

## Weekly Report January 29, 2021

### **GOVERNOR:**

**Governor's State of the State Speech** – On February 1<sup>st</sup>, Governor Greg Abbott gave his State of the State speech via live video from Visionary Fiber Technologies in Lockhart. He reflected on 2020 and thanked health care workers, food service and grocery workers, truck drivers and farmers for working through the pandemic, and he predicted a bright future for the state.

**Emergency Items** - During his remarks, the governor identified five emergency items that the legislature will be able to consider before the 60<sup>th</sup> day of the session on March 12<sup>th</sup> including:

- Expanding rural broadband access;
- Preventing local defunding of police;
- Bail reform;
- Election integrity; and
- Liability protection from COVID-related lawsuits.

**Note:** *Specific issues addressed in Governor Abbott's State of the State speech and information on the emergency items are detailed in the issue categories below.*

**SENATE:** The Texas Senate was not in session this week.

**Next Week:** The Senate will reconvene at 3:00 p.m. on Tuesday, February 9, 2021.

**HOUSE:** The House was not in session this week.

**House Committee Assignments** – On February 4<sup>th</sup>, Speaker Dade Phelan (R-Beaumont) announced House committee assignments for the 87<sup>th</sup> Legislature. Speaker Phelan said, “The State of Texas has arrived at a pivotal moment in its history – one that requires us as lawmakers to work with one another, build consensus, and leverage the diverse strengths and backgrounds of those within our chamber to confront the unique challenges ahead. I have dedicated my speakership to creating a member-driven process that affords each of my colleagues a seat at the decision-making table, and have made these committee assignments to reflect their preferences, talents, and where I believe they will have the greatest impact on the issues to come before this body.” Speaker Phelan said that the committee assignments were made with a number of considerations in mind, namely, the interests, skillsets, and express committee preferences of each member, the needs and priorities of the state's rural and urban areas, and the diverse demographics of the House's membership. Highlighting the need to invest in the future of House leadership, Speaker Phelan

added, “The nature of this session will be anything but status quo, and the House stands to benefit from members assuming new roles and responsibilities and the fresh perspectives these appointments provide. I have utmost confidence that each of these appointees will excel in the positions they’ve been selected for, and I thank them in advance for the work they will do.” Speaker Phelan made some observations about his House committees:

- Twelve members were selected to chair committees for the first time.
- Consistent with House practice in preceding sessions, members are considered eligible to serve as a chair or vice chair in their third and second terms respectively, making 104 members eligible for a chair and 130 members eligible for a vice chair this session.
- Over 40 percent of the House’s membership has served less than three terms.
- The current makeup of the Texas House is 82 Republicans and 67 Democrats (with 1 vacant seat).
- Including the Speaker Pro Tempore, a leadership position equivalent to a chair, 21 chairs are Republicans and 14 are Democrats;
- Consistent with House Rules, which were adopted by members during the first week of the legislative session, there are 34 standing committees to which members have been appointed. Of those committees:
  - 5 chairs and 14 vice chairs are women;
  - 14 chairs and 21 vice chairs are Black, Hispanic, or Asian-American;
  - 11 chairs and 7 vice chairs represent rural areas of the state; and
  - 24 chairs and 27 vice chairs represent urban areas of the state.
- Speaker Phelan elected not to form Select Committees, thereby giving deference to the committee structure approved by members in the House Rules.
- In the interest of a fair and objective process, Speaker Phelan has chosen not to appoint chairs of other committees to simultaneously serve on the House Calendars Committee.

**House Committees and Chairs:**

**Deans of the Texas House** – Tom Craddick (R-Midland) and Senfronia Thompson (D-Houston)

**Speaker Pro Tempore** – Joe Moody (D-El Paso)

**Agriculture & Livestock** – DeWayne Burns (R-Cleburne)

**Appropriations** – Greg Bonnen (R-Friendswood)

**Business & Industry** – Chris Turner (D-Grand Prairie)

**Calendars** – Dustin Burrows (R-Lubbock)

**Corrections** – Andrew Murr (R-Junction)

**County Affairs** – Garnet Coleman (D-Houston)

**Criminal Jurisprudence** – Nicole Collier (D-Fort Worth)

**Culture, Recreation & Tourism** – Ken King (R-Canadian)

**Defense & Veterans’ Affairs** – Richard Pena Raymond (D-Laredo)

**Elections** – Briscoe Cain (R-Deer Park)

**Energy Resources** – Craig Goldman (R-Fort Worth)

**Environmental Regulation** – Brooks Landgraf (R-Odessa)  
**General Investigating** – Matt Krause (R-Fort Worth)  
**Higher Education** – Jim Murphy (R-Houston)  
**Homeland Security & Public Safety** – James White (R-Hillister)  
**House Administration** – Will Metcalf (R-Conroe)  
**Human Services** – James Frank (R-Wichita Falls)  
**Insurance** – Tom Oliverson (R-Cypress)  
**International Relations & Economic Development** – Angie Chen Button (R-Garland)  
**Judiciary & Civil Jurisprudence** – Jeff Leach (R-Plano)  
**Juvenile Justice & Family Issues** – Victoria Neave (D-Dallas)  
**Land & Resource Management** – Joe Deshotel (D-Beaumont)  
**Licensing & Administrative Procedures** – Senfronia Thompson (D-Houston)  
**Local & Consent Calendars** – Charlie Geren (R-Fort Worth)  
**Natural Resources** – Tracy O. King (D-Batesville)  
**Pensions, Investments & Financial Services** – Rafael Anchia (D-Dallas)  
**Public Education** – Harold Dutton (D-Houston)  
**Public Health** – Stephanie Klick (R-Fort Worth)  
**Redistricting** – Todd Hunter (R-Corpus Christi)  
**Resolutions Calendars** – Ryan Guillen (D-Rio Grande City)  
**State Affairs** – Chris Paddie (R-Marshall)  
**Transportation** – Terry Canales (D-Edinburg)  
**Urban Affairs** – Philip Cortez (D-San Antonio)  
**Ways & Means** – Morgan Meyer (R-Dallas)

#### **About House Committees:**

**Number of Committees** – The House has 34 standing and procedural committees, the same as 2019. In 2017, there were 38.

**Republican Committee Chairs** – Republicans are chairing 21 of the House's standing and procedural committees, compared to 22 in 2019. In 2017, Republicans chaired 25 of the House's standing and procedural committees.

**Democratic Committee Chairs** – Democrats are chairing 13 of the House's standing and procedural committees, compared to 12 in 2019. In 2017, Democrats chaired 13 of the House's standing and procedural committees.

**Next Week:** The House will reconvene at 2:00 p.m. on Tuesday, February 9, 2021.

#### **PUBLIC EDUCATION:**

**Public Education** – In his State of the State address, Governor Abbott thanked the legislature for passing HB 3, the public school finance reform in 2019, and he asked legislators to build on that success. He said, "We must continue to invest in our future. And that is exactly what we did last session when we passed sweeping reforms to our school finance system and made major investments in our students and our teachers. We are already seeing the results of that work with teachers across Texas earning meaningful pay raises. I'm proud to say that

last year, teachers who had worked up to five years received an average raise of \$3,800. Teachers with more than five years of experience saw their pay increase by an average of \$5,200. We are also closing the digital divide for Texas students. The state partnered with school districts to provide internet connectivity and eLearning devices for schools and students. Investments like these are a victory for teachers, students, and parents as we provide our children with a quality education regardless of their zip code. This session we must continue to fund education as we promised. Also, if we expect the next generation of Texans to keep Texas the best state in the nation, we must teach them why we are so exceptional. We must educate them what it means to be an American and what it means to be a Texan. We must bolster civics education in our classrooms and ensure that every child learns the values of freedom, good governance, and patriotism.”

**Texas State Teachers Association Response** - TSTA President Ovidia Molina responded to the governor’s State of the State comments on public education saying, “If Governor Abbott thinks that HB 3 (2019) solved the school finance and teacher pay problem in Texas, he is sadly mistaken. HB 3 was a good start, but the governor and the legislature must do more. Despite the extra funding provided by the legislature in 2019, the average teacher pay in Texas and the average spending per student still lag woefully behind the national average. According to the latest survey by TSTA’s affiliate, the National Education Association, the average teacher pay in Texas in the 2019-20 school year was \$57,091, more than \$6,500 below the national average of \$63,645. And, Texas trailed the national average of \$14,254 in spending per pupil in average daily attendance (ADA) by an estimated \$2,839 per child, drawing on Texas’ own budgetary data. To keep Texas schools and teachers from falling even further behind, the governor and the legislature must do more than maintain the spending levels of HB 3. They must increase that funding level because the needs of educators are greater than ever as a result of the pandemic. To help, lawmakers can tap into the \$11.6 billion Rainy Day Fund. For starters, the state must keep all our districts fully funded, at last year’s levels, for the remainder of the spring semester, regardless of attendance losses over which districts have little control during a health emergency. Our teachers and other school employees have responded heroically to this crisis and are still waiting to be given the priority they deserve for a COVID vaccination. At personal risk, they have protected students, kept them fed and reinvented teaching options, all at significant additional costs to districts. Our state’s economic recovery depends on our public school system, and our school system depends on our still underpaid teachers and support staff. With the pandemic still raging, TSTA also urges the state to let school districts close in-person instruction, without losing state funding, if local health and school officials believe that is necessary to protect the health and safety of students, educators and their communities.”

**Supplementary Special Education Services Program** – On January 28<sup>th</sup>, Governor Greg Abbott and the Texas Education Agency (TEA) launched an

online application for the Supplementary Special Education Services (SSES) program, which allows eligible families of children with significant cognitive disabilities and complex educational needs to apply for a \$1,500 online account to be used in the SSES marketplace. The goods and services in the marketplace can help families mitigate educational setbacks resulting from the extensive disruptions to education prompted by COVID-19. These services do not reduce or eliminate the responsibilities of schools to provide a free appropriate public education (FAPE) to all students. Under the program - which was established last fall with \$30 million in funds by Governor Abbott and state leaders - at least 18,000 students with significant cognitive disabilities statewide will be in position to receive a one-time grant of up to \$1,500 for the purchase of a broad range of educational resources and services. Priority will be given to Texas families receiving income assistance and to families that have documented financial needs. Once approved for the program, families will be provided access to a ClassWallet-managed online portal and a digital spending account which they can use with providers that have been vetted and approved by TEA. The portal will provide information on available resources and services, allow families to make purchases, and provide them with full account and balance information. The program will support students who were enrolled in Texas public schools during the 2019-20 school year and are currently enrolled for the 2020-21 school year. The TEA is requesting that school systems across the state encourage eligible families of K-12 students identified with complex disabilities or significant cognitive disabilities to review eligibility requirements and complete the online application through the secure portal. Following the submission of an application, eligible families will receive an email to create their SSES marketplace account through ClassWallet to access the one-time \$1,500 per eligible student grant.

**Governor Greg Abbott** said, "The SSES program provides crucial academic resources to students with cognitive disabilities and will help close the educational gap caused by the COVID-19 pandemic. I urge eligible Texans to apply for this funding so that the State of Texas can partner with them and provide more support to Texas students."

**Lt. Governor Dan Patrick** added, "I encourage eligible parents of special education students to apply for the Supplemental Special Education Service program grant. Helping children with cognitive disabilities has been a priority of mine for over thirty years and I am so glad we can offer this SSES grant at this time. Now, more than ever, we need to make sure that our special education students have additional resources to help with the disruptions brought about by the pandemic along with the additional challenges they face."

**Speaker Dade Phelan** said, "Now more than ever, we must work to identify innovative solutions to prevent our most vulnerable students from falling through the cracks, and the funding provided for the SSES grants will help tremendously in keeping these students on the right academic trajectory. The SSES program will go a long way to offset the unprecedented educational disruptions that COVID-19 has created for thousands of Texas students with unique learning needs, and I appreciate Governor Abbott's leadership on the matter."

**Education Commissioner Mike Morath** said, "This program is yet another example of the innovative ways in which our state is working to close gaps in our system of public education. COVID-19 has created a host of new challenges for students, families, and teachers - but particularly for those students requiring special education services. These one-time grants will positively impact thousands of Texas families and help students to keep pace academically despite the ongoing disruptions tied to the pandemic. We encourage eligible families to apply quickly."

[Here](#) is a link to SSES program information.

### **STATEWIDE – COVID-19 RESPONSE:**

**DSHS COVID-19 Vaccine Weekly Update** – On January 29<sup>th</sup>, the Texas Department of State Health Services (DSHS) gave a vaccine update. For the week of February 1-5, 2021, the state of Texas will receive 520,425 first doses of COVID-19 vaccine from the federal government. DSHS instructed the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention to ship those doses to 344 providers in 166 counties across Texas. That includes 82 hub providers that will focus on broader community vaccination efforts including the hardest hit populations and areas in exchange for a steady supply of vaccine from week to week. 262 other providers are receiving doses, including more than 100 federally qualified health centers, community health centers, and rural health clinics that typically provide primary care for underserved populations. The increase in vaccine available is due to two factors:

- a 30 percent increase in the number of Moderna doses being provided to the state by the federal government, and
- a one-time return of 126,750 doses of the Pfizer vaccine that Texas was required to set aside for the federal Pharmacy Partnership for Long-Term Care Program because the program overestimated the amount of vaccine needed, so doses are being given back to the states. **DSHS is allocating the doses from the long-term care program to providers in counties where allocations have been significantly less than their share of the population, particularly in the suburban Dallas-Fort Worth and Houston areas.**

In addition to the over 500,000 first doses, the state ordered 188,225 doses intended as the second dose for people first vaccinated a few weeks ago. DSHS is working with providers to make sure that they order the number of second doses they need at the appropriate time. People should be able to return to the same provider to receive their second dose. Here is some information provided:

- **Texas providers have administered nearly 2.2 million doses of vaccine.**
- More than 1.75 million people have received at least one dose, and more than 410,000 have been fully vaccinated.
- People are not required to be vaccinated in their county of residence, and vaccine has been administered to residents of all 254 counties.
- Texas continues to vaccinate health care workers, residents of long-term care facilities, people 65 and older and those with medical conditions that put them at greater risk of hospitalization and death from COVID-19.

- Vaccine remains limited based on the capacity of the manufacturers to produce it, so it will take time for Texas to receive enough vaccine for all the people in the priority populations who want to be vaccinated.
- Currently, there is not enough vaccine to supply every provider with vaccine every week.

**Emergency Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program** – On February 2<sup>nd</sup>, Governor Greg Abbott announced that the Texas Health and Human Services Commission (HHSC) will provide approximately \$300 million in emergency Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) food benefits for the month of February as the state continues its response to the COVID-19 pandemic. Governor Abbott said, "We are grateful for this additional extension of emergency SNAP benefits for the month of February. We will continue to provide Texas families with the resources they need to put food on the table and provide for their loved ones." HHSC received federal approval from the U.S. Department of Agriculture to extend the maximum, allowable amount of SNAP benefits to recipients based on family size. The emergency February allotments are in addition to the more than \$2 billion in benefits previously provided to Texans since April 2020. Recipients will also continue to receive a 15 percent increase in their total benefits, which will continue monthly until June 2021. This additional 15 percent increase and the emergency allotment amount should appear in recipients' accounts by February 28. Administered by HHSC, SNAP is a federal program that provides food assistance to approximately 1.6 million eligible low-income families and individuals in Texas.