

**GOVERNOR:**

**Governor Abbott Repeals Pandemic Orders** – On March 2<sup>nd</sup>, Governor Greg Abbott issued an Executive Order (GA-34) lifting the mask mandate in Texas and increasing capacity of all businesses and facilities in the state to 100 percent. The governor made the announcement at Montelongo's Mexican Restaurant in Lubbock in an address to the Lubbock Chamber of Commerce. Governor Abbott said, "With the medical advancements of vaccines and antibody therapeutic drugs, Texas now has the tools to protect Texans from the virus. We must now do more to restore livelihoods and normalcy for Texans by opening Texas 100 percent. Make no mistake, COVID-19 has not disappeared, but it is clear from the recoveries, vaccinations, reduced hospitalizations, and safe practices that Texans are using that state mandates are no longer needed. Today's announcement does not abandon safe practices that Texans have mastered over the past year. Instead, it is a reminder that each person has a role to play in their own personal safety and the safety of others. With this executive order, we are ensuring that all businesses and families in Texas have the freedom to determine their own destiny." During his remarks, the governor discussed the incredible advancements that Texas has made that allow the state to open fully and lift the mask mandate - noting the rapid increase of vaccines. Nearly 5.7 million vaccine shots have been administered to Texans, and the state is now administering almost one million shots each week. By next Wednesday, about 7 million shots will have been administered in Texas and over half of seniors in Texas will have received a vaccine shot. By the end of March, every senior who wants a vaccine should be able to get one. The vaccine supply continues to increase so rapidly that more and more Texans will soon be eligible to receive a vaccine. The governor noted that Texas has a surplus of personal protective equipment and can perform over 100,000 COVID-19 tests a day. The state has invested in a variety of anti-body therapeutic drugs that have kept thousands of Texans out of hospitals. Texans have also adopted daily habits that reduce the risk of COVID-19 exposure and infection. More than 2.5 million Texans who were lab confirmed for COVID-19 have recovered since the beginning of the pandemic, and experts note the total number of Texans who have recovered from COVID-19 is likely 4-5 times that amount. The number of active COVID-19 cases is the lowest since November - meaning more Texans are recovering from COVID-19 than contracting it. The executive order rescinds most of the governor's earlier executive orders related to COVID-19. Effective next Wednesday, all businesses of any type may open to 100 percent capacity. Additionally, the order ends the statewide mask mandate in Texas. Businesses may still limit capacity or implement additional safety protocols at their own discretion. If COVID-19 hospitalizations in any of the 22 hospital regions in Texas get above 15 percent of the hospital bed capacity in that region for seven straight days, a county judge

in that region may use COVID-19 mitigation strategies. However, county judges may not impose jail time for not following COVID-19 orders nor may any penalties be imposed for failing to wear a face mask. If restrictions are imposed at a county level, those restrictions may not include reducing capacity to less than 50 percent for any type of entity.

**Lt. Governor Dan Patrick** said, "The Texas economy is coming back stronger than ever and Governor Greg Abbott's announcement will help us restore the livelihoods of millions of Texans even faster. Texas has proved what I have said throughout this long year of the pandemic - we can do two things at once - maintain our economy and fight COVID-19. Today, Texas is one step closer to a return to normalcy."

**Speaker Dade Phelan** said, "The unparalleled efforts of government and the pharmaceutical industry to defeat the novel coronavirus prove what we've always known: vaccines work. With greater access to vaccinations, better treatment options, and decreasing hospitalization rates, the Texas approach empowers citizens to exercise personal responsibility about their health in the fight against COVID-19. Today's action marks an important step in the reopening of Texas, improving the mental health of our students, increasing the reporting of domestic violence and child abuse, and revitalizing our business climate. I also appreciate that there are safeguards in place to prevent spread from increasing as the state reopens. The past year has been difficult for all Texas families, and there is now hope that we will defeat and eradicate COVID-19."

**Texas Association of Business** CEO Glenn Hamer said, "Throughout the pandemic, Governor Abbott has implemented measures that protect our communities, while ensuring Texans still have the ability to earn a paycheck and put food on their tables. Once again, the governor is striking the right balance by removing the heavy hand of government and allowing businesses to operate as they see fit. One year into dealing with COVID-19, organizations understand what protocols they must implement to function safely, and TAB knows Texas companies will operate responsibly."

**National Federation of Independent Business** State Director Annie Spillman said, "Our members are relieved that the governor has decided that all businesses can operate at full capacity. It's important that individuals continue to take personal responsibility and follow CDC guidelines to keep healthy and prevent the deadly coronavirus from spreading, but today's announcement is a step in the right direction toward helping small businesses recover from the economic slump caused by the pandemic and to keep Texans working."

**Invest Texas Council** Chair Ron Simmons said, "Today's announcement from the governor is a welcome one for businesses and employees throughout Texas. Businesses know what it takes to operate safely and do not need the heavy hand of government dictating to them how to function. As other states in the country keep restrictions in place, Texas will spearhead the economic recovery under Governor Abbott's leadership and with the aid of the legislature."

**Texas Restaurant Association** said, "The Texas Restaurant Association thanks Governor Abbott for outlining a plan that will lift costly business restrictions for most of the state where we are seeing significant improvement in our COVID-19

case, hospitalization, and vaccination numbers. We also thank the healthcare workers, first responders, and everyone else whose tireless work has enabled us to reach this point. What was originally planned as a two-week closure to bend the curve has become nearly one year of unprecedented challenges, wreaking havoc on the restaurant industry and families across Texas. For the thousands of local restaurants on the brink of closure and the 167,000 Texans that remain unemployed in our industry alone, there's finally a light at the end of a very long and dark tunnel."

**Texas Democratic Party** Chair Gilberto Hinojosa said, "What Abbott is doing is extraordinarily dangerous. This will kill Texans. Our country's infectious disease specialists have warned that we should not put our guard down even as we make progress towards vaccinations. On this Texas Independence Day, once again Abbott's actions are made independent of logic or reason. From leaving Texans to literally freeze to death, to letting a deadly virus have an open season on our residents, Governor Abbott has proven many times over that he neither understands the struggles of everyday Texans, nor does he care about doing his basic duty to protect them. Make no mistake: opening Texas prematurely will only lead to faster COVID spread, more sickness and overcrowding in our hospitals, and unnecessary deaths. There is no economic recovery without beating the coronavirus pandemic. This will set us back, not move us forward."

**Texas State Teachers Association** President Ovidia Molina said, "Like Governor Abbott, we believe we are making progress against the COVID-19 pandemic, but we are not there yet. Far from it. The COVID numbers have been coming down, but there were still 1,637 new confirmed cases of COVID in Texas yesterday and 59 deaths. More than 5,600 COVID patients were in Texas hospitals, and much is still unknown about the more-infectious variants of the deadly virus that have started striking our state. Governor Abbott needs to quit obeying his political impulses and listen to the health experts, who are warning that it is too soon to let our guard down without risking potentially disastrous consequences. The experts caution us to continue the safety practices that have worked against this disease, including widespread mask use and social distancing. The Texas State Teachers Association urges the governor to keep his mask mandate in place, especially in our public schools, and see that it is enforced."

[Here](#) is a link to the governor's executive order.

**SENATE:** The Texas Senate was in session on Tuesday of this week and recessed until Wednesday to refer bills to committee.

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

**HOUSE:** The House was in session on Tuesday and Wednesday this week.

**Next Week:** The House will reconvene on Tuesday, March 9, 2021 at 2:00 p.m. The first House Congratulatory and Memorial Resolutions Calendar has been set for March 10<sup>th</sup>.

## **BUDGET:**

**Legislative Budget Board** – On March 2<sup>nd</sup>, Speaker Dade Phelan appointed Representative Armando Walle (D-Houston) and re-appointed Representative Mary Gonzalez (D-Clint) to the Legislative Budget Board. Walle is replacing Representative Oscar Longoria (D-Mission). Representative Walle said, “I am proud and humbled to have earned the confidence of Speaker Phelan to serve on the Legislative Budget Board during such a critical time for Texas. With our state and its economy reeling from the effects of our recent winter storm and the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic, I am ready to get Texas back on track with my fellow members of the LBB.” Other members of the LBB are Lt. Governor Dan Patrick and Senators Kelly Hancock (R-North Richland Hills), Joan Huffman (R-Houston), Larry Taylor (R-Friendswood), and Jane Nelson (R-Flower Mound); Speaker Dade Phelan and Representatives Greg Bonnen (R-Friendswood) and Morgan Meyer (R-Dallas). The LBB was created by statute in 1949. The primary purpose of the board is the development of recommended legislative appropriations for all agencies of state government. The board provides the Texas Legislature with the recommended state budget, prepared by the LBB staff, at the beginning of each legislative session. The board also completes fiscal analyses for proposed legislation and conducts evaluations and reviews to improve the efficiency and performance of state and local operations.

## **PUBLIC EDUCATION:**

**House Public Education Committee** – The House Public Education Committee held its organizational meeting on Tuesday. Chair Harold Dutton opened the meeting by commending former Chair Dan Huberty for his leadership in passing HB 3, which he called “the most historic education reform since 1984.” He said it is important to continue that progress. He called HB 3 a “launching pad” not a “landing spot.”

**Education Commissioner Mike Morath** was the only witness. He first talked about the adjustment TEA, schools and students have had to make because of COVID.

- He commended the extra labor of teachers and their creativity in responding to the pandemic.
- He talked about the initial \$2.2 billion in federal resources allocated to public education early in the pandemic.
- The initial response was making sure students were fed as schools began to close.
- He said, “Now we know schools are the safest congregant setting in the pandemic.”
- A challenge has been transitioning to remote learning. Over 4.5 million devices and hot spots have been delivered, and the state has closed the digital divide on devices.

- Student enrollment is down 153,000 students from last year when a 35,000 increase was projected with most of the drop off being younger students.
- Also, there has been a noticeable decrease in high school attendance by juniors and seniors since October.
- He is “actively deliberating” about the “hold harmless” issue and is on the verge of announcing a solution, which he said will come “very soon.”
- He discussed a new tool – beginning-of-year assessments (BOY). TEA has used statistical techniques to extrapolate results and found that students are 3.2 months behind in reading and math as of September.
- TEA has been looking at ways to accelerate instruction going forward.
- He suggested four evidence-based approaches, but said they are difficult to implement. They are:
  - Curriculum rigor – they don’t want to downward adjust so educators will need to provide grade-level instruction while providing remedial instruction at the same time.
  - Support for Teachers – He talked about challenges of teaching “roomies” and “zoomies” simultaneously. Adjustments must be made to relieve teachers.
  - Time – More instruction time is needed to fill the gap including tutoring, after school programs and summer programs.
  - Systemic Adjustments
- He talked about Operation Connectivity and bridging the digital divide.
- Operation Connectivity has three phases. Phase one (Triage) has been complete by providing \$1 billion in laptops, hotspots, iPads, and Chromebooks. In all, three million devices and one million hotspots were provided.
- The next phase is the challenge of internet access.
- Over one-million low-income students are in an area with commercially available broadband but they do not have access. (Those areas are mapped out.) TEA is negotiating with providers in those areas for discount pricing and looking at ways to subsidize student connection. Doing that will cost \$280 million per year.
- The other challenge is deploying broadband in rural areas where it is not available.
- There is a four- to five-year life cycle of devices. Device replacement will cost \$260 million per year.
- Then, he turned the discussion to the challenge of defining the future for hybrid instruction.
- The state is currently providing 100 percent funding for remote instruction.
- He believes there is a “bright future” for blended instruction but a limited future for remote-only learning.
- The Virtual School Network is a model for full-time virtual learning. Under the VSN model, there is pay for completion. That is a different model than in-person instruction, which is paid based on attendance.

- Some attention might need to be given to funding models for blended learning.
- He has already seen a noticeable impact from HB 3 including:
  - Math and Reading Academies
  - Additional days in the school year
  - Full funding of SAT/ACT and certifications
  - 82 school systems are taking advantage of the Teacher Incentive Allotment, which he said will “be a big deal in the long-term.”
  - Full-Day Pre-K increased students by 31,000 (although interrupted by the pandemic)
  - Lower school property tax rates.
- He discussed some unintended consequences of HB 3 that need to be addressed:
  - Fast-growth allotment
  - CTE funding in small and mid-size districts
- He discussed HB 3906 which overhauled STAAR assessments. Two positive results have been integrating co-curricular and writing samples and transition to on-line assessments.
- He pointed out that the five-year transition to on-line assessments will only continue if the legislature acts. The legislature must decide if the state proceeds transitioning to on-line testing.

**State Board for Educator Certification** – On March 2<sup>nd</sup>, Governor Greg Abbott appointed Kyrsten Arbuckle and Melissa Isaacs and reappointed Rohanna Brooks-Sykes and Emily Garcia to the State Board for Educator Certification for terms set to expire on February 1, 2025. Additionally, the governor appointed Bob Brescia, Ed.D. for a term set to expire on February 1, 2023. The board develops certification and continuing education requirements and standards of conduct for public school teachers.

**Kyrsten Arbuckle** of Austin is a former small business owner. She is a member of the Parent Service Organization Leadership Team for Valor Public Schools, community market volunteer for Community First! Village, a small group leader for Providence Church, and a coordinator for Moms in Prayer. Arbuckle received a Bachelor of Arts in Communication Studies from Texas Christian University.

**Melissa Isaacs** of Jewett is a secondary school teacher for Buffalo ISD. She is a member of Innovative Teachers of Texas, American Association of Family & Consumer Sciences, and the Career and Technical Association of Texas and a former member of the Family and Consumer Sciences Teacher Association of Texas. Additionally, she is a board member of the Texas FCCLA Board of Directors. Isaacs received a Bachelor of Science in Family and Consumer Sciences and a minor in Secondary Education from Sam Houston State University, Master of Theological Studies from the University of Dallas, and a Master of Science from Family and Consumer Sciences and a minor in Curriculum and Instruction from Sam Houston State University.

**Rohanna Brooks-Sykes** of Spring is a related services counselor at Klein High School and is a certified school and a licensed professional counselor supervisor.

She is vice-chair of the State Board for Educator Certification and a member of the Texas School Counselors Association, Texas Counselors Association (TCA), former chair of the TCA Public Policy and Advocacy Committee and former co-chair of the TCA Human Rights Committee. She is currently the chair of the Spring Creek Counseling Association (SCCA) Legislative Committee and a member of the Klein Leadership Coalition. Brooks-Sykes is a former president of SCCA and former member of the Klein District Instructional Development Council, Klein Unite for Understanding Diversity Council and Klein District Improvement Plan: Closing the Achievement Gap. She is the 2013 recipient of the TCA Dr. Jamesanna Kirven Outstanding Counselor Award. Brooks-Sykes received a Bachelor of Science in Psychology from the University of Houston and a Master of Arts in Counseling from Prairie View A&M University.

**Emily Garcia** of Dallas is the Executive Director of Urban Teachers. Previously, she served as a middle school Director for Uplift Education, and was a teacher and an assistant principal for Grand Prairie ISD. She is a founding member of The Commit Partnership's Best in Class Coalition, a member of P.E.O. International, a Leadership ISD Alumni and an Emergency Leader in Philanthropy fellow. Additionally, she volunteers as a deputy voter registrar for Dallas County, and also supports the International Student Foundation. Garcia received a Bachelor of Arts in Crime and Justice Studies from The University of Texas at Dallas and a Master of Education from Southern Methodist University. She serves as the alternative educator preparation program representative, which is a non-voting position, and is not subject to Senate confirmation.

**Bob Brescia**, Ed.D. of Odessa is a Teacher of Record for Ector County Independent School District, and an adjunct professor for Wilmington University. He previously served as the Executive Director for The John Ben Shepperd Public Leadership Institute, and served as the Head of School for Saint Joseph Academy in Brownsville. He is a board member of the Salvation Army - Odessa and Constituting America and a member of the Odessa Information & Discussion Group. He is the former chairman of Basin PBS and the American Red Cross of the Permian Basin and former president of Rotary International - Greater Odessa. Brescia is a U.S. Army veteran, and received a Bachelor of Arts in Civil Government from Norwich University, a Master of Science in Computer Information Systems and a Master of Arts in International Relations from Boston University – European Division, and a Doctor of Education in Executive Leadership with distinction from The George Washington University.

**Texas Education Agency's Updated Health Guidance** - On March 3<sup>rd</sup>, Texas Education Agency (TEA) updated its public health guidance for school districts in response to Governor Abbott's new executive order, which addresses the statewide wearing of face coverings and takes effect March 10<sup>th</sup>. TEA's authority to implement operational requirements for public schools remains in effect. As a result of the lifting of the order on masks, TEA provided its new guidance to school districts. Under the updated guidance, a public school system's current practices on masks may continue unchanged. Local school boards have full authority to determine their local mask policy.

TEA also made updates related to surface cleaning requirements.

[Here](#) is a link to TEA's new public health guidance for schools.

**“Hold Harmless” Extended Through This School Year** – On March 4<sup>th</sup>, Governor Greg Abbott and the Texas Education Agency (TEA) announced that the State of Texas will provide a "hold harmless" to Texas school systems for the rest of the 2020-2021 academic school year only. This means funding will be made available to school systems in Texas that have seen enrollment and attendance declines because of the COVID-19 pandemic, as long as they maintain or increase current levels of on-campus attendance. Districts will be funded on attendance in line with projections made prior to the public health crisis. This will ensure that school systems in Texas can retain their teachers for the 2020-21 school year for whom they originally budgeted. This final semester of hold harmless means districts have been held harmless for three consecutive semesters - Spring Semester of the 2019-20 academic year and the entirety of the 2020-21 academic year. In normal times, schools are funded based on the students enrolled and the daily attendance on campus. This year, TEA prioritized flexibility to ensure essential funding support for school systems, by providing full funding based on daily attendance, whether the attendance was in-person or remote. The hold harmless, which was previously provided in the first semester of the school year, allocates funding above the statutory guaranteed level of funding for students who are not enrolled, or for students who attend (even if remotely) less frequently. For the current second semester, it is being provided as long as on-campus attendance participation rates do not decline or those rates otherwise remain high (at least 80 percent).

**Governor Abbott** said, "As more districts return to in-person instruction, we are ensuring that schools are not financially penalized for declines in attendance due to COVID-19. Providing a hold harmless for the remainder of the 2020-2021 school year is a crucial part of our state's commitment to supporting our school systems and teachers and getting more students back in the classroom."

**Lt. Governor Dan Patrick** said, "My goal is to get all of our students back in the classroom and this hold harmless funding will ensure our public schools can complete the school year and continue to bring students back to campuses for in-person learning. As always, we are grateful to those teachers across the state who have worked tirelessly during the pandemic to keep our students on track."

**Speaker Dade Phelan** said, "The State of Texas is committed to getting more students back into the classroom for in-person instruction and fully funding our schools - despite challenges that occurred as a result of COVID-19. I fully support the decision to provide necessary funding and maintain our commitment to Texas schools."

**Senate Education Committee Chair Larry Taylor** said, "The legislature was already dedicated to fulfilling the commitments made in HB 3 from last session. The financial stability provided by this hold harmless will further support our schools in their efforts to help our students meet the challenges brought on by COVID-19."



**House Public Education Committee Chair Harold Dutton** said, "It would be an understatement to say that Texas families have been negatively affected by the COVID environment. And perhaps those most affected have been our public school students who have had to educate remotely or not at all. Texas should do everything possible to get these students back to school but school districts must not be penalized financially for the absence of these students. That is why this hold harmless provision is a financial must for Texas school districts."

**Next Week:**

**Tuesday, March 9, 2021**

**8:00 a.m. – House Public Education Committee** will meet in E1.004 to take up: **HB 434** by Keith Bell (R-Forney) would allow a **career and technology credit** to be substituted for the fine arts credit in the curriculum requirements for the foundation high school program.

**HB 547** by James Frank (R-Wichita Falls) would allow **home-schooled students** to participate in activities sponsored by the University Interscholastic League (**UIL**).

**HB 690** by Will Metcalf (R-Conroe) would require the State Board of Education to require a **trustee** to complete **training on school safety** on curriculum and materials developed by the board.

**HB 691** by Will Metcalf (R-Conroe) would require the Texas School Safety Center to report to the Texas Education Agency (TEA) any school district that fails to require with **school safety and security audits, procedures and requirements**; and would allow TEA to impose an administrative penalty against the district in an amount up to the annual salary of the superintendent.

**HB 699** by Jon Rosenthal (D-Houston) would require school districts to excuse a student from attending school for an **absence** resulting from a **serious or life-threatening illness** or treatment that makes the student's attendance infeasible.

**HB 759** by Sam Harless (R-Spring) would require Texas Education Agency to establish a **database of student threat assessments** in which there was a determination that a student poses a serious risk of violence to self or others; and allow access to the database to peace officers, school resource officers, principals and superintendents.

**HB 773** by Gary VanDeaver (R-New Boston) would to add "students who successfully completed a program of study in **career and technical education**" as a student **success indicator**.

**HB 1147** by Dan Huberty (R-Humble) would count enlistment in the Texas National Guard as **military readiness**.

**STATEWIDE – COVID-19 RESPONSE:**

**DSHS Weekly Vaccine Distribution Update** – On February 26<sup>th</sup> the Department of State Health Services issued its weekly update on Vaccine distribution in Texas for the week of March 1<sup>st</sup>. It said, "The number of COVID-19 vaccine doses shipping to Texas providers continues to climb with 676,280 first doses (compared to 591,920 first doses last week) allocated to the state by the federal government for the week of March 1. The Texas Department of State Health

Services has instructed the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention to ship those doses to 522 providers (compared to 563 last week) in 199 counties (compared to 158 last week). The total includes 84,240 doses for federally-supported sites (same as last week) in Houston and North Texas and another 52,650 unused doses returned to Texas by the Federal Pharmacy Partnership for Long-Term Care. *(Note: This week's total is 84,360 more than last week and if you back out the long-term care vaccines returned to the system, the increase is only 31,710 doses over the previous week.)* Texas providers swiftly resumed vaccination following last week's winter storms and have now administered more than 5 million doses. More than 3.3 million people have received at least one dose, and almost 1.7 million are fully vaccinated. Progress continues in vaccinating adults 65 years old and older with more than 40 percent having received at least one dose and nearly 1 in 5 fully vaccinated. In addition to the first doses, the state is ordering 429,600 doses (compared to 516,830 doses last week) intended as the second dose for people first vaccinated a few weeks ago. DSHS automatically orders second doses to arrive at providers in the week they can be administered, so they will be available when needed. People should be able to return to the same provider to receive their second dose within six weeks of getting the first. 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.

**Major Disaster Declaration Extended to Additional Counties** - On February 26<sup>th</sup>, Governor Greg Abbott announced that the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) added 18 more Texas counties to President Biden's Major Disaster Declaration for Individual Assistance. Governor Abbott said, "Thank you to our federal partners at FEMA for granting approval for these 18 counties. I look forward to working with them to ensure the remaining counties in this request are approved, as well as other counties throughout our state who are in need of assistance." The governor originally requested Individual Assistance for all 254 Texas counties on February 18<sup>th</sup>. On February 20<sup>th</sup>, the White House partially approved Texas' request for a Major Disaster Declaration. The partial approval included Individual Assistance in 77 counties and for Public Assistance (Emergency Protective Measures Only) in all 254 counties. On February 22<sup>nd</sup>, the Texas Division of Emergency Management (TDEM) re-requested, and FEMA approved an additional 31 counties to be added to the President's Major Disaster Declaration for Individual Assistance. Additional counties will be re-requested as the State of Texas continues to receive information reported from individuals who have suffered damage from the winter storm. Texans are urged to fill out TDEM's State of Texas Assessment Tool (iSTAT) to help the state identify damages across Texas and help emergency management officials gain an understanding of damages that occurred during the recent winter weather. FEMA has asked the state of Texas for additional

information regarding the amount of damage in the counties that have yet to be declared, and TDEM will continue to present that information until all Texas counties that qualify for federal assistance receive the assistance they need. The 18 newly-approved counties include Atascosa, Bandera, Brooks, Duval, Eastland, Ector, Goliad, Howard, Jim Hogg, Karnes, Kleberg, Leon, Llano, Newton, Robertson, Trinity, Webb, and Willacy.

**Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program** – On February 26<sup>th</sup>, Governor Greg Abbott and the Texas Health and Human Services Commission (HHSC) announced that the state will provide approximately \$229 million in emergency Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) food benefits for the month of March as the state continues its response to the COVID-19 pandemic. Governor Abbott said, "Providing emergency SNAP benefits is critical to our state's ongoing COVID-19 response because it ensures that Texas families can continue to put healthy meals on the table. I thank the USDA for their continued partnership as we ensure access to healthy food for Texans in need." 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 March allotments are in addition to the more than \$2.5 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 March 31.

**Save Our Seniors Initiative** – On March 1<sup>st</sup>, Governor Greg Abbott announced that the Texas Division of Emergency (TDEM), the Texas Department of State Health Services (DSHS), and the Texas Military Department (TMD) have announced 26 participating counties for the first week of the Save Our Seniors initiative. The state has allocated up to 8,000 vaccine doses for the first week of the program, which the state will use in partnership with local officials and service organizations to target Texans who are 75 years and older or homebound. TDEM and TMD will work alongside local jurisdictions to set up a central drive-through vaccine clinic in the community or administer directly to homebound seniors - these decisions will be driven by local jurisdictions based on their most vulnerable identified individuals. Governor Abbott said, "The Save Our Seniors program will help us reach vulnerable homebound seniors across the state and provide them with life-saving COVID-19 vaccines. As more communities are identified and selected for the program, we will be able to get more shots in arms and further strengthen our response to this virus." Counties participating in the first round of the program are Aransas, Bastrop, Brewster, Brooks, Brown, Cass, Dallas, Eastland, Freestone, Gray, Hill, Hockley, Hudspeth, Hutchinson, Irion, Lee, McCulloch, Medina, Morris, Panola, Rains, Refugio, Robertson, San Jacinto, Shelby, and Webb. In coordination with local and state partners, counties and cities have been selected based on data provided from DSHS related to the following factors:

- the state targeted areas with ongoing high hospitalizations;

- the state looked at the number of approved providers serving the area;
- the state took into account areas who reported no more than approximately a third vaccinated for seniors;
- the state took into account total allocations over the previous 12 weeks;
- the state utilized data showing the least vaccinated counties for both 65+ and 75+ administered doses; and
- the state focused on allocating vaccine equitably across the state.

**Vaccine Eligibility Expanded to School and Day Care Workers** – On March 2<sup>nd</sup>, the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services directed states to expand eligibility to include people who work in school and child care operations. The federal directive defined the people eligible as “those who work in pre-primary, primary, and secondary schools, as well as Head Start and Early Head Start programs (including teachers, staff, and bus drivers) and those who work as or for licensed child care providers, including center-based and family care providers.” In response, on March 3<sup>rd</sup>, HHSC Commissioner John Hellerstedt sent a letter to all COVID-19 Vaccine Providers in Texas saying, First and foremost, thank you for all you have done to administer COVID-19 vaccines across the state of Texas. Your efforts are greatly appreciated. As of today, you have administered nearly 6 million doses to your fellow Texans, and more than 2 million are now fully vaccinated. Yesterday, the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services directed states to expand vaccine eligibility to include people who work in school and child care operations. This includes those who work in pre-primary, primary, and secondary schools, as well as Head Start and Early Head Start programs (including teachers, staff, and bus drivers) and those who work as or for licensed child care providers, including center-based and family care providers. In light of this federal directive, all vaccine providers in Texas should immediately include these personnel in vaccination administration and outreach to ensure they are able to be immunized. This action does not change the other groups prioritized for vaccination in Texas, and I encourage you to continue your efforts to vaccinate older adults since the burden of COVID-19 falls so severely on people ages 65 and older. Additionally, please track to the best of your ability the number of education and child care employees vaccinated. In the coming days, the TDEM reporting portal will be updated to allow you to report these numbers as part of your daily reporting. This information will be key to help Texas keep track of its progress in vaccinating this group. The state of Texas appreciates your continued dedication and flexibility as we progress through COVID-19 vaccination.”

**State Websites** - Additional information can be obtained via the Senate, House, and capitol websites:

[www.senate.state.tx.us](http://www.senate.state.tx.us)

[www.house.state.tx.us](http://www.house.state.tx.us)

[www.capitol.state.tx.us](http://www.capitol.state.tx.us)

**COVID-19 State Website:** <https://gov.texas.gov/coronavirus>