking you to approve two years of appropriation authority to ensure that we can quickly disburse the second tranche of this funding.

This program only works if North Dakota taxpayers have confidence in how we're spending the money. It needs to be authorized and appropriated quickly. We need to be responsible stewards and track it closely. And it needs to have a tremendous impact on the well-being of our citizens.

In my first State of the State, I spared you any baseball references – not easy for an old American Legion baseball coach and future Ditch Chickens manager. No such luck today.

Let's keep our eye on the ball. Tune out the chatter from the bleachers. Lay off the pitches that can wait until later. Focus on hitting a home run by making the best possible use of this huge investment. If we execute our game plan, we can continue to receive an outsized share of these federal dollars – nearly a billion dollars over the next five years.

By doing so, we can make North Dakota the healthiest state in the nation and the best place to live, work and raise a family.

Thank you all for allowing me to address you today. God Bless you, and may God continue to bless the State of North Dakota and the U.S.