

At the Center of Everything

An Interview with The Honorable JB Pritzker, Governor of Illinois

EDITORS' NOTE Governor JB Pritzker was sworn in as the 43rd Governor of Illinois on Jan. 14, 2019. Since taking office, he has accomplished one of the most ambitious and consequential policy agendas in state history. The governor won bipartisan passage for Rebuild Illinois, the largest investment in state history to upgrade roads, bridges, rail, broadband, and schools. He overcame years of fiscal mismanagement in Illinois by proposing and passing a balanced budget



The Hon. JB Pritzker

every year, eliminating the state's multi-billion-dollar bill backlog, reducing the state's pension liability, and achieving six credit upgrades from rating agencies. He took bold action to put state government back on the side of working families by creating jobs, raising the minimum wage to a living wage, protecting reproductive rights, making university and community college education more affordable, and advancing equal pay for women. Throughout the COVID-19 pandemic, Governor Pritzker saved lives and livelihoods by prioritizing the health and safety of Illinois residents while supporting families and businesses through the COVID-induced recession. To protect hardworking families from additional hardship, one of the defining features of the governor's response to the COVID financial crisis was launching the nation's largest pandemic relief grant program for small businesses and the nation's largest housing assistance program. In 2021, Governor Pritzker proposed and signed a comprehensive clean energy bill, making Illinois a national leader on climate action and the first state in the Midwest to pass a law phasing out fossil fuels. Before becoming governor, Pritzker founded 1871, the nonprofit small business incubator in Chicago. Since its creation, Chicago has been named one of the top ten technology startup hubs in the world, and 1871 was named the best incubator in the world. As governor, he continues to expand support for new business creation throughout the state and cut taxes for hundreds of thousands of small businesses while incentivizing job creation. Since 2019, annual new business startups in Illinois have grown by nearly 70 percent. Governor Pritzker and his wife, MK, have been married for more than 25 years, and they are the proud parents of daughter, Teddi, and son, Don.

What was your vision for Rebuild Illinois and how has this effort positioned Illinois for future growth?

Illinois' position as a leading national hub of manufacturing, transportation, distribution, and logistics lays the groundwork for our future. Rebuild Illinois is a \$45 billion plan capitalizing on that and on our talented workforce. After too many years without upgrading our infrastructure, by 2019 it was time to modernize our roads, rail, transit, bridges, airports, and river ports, along with vertical

infrastructure. Already, hundreds of projects are complete or under construction across the state, including community college and university campuses, town centers, broadband, and 21st century water and sewage infrastructure. And Illinois Works – a program within Rebuild Illinois that opens doors for more Illinoisans to get into the trades – continues to bring new opportunities to women and people of color.

Illinois is now ranked as a national leader in infrastructure, and we're seeing the benefits of this revitalization in job creation (among the fastest in the Midwest) and GDP growth (now the 5th state to reach \$1 trillion). Companies looking to build in Illinois want to know they're going to be able to distribute their products efficiently and appreciate the ongoing commitment to improving infrastructure. Students considering Illinois universities want to see new and modernized facilities – and Rebuild has helped make that possible. Across the board, the Rebuild Illinois capital plan has made Illinois a more attractive destination for tourists and residents alike while creating thousands of jobs.

Our progress was already underway when the federal bipartisan infrastructure law passed. The new Infrastructure Investments and Jobs Act will put an additional \$20 billion into infrastructure projects in Illinois. This is a profound moment of change for our state, and I'm committed to infrastructure investments that improve the lives of our families and the success of our economy.

Will you highlight Illinois' leadership on climate action and its action to be the first state in the Midwest to pass a law phasing out fossil fuels?

Illinois vaulted forward to become one of the leading states addressing climate change and

transitioning to clean energy back in September 2021 when I crafted and signed the Climate and Equitable Jobs Act. A few months later, I proposed and signed the Reimagining Electric Vehicles in Illinois Act. CEJA requires Illinois to move to a 100 percent carbon-free power sector by 2045 – the first Midwest state to do so. Just as important, our climate action is equity-centric.

The plan includes not just a transition of our fuel supply, but a proactive approach to ensuring disinvested communities are a cornerstone of the clean energy economy, with the establishment of clean energy job training hubs throughout Illinois, contractor incubators to ensure those same communities of color aren't just becoming the clean energy workers, but also managers and leaders. And we included a Displaced Energy Workers Bill of Rights to support fossil fuel power plant, coal mine, and nuclear plant workers in the transition.

Illinois is leading in this area, and it's a product of putting together a grassroots coalition of environmentalists and organized labor, including people from all sides of each clean energy issue, and understanding the challenges ahead while finding the courage to face them.

What steps is your administration taking to improve education in Illinois and reforming K-12 education?

To truly address education properly, we must start with looking at quality early childhood education from zero to five years old, making sure we have childcare and pre-K available to every child in Illinois. Study after study shows that investments made in these earliest years pay enormous dividends in taxpayer savings and quality of life for our children. Early childhood development has been a cornerstone of my education policy since day one. I've proposed the Smart Start plan to make pre-K universally available and to stabilize and grow childcare to a new level in Illinois.

In addition, I've increased K-12 funding by an additional \$1.5 billion so far during my term in office, bringing it to its highest levels in state history. State scholarships are also at their highest levels ever, making community college tuition free for people at or below median income and providing larger university scholarships than ever before. Whether young people want to learn a trade or pursue a four-year degree, we've made college more affordable than ever, and we've connected degrees with jobs awaiting students when they graduate.



Governor Pritzker signing Illinois assault weapon ban into law in Springfield, Illinois

Will you discuss your administration's focus and commitment to transparency?

The very first executive order I ever signed was a directive for state agencies to ensure compliance with transparency and reporting standards. I also signed major ethics reform legislation to bring transparency to lobbying practices and created a committee and database to review and track lobbying in all levels of government. We closed the "revolving door" of elected officials immediately becoming lobbyists.

Transparency in government is vital for our democracy. Our residents deserve to know how their hard-earned tax dollars are being spent and to have an opportunity to hold lawmakers accountable for their decisions. Everyone deserves elected officials who are acting in the public's best interests, not lining their own pockets.

How critical is a strong public/private partnership in Illinois and will you highlight your working relationship with the business community?

Coming from the business world, I saw firsthand how essential it was that the private sector and government have a mutually beneficial working relationship. I'm constantly having conversations with business leaders in Illinois, across the United States, and across the world to highlight the many benefits of doing business in our state, and I take my role as Illinois' best Chief Marketing Officer extremely seriously.

The growth of small businesses in Illinois, the fastest among the most populous states, is evidence of a business environment conducive to job growth. I've led the passage of incentives for industries newer to Illinois like data centers and electric vehicles alongside tax credits for apprenticeship programs and

neighborhood revitalization. We can and have made Illinois a business-friendly state while ensuring no one is excluded from opportunities for growth.

As you look to attract new industries and businesses to Illinois, how do you define the Illinois advantage?

There are so many advantages to operating a business in Illinois, but I think one of the strongest draws for business leaders is the exceptionally talented and skilled people that make up our workforce. Our top-tier business schools and engineering programs, world-class university system, alongside our excellent community college system (the third largest in the nation), are producing tens of thousands of people of all ages each year with the skills necessary to fill open positions in legacy and new industries alike. I've made college more affordable to ensure students have an opportunity to get this essential education without being tied to a lifetime of burdensome debt, and it's why we're making community college free for working class families across Illinois.

On top of that, Illinois has a tremendous geographic advantage in the middle of the country: the heart of the nation's logistics and shipping sectors, headquarters for 35 Fortune 500 companies, and home to the most affordable large city in the country. We're at the center of everything – with abundant fresh water, fertile farm land, and hard-working families that want to be here.

And, of course, my administration is committed to working hand-in-hand with job creators to bring them and keep them here, with incentives for innovators in the industries of the future, like electric vehicles, data centers, and quantum computing.

With so much gridlock and partisanship in Washington DC, what do you see as the key ingredients in getting action and achieving results?

As governor, I've worked on complex legislation with bipartisan support to advance the interests of our residents, including the largest infrastructure program in state history, creation of an equitable cannabis industry, and one of the nation's best clean energy and climate laws. But most important to our residents is that we make real progress to lift up working families and those who have been left out and left behind. What Illinoisans and all Americans want most is progress, even if it doesn't come with bipartisan support. So I've gotten a raise in the minimum wage, balanced budgets, and more college affordability with only Democrats supporting them. It was the right thing to do in the face of Republicans' unwillingness to work together on them.

What attracted you to public service?

My mother was a Democratic activist who took me to protests for women's rights and meetings about public policy at a young age, where I saw the importance of a passionate and involved community. My father too helped elect Democrats to public office. I'm proud to honor their legacy with the work I do. I also am motivated by my love for Illinois and my belief that ours truly is the greatest state in the nation. I want every family in the state to feel the same, and I want residents of other states and leaders both nationally and internationally to look to us as a leader.

With the success that you administration has achieved for Illinois, are you able to enjoy the process and take moments to celebrate the wins?

Absolutely, but the celebrations are short. We never want to stop pushing forward to make Illinois even better, but I am consistently in awe of the resilience and determination of Illinoisans. Take just this past year, when the current Supreme Court struck down the long-standing precedent and protection offered by *Roe v. Wade*, curtailing reproductive freedom around the country. In 2019, I had already enshrined Illinois' status as a safe haven for reproductive rights, meaning that this abhorrent decision wouldn't impact Illinoisans quite so directly – though as we've seen from ongoing litigation to curtail abortion medication access, they're coming to take away reproductive freedom in Illinois, too.

But at the moment of the *Dobbs* decision, Illinoisans demonstrated why they are such an incredible people, turning to states on Illinois' borders – where abortion rights have been struck down or restricted on all sides – and finding new and creative ways to volunteer, to offer support, to stand up for the liberty of their fellow Americans. This is one of the great political challenges of our lifetimes, and everyday Illinoisans have made it clear that we will lead. I'm absolutely honored to represent such a strong and empathetic people, and it's a legacy I strive to do right by every day. ●