

Week in Review

5/22/2023

ADDICTION/SUBSTANCE ABUSE

RecoveryOhio, the Ohio Narcotics Intelligence Center (ONIC) and U.S. Drug Enforcement Agency (DEA) recently joined law enforcement and treatment agencies in Ross County for the state's fourth coordinated drug response. The two-day "Operation Bridging Recovery and Interdiction Data Gathering Enforcement" (BRIDGE) sought to remove drugs and drug traffickers from the streets and connect addicted persons with help and treatment. The enforcement surge involved area drug task forces, law enforcement, quick response teams, and providers of harm reduction and treatment in a comprehensive approach to substance abuse.

AGRICULTURE

Clint Black and special guest Emily Ann Roberts have claimed the final spot in the 2023 Ohio State Fair Concert & Event Series. The country music singers will perform at 7 p.m. on Thursday, July 27. Tickets (\$35 and \$25 options) are now on sale. Each concert ticket purchased in advance includes admission to the Ohio State Fair. All concerts take place in the indoor, air-conditioned WCOL Celeste Center. Tickets for the full line up of shows are available for purchase at ticketmaster.com/OhioStateFair. Previously announced shows at the 2023 Ohio State Fair include KIDZ BOP Never Stop Live Tour, Third Eye Blind with special guest The Main Squeeze, Keith Sweat with special guest Ginuwine, All Ohio State Fair Band & Youth Choir, Yung Gravy and bbno\$, Casting Crowns, 1964 The Tribute (Beatles tribute band), Ludacris, Styx with special guest Foghat, Tyler Hubbard with special guest Matt Stell, Jeff Dunham, Lindsey Stirling with special guest Walk off the Earth, and the Sale of Champions Livestock Auction.

ARTS, SPORTS AND ENTERTAINMENT

Arts organizations around Ohio will be receiving more than \$23 million in support as part of the first round of the Ohio Arts Economic Relief Program. According to the governor's office, 138 organizations based in 35 counties are receiving the grants that were funded through the American Rescue Plan Act (ARPA). The program was created through 134-SB234 (Lang), which was later rolled into 134-HB45 (West-Roemer). A total of \$50 million is available through the program, with a second round of funding to be announced in coming weeks. Funding can be used to help pay for employee compensation, excluding bonuses; employee recruitment, rehiring and training expenses; rent or mortgage payments; and operating costs.

ATTORNEY GENERAL

Attorney General Dave Yost announced this year's victim assistance award winners at the 2023 Two Days in May Conference. They are New Leaf Justice Enterprises, Promising Practice Award; Founder and Director Brenda Glass of the Brenda Glass Multipurpose Trauma Recovery Center, Special Courage Award; and former Executive Director David Voth of Crime Victim Services, Robert Denton Special Achievement Award.

Attorney General Dave Yost recently celebrated a "banner day" for the Northeast Ohio Human Trafficking Task Force. The group recently arrested 10 on sex charges in North Olmsted as an Elyria man was being convicted of 31 human trafficking offenses and sentenced to 172.5 to 182.5 years in prison. The 10 arrests were part of a one-day operation in conjunction with the North Olmsted Police Department, Westshore Enforcement Bureau and the Ohio Internet Crimes Against Children Task Force to identify those providing and purchasing commercial sex. Among those taken into custody for promoting prostitution was Errol Jackson, 35, of Lorain, already a registered Tier III sex offender, Yost noted.

AUTOMOBILE INDUSTRY

DriveOhio will hold a number of public meetings around the state as it updates its Electric Vehicle (EV) Infrastructure Deployment Plan ahead of the second phase of EV charging implementation later this year. The meetings, which are open to the public, will gather feedback on charging locations and other plan updates. They will be held in Cincinnati (June 9); Columbus (June 12); Athens (June 13); Cleveland (June 14); Toledo (June 22); and the Dayton area (date TBA).

BALLOT ISSUES

Opponents of an amendment that would require future Ohio constitutional amendments to reach a 60 percent threshold to be adopted filed a lawsuit Friday, May 12 seeking to block an August special election where voters will decide the issue. One Person One Vote, the opposition group to SJR2 (Gavarone-McColley), filed the lawsuit against Secretary of State Frank LaRose. Three Ohio voters who oppose the measure are also plaintiffs. They argue that the Ohio Revised Code, after passage of 134-HB458 (Hall), now only permits local August elections, and only in localities that are under a fiscal emergency. They seek a writ of mandamus directing LaRose to remove the constitutional amendment proposed by SJR2 from the Aug. 8 special election ballot and to instruct county election officials not to proceed with the special election.

Then this week, the ACLU of Ohio Thursday filed an amicus brief with the Ohio Supreme Court on behalf of the Ohio League of Women Voters in a lawsuit challenging the use of an August special election for SJR2 (McColley-Gavarone), the 60 percent constitutional amendment, filed by One Person, One Vote.

SJR2 (McColley-Gavarone), the 60 percent constitutional amendment, was officially designated as State Issue 1 by the Ohio Ballot Board Thursday. The board also approved the ballot language and explanation of the proposed amendment. The ballot language was adopted on a 3-2 vote, with Democrats voting against it. It was written by staff of Secretary of State Frank LaRose, the chair of the Ballot Board.

The amendment is titled "Elevating the Standards to Qualify for and to Pass Any Constitutional Amendment." The amendment would do the following:

- Require that any proposed amendment to the constitution of the state of Ohio receive the approval of at least 60 percent of eligible voters voting on the proposed amendment.

- Require that any initiative petition filed on or after Jan. 1, 2024 with the secretary of state proposing to amend the constitution of the state of Ohio be signed by at least 5 percent of the eligible voters of each county in the state.

- Specify that additional signatures may not be added to an initiative petition filed with the secretary of state on or after Jan. 1, 2024, proposing to amend the constitution of the state of Ohio.

FY24-25 BUDGET

As consideration of the biennial budget moves back to the Senate Finance Committee after weeks of hearings in other standing committees assigned to act as subcommittees, Finance Committee Chair Sen. Matt Dolan (R-Chagrin Falls) has set a three-week schedule of public testimony on HB33 (Edwards). All hearings are in the Senate Finance Hearing Room. Dates, times and topics are as follows:

- 9 a.m. Thursday, May 25, health and Medicaid.

- 2 p.m. Tuesday, May 30, general government.

- 9 a.m. Wednesday, May 31, education.

A Senate Finance Committee budget hearing on higher education and workforce topics Tuesday included several calls for a \$24 million amendment to expand access to computer science education -- a partial restoration of what the administration proposed but the House removed. While the House version of HB33 (Edwards) retained some of Gov. Mike DeWine's proposals for computer science education, it removed much of the funding, including the \$18.5 million to support the Computer Science Promise Program, which would allow students to enroll for free in a computer science course and get credit if their home school does not offer it. The House version also deleted language on the Teach CS grant program, which would support training for teachers in computer science, and on establishment of the Office of Computer Science in the Ohio Department of Higher Education. Multiple witnesses spoke in support of a draft amendment, SC1252, to provide a total of \$24 million, as follows:

- \$4 million per fiscal year for Teach CS grants

- \$4 million per fiscal year for the Computer Science Promise Program

- \$4 million per fiscal year for the Ohio Computer Science Council to provide after-school programming and other enrichment outside the classroom

BUSINESS/CORPORATE

Members of NFIB Ohio heard remarks from Lt. Gov. Jon Husted, Senate President Matt Huffman (R-Lima) and Speaker Jason Stephens (R-Kitts Hill) during the organization's Small Business Day Wednesday, with each of the three officials including the budget in their

comments. Huffman described Senate plans on changing tax policy, saying that will reward work and risk-taking, and focused on state spending for Medicaid and K-12 education as well. He compared those areas to "two big glaciers running side-by-side" and said there continue to be "record increases in spending" for both. Stephens also discussed income tax changes, saying they will be implemented "from the bottom up" with a flat 2.75 percent rate for those making up to \$92,000 a year. He said the House version of the budget is "fiscally responsible" and

"utilizes the one-time investments" for the All-Ohio Future Fund and brownfield redevelopment while addressing economic growth and workforce development, protecting families and the most vulnerable, and committing to education across Ohio.

CHILDREN/FAMILIES

Dr. Bruce Vanderhoff, head of the Ohio Department of Health (ODH), addressed a nonprofit coalition focused on lead-safe housing Friday about state efforts on that topic as the administration pursues expanded prevention services driven by a new, lower threshold for flagging lead exposure in children. Gov. Mike DeWine's as-introduced biennial budget for FY24-25 would expand funding for lead safety initiatives by an additional \$8.5 million. However, the House version of HB33 (Edwards) instead opts for flat funding. Fred Strahorn, the former legislator and House minority leader from Dayton, now leads the Ohio Healthy Homes Network (OHHN), at whose conference Vanderhoff spoke. Strahorn said lead exposure in the first few years of children's lives can pose lifelong challenges. "That damage tends to be permanent. You don't get that time back ... there is a cost to not fixing it," he said.

Ohio START announced the expansion of its model to include Perry and Muskingum counties, marking the addition of a sixth cohort and bringing the total number of participating counties to 56. Ohio START (Sobriety, Treatment and Reducing Trauma) is an evidence-based intervention that helps families struggling with both substance use disorder and children services involvement by creating teams of caseworkers, family peer mentors and behavioral health providers to support them. START is an evidence-based prevention service designed to keep children safely with family when possible so that they do not have to enter foster care.

CRIME AND PUNISHMENT

According to court documents, former House Speaker Larry Householder and former Ohio Republican Party Chair Matt Borges are scheduled to be sentenced next month after their convictions on federal racketeering charges. Householder is scheduled to be sentenced Thursday, June 29, while Borges is scheduled to be sentenced Friday, June 30, both in Cincinnati.

EDUCATION

Warren G. Morgan, chief academic officer for Indianapolis Public Schools, will be the new superintendent of Cleveland Metropolitan School District, community leaders announced recently. Morgan will succeed Eric Gordon, who has been superintendent since 2011 and previously served as chief academic officer.

The Columbus City Schools Board of Education announced Tuesday that Angela Chapman, the district's interim superintendent since December, will be promoted to permanent superintendent. She is succeeding Talisa Dixon, who retires at the end of the school year. Chapman was one of three finalists, alongside Brian McDonald of Pasadena and Eric Thomas of Minneapolis. She joined the district as chief of transformation and leadership in 2019 and previously worked in Washington, D.C. Schools, Massillon City Schools, Metropolitan Nashville Public Schools, Cleveland Heights-University Heights Schools and Euclid City Schools.

State lawmakers Tuesday presented two different visions for social studies education in Ohio. Rep. Mary Lightbody (D-Westerville) was joined by advocacy groups to introduce her legislation, HB171, to add instruction about more diverse groups of people to Ohio's social studies model curriculum. Later in the day, the House Primary and Secondary Education Committee heard a wave of opposition to Reps. Don Jones (R-Freeport) and Tracy Richardson's (R-Marysville) bill, HB103, to overhaul the state's social studies standards with more "liberty focused" principles.

Ohio High School Athletic Association (OHSAA) member schools passed 12 of the 13 proposed revisions to the organization's constitution and bylaws, OHSAA Executive Director Doug Ute announced Tuesday.

Each member school had one vote on each item, which was cast by the high school principal. Nearly every school voted, with 814 of OHSAA's 818 member high schools casting their ballot, OHSAA said in a release. Issue 1B, which would have permitted a student enrolled at a public school that does not sponsor a team sport to potentially play that sport at a public school located in a bordering public school district, failed for a second consecutive year, this time by a margin of 427 to 374 (13 abstained). The margin was significantly greater than the 2022 vote, where the proposal failed by 13 votes (406 to 393), the closest vote in documented OHSAA history.

The Ohio Department of Education is seeking submissions of curricula on child sexual abuse prevention and sexual violence prevention, per new requirements for instruction in those subjects under 134-SB288 (Manning). The law requires schools to provide instruction in child sexual abuse prevention for K-6 students and sexual violence prevention education for those in grades 7-12. It also requires ODE to provide links to free curricula. A form is available on ODE's webpage on child sexual abuse, dating violence and sexual violence prevention at <https://tinyurl.com/5xh2edby>. The deadline to submit curricula is Friday, May 26.

ELECTIONS

Legislation to standardize how boards of elections handle data that is supported by Secretary of State Frank LaRose passed the Senate Wednesday along party lines. Sen. Theresa Gavarone (R-Bowling Green), sponsor of SB71, said the bill would require election data be "maintained, disclosed, analyzed and archived in a modern way." The bill establishes an Office of Data Analytics and Archives in the Secretary of State's Office to retain, analyze and publish data.

FEDERAL

U.S. Sen. Sherrod Brown (D-OH) says his Summer Manufacturing Camps for Ohio youth will rebound to 36 gatherings in 26 counties this year after the COVID-19 downturn. In their 11th straight year, the summer camps seek to raise children's and parents' awareness that manufacturers are no longer the hardscrabble factories of the past but instead hi-tech production centers offering promising careers.

"We're burying the term Rust Belt," Brown said during a press call Wednesday. He partners with manufacturers and K-12 schools to host the summer camps at no cost to children or their parents. Youth tour local manufacturing facilities, learn about careers in their communities, and work as a team on projects specific to their region.

GAMING/GAMBLING

While the General Assembly has not yet authorized the Ohio Lottery to provide iLottery services, a private online platform called Jackpot.com now allows individuals to buy Ohio Lottery tickets with their phone or computer. The company's investors include the Haslam Sports Group, which owns the Cleveland Browns and the Columbus Crew, and Detroit Venture Partners, the venture arm of Cleveland Cavaliers owner Dan Gilbert's family office. Additionally, Jackpot.com is launching with a marketing partnership with the Cleveland Guardians. With Jackpot.com, Ohio customers can instantly play Powerball/Power Play, Mega Millions with Megaplier, Lucky for Life, and Rolling Cash 5. Jackpot.com notifies users when drawings take place, and delivers their winnings instantly, according to the company.

Ohio's four casinos and seven racinos earned more revenue in March 2023 than March 2022, according to data from the Ohio Casino Control Commission (OCCC) and Ohio Lottery Commission (OLC). Ohio's four casinos raked in \$93.5 million in March 2023, slightly over its March 2022 total of \$93.3 million.

With sports gambling being legal for the past five months, the Ohio Casino Control Commission (OCCC) is beginning to see a new problem -- sports betting companies pretending to offer fantasy sports contests.

"There is an army of these out there," OCCC Executive Director Matt Schuler said during Wednesday's commission meeting. "They offer proposition wagers -- which are part of sports gaming -- against the house, but are trying to call them fantasy contests," Schuler said. "The staff, as a regular course of action, is scanning out there to see who is doing business in the state of Ohio." Schuler said OCCC General Counsel Andromeda Morrison "is getting really good at sending cease and desist letters" to these companies.

GENERAL ASSEMBLY/STATEHOUSE

In its first meeting of 2023, the Commission on Infant Mortality heard legislative updates on the state operating budget, HB33 (Edwards), as well as on other legislation designed to improve the health of children and families. Kara Wentz, director of the Governor's Office of Children's

Initiatives, discussed the governor's budget proposal to create a new state department called the Department of Children and Youth, as well as a range of other budget initiatives. The commission also heard from Reps. Andrea White (R-Kettering) and Latyna Humphrey (D-Columbus), the co-sponsors of HB7, the so-called "Strong Foundations Act." The bill contains a number of provisions designed to reduce Ohio's infant and maternal mortality rates. Sen. Paula Hicks-Hudson (D-Toledo) discussed her bill, SB93 (Reynolds-Hicks-Hudson), to expand Medicaid coverage to doula services -- similar language is also contained in HB7. Lynanne Gutierrez, chief operating and policy officer at Groundwork Ohio, also discussed that group's priorities for the budget, which include investments in prenatal care, and other early intervention services in education and health care for children.

Child care advocacy professionals argued the case Monday for increased spending and access for early learning as a key to Ohio's workforce and economic challenges and to addressing K-12 learning gaps.

The virtual meeting of the Legislative Children's Caucus included presentations from Pre4CLE, which works to increase access to high quality early childhood programs in Cleveland, and Groundwork Ohio, which advocates broadly on early childhood issues.

The House Commerce and Labor Committee heard two bills Tuesday dealing with the cosmetology and barbering profession, including sponsor testimony on legislation that aims to update the statutes but leaves out the debate over training hours that have held up previous efforts. Reps. Bill Roemer (R-Richfield) and Melanie Miller (R-Ashland) gave sponsor testimony on HB158 (Roemer-M. Miller), with the sponsors noting that the cosmetology and barbering statutes have not been updated since Gov. John Kasich's administration combined the two professions into one board in 2017. Roemer said the bill has two goals in mind: to better reflect the current standards, procedures and terminology used by the Board of Cosmetology and Barbering, and to better serve aspiring cosmetologists and barbers who may be unduly burdened when trying to enter the field. The committee also heard opponent testimony on HB58 (Gross).

In other action, the House Agriculture Committee reported out HB162 (Klopfenstein-Kick) to officially designate agriculture-related days/weeks; the House Pensions Committee reported out HCR6 (King-Plummer) which urges Congress to repeal the Windfall Elimination Provision; and HB146 (Bird) which establishes a SERS benefit cap; the House State and Local Government Committee reported out HB101 (Bird-Schmidt) which deals with village dissolution; and the House Ways and Means Committee reported out HB121 (Blasdel-Mathews) which deals with remote workers and the municipal income tax.

HIGHER EDUCATION

A study released by the Inter-University Council of Ohio (IUC) showed that Ohio's 14 public universities delivered \$68.9 billion in total economic impact in FY21-22, or 8.8 percent of the state's total gross state product. The study was conducted by independent consulting firm Lightcast on behalf of IUC. The analysis showed that the operations, construction, clinical, research, entrepreneurial, visitor and student spending of the public universities, together with volunteerism and the enhanced productivity of their alumni, combined for the \$68.9 billion

impact. It said that the effect is larger than the entire health care and social assistance industry in the state. In addition to the economic impact, it said that activities of the public universities and their students support 855,782 positions, or one in eight Ohio jobs.

Ohio State University (OSU) and mental health company Inner State Inc. have received the first U.S. Drug Enforcement Agency (DEA) license to grow whole psilocybin mushrooms at a U.S. university for research. OSU and Inner State plan to use the license to significantly advance the study of the mental health treatment capabilities of naturally-grown psychedelic mushrooms, Inner State said. Psilocybin has shown promise in treating a variety of mental health conditions, including depression, PTSD, anxiety, and addiction, according to Inner State. However, due to its classification as a Schedule I drug, research into whole psilocybin mushrooms has been severely restricted in the U.S.

The Senate passed a broad higher education overhaul bill Wednesday after a final round of committee changes, while opponents turned out in large numbers to oppose a companion measure in the House. Detractors of the bill at the Statehouse wore stickers, carried signs and covered their mouths with tape to express opposition. Senate President Matt Huffman (R-Lima) said parts of the bill could end up in the Senate's version of the biennial budget, particularly the proposal for shorter terms for university trustees.

Under SB83, sponsored by Sen. Jerry Cirino (R-Kirtland), institutions of higher education would be required to have syllabi posted online for all courses; to set policies generally barring most mandatory diversity training programs; to include American government and history courses as a degree requirement; and to refuse gifts or contributions from the government of China or organizations suspected to be working on behalf of that government. It would also prohibit university employees from striking, among many other provisions. The final 21-10 Senate vote saw Democrats joined in opposition by three Republicans -- Sens. Louis Blessing (R-Cincinnati), Nathan Manning (R-North Ridgeville) and Michele Reynolds (R-Canal Winchester).

The Ohio Department of Higher Education (ODHE) Thursday announced a new designation for colleges, universities and Ohio technical centers working to make their campuses supportive of foster care-connected students. The "Ohio Reach Postsecondary" designation will be awarded to those campuses meeting "foster friendly" criteria to be supportive of students with experience in foster care or kinship.

"Ohio Reach is a network of professionals, advocates and students across Ohio determined to support former foster youth on their education journey. Ohio Reach, administered through the Ohio Children's Alliance, provides resources to institutions of higher education, child welfare agencies, and foster care alumni enrolled in higher education to support their academic success," the department said.

HUMAN SERVICES

Representatives of a Columbus-based anti-sex trafficking organization Wednesday told the Senate Community Revitalization Committee that they believe there has been more awareness of trafficking in recent years, but the opioid epidemic has also exacerbated the problem. Jami Gray

and Tiffany Tripp of Out of Darkness gave the committee a presentation on their organization, which they said uses various outreach methods to identify and build relationships with victims of commercial sexual exploitation. That effort includes weekly street outreach and a drop-in center on the south side of Columbus. It also offers a jail mentorship program which offers education, resources, and support to incarcerated victims of commercial sexual exploitation.

JUDICIAL

In perhaps her strongest pronouncement to date as the state's top jurist, Chief Justice Sharon Kennedy issued a far-reaching appeal Wednesday for the separation of powers, moving the high court and the state in a somewhat different direction from the one taken by her predecessor. Led by Kennedy, Ohio Judicial Conference (OJC) Director Paul Pfeifer and other criminal justice stakeholders on both sides of the bar told the Senate Judiciary Committee Wednesday that the most "seamless" way to fix Rule 46 of the Rules of Criminal Procedure after ballot Issue 1 restored public safety concerns to bond amounts and conditions would be to eliminate the rule altogether and return to the Ohio Revised Code as the state's standard of jurisprudence.

The Supreme Court of Ohio's Reentry Task Force held its first meeting Thursday, with a focus on sharing data about people released from prison and jail each year and the existing programs to serve them. The task force plans to hold full quarterly meetings along with more frequent workgroup sessions in order to meet the June 1, 2024, report deadline. It was formed in April. Chief Justice Sharon Kennedy, who created the task force, spoke about the local work done by members and how they can help expand best practices on reentry. "The task force is being asked to analyze the needs, services and practices between courts and reentry population. Our intent is for you to identify best practices, to aid in reentry with a holistic approach for one mission -- the improvement of outcomes. In addition to prison reentry, you are being asked to examine local jail release efforts," Kennedy told members. "The goal is to make recommendations on how to grow and strengthen seamless reentry for those who have achieved a life restored so that they should live a life restored, and for that to be possible please begin with a thorough exploration of where we have been in Ohio, where we are now and where we need to be in the future."

The Ohio Criminal Sentencing Commission (OCSC) gave its felony sentencing work group and Criminal Justice Committee the green light Thursday to further refine its 11 recommendations for a modernized "rehabilitative" model of sentencing, though not without some skepticism from its vice chair. Members approved the continued work of its ad hoc Sentencing Roundtable Workgroup under its standing Criminal Justice Committee after a lightly attended March meeting that lacked a voting quorum. "Criminal justice policy should be based on facts and evidence that make the most effective use of resources, not rhetoric and emotion," the work group stated in its summary of March's draft report. "With the endorsement of the commission, the workgroup will further explore and study an indeterminate sentencing structure that incentivizes release, ties rehabilitation with the purposes and principles of sentencing and incorporates parole and probation." Interrupting the public portion of the meeting, members went into executive session to discuss the replacement of OCSC Director Sara Andrews, who retires at the end of June.

LOBBYISTS

Christiane Schmenk, who led the Ohio Department of Development/Ohio Development Services Agency under former Gov. John Kasich, has taken a job with government relations and strategic consulting firm Hicks Partners. Schmenk will serve as a senior adviser for the firm, Hicks Partners said in a news release.

MARIJUANA/HEMP

The Ohio Board of Pharmacy on Wednesday awarded a dispensary certificate of operation to the Landing Dispensary, located at 1312 State Route 63 in Monroe. There are now 84 dispensaries legally operating under the Ohio Medical Marijuana Control Program.

The Ohio Department of Commerce (DOC) recently distributed its first quarterly report on the Ohio Medical Marijuana Control Program (MMCP). DOC simultaneously published four other quarterly reports with data from 2022.

MEDICAID/MEDICAID REFORM

Despite the hopes and expectations of many policymakers, the end of the COVID-19 public health emergency will almost certainly not return Medicaid caseloads to pre-pandemic levels, CBIZ Optumas Senior Manager Dan Skinner told the Joint Medicaid Oversight Committee (JMOC) on Thursday. "We've looked at all the different states that we're currently contracted with. We've looked at the federal data ... no one is expecting their enrollment to return to 2019 or pre-pandemic levels. Everyone projects that we are at a permanently higher caseload," Skinner said, responding to a question from JMOC Chair Rep. Adam Holmes (R-Nashport). During his actuarial report, Skinner said CIBZ Optumas provided growth rate projections under two scenarios. Scenario "A" provided a more classic projection of Medicaid growth, while scenario "B" incorporated the anticipated effects of the public health emergency unwinding and the consumer price index (CPI). Under scenario A, Medicaid would likely grow at an average of 3.2 percent per year, below the JMOC average annual rate of 3.35 percent. However, under the more realistic scenario B, Skinner said, Medicaid would grow at an average of 3.9 percent.

PENSIONS

The State Teachers Retirement System (STRS) Board of Trustees voted Thursday to grant a 1 percent cost-of-living adjustment (COLA) for retirees and delay for five years a planned increase in the career length needed to qualify for full benefits. Under the 2012 pension reform law, the number of years a teacher must work in order to qualify for full retirement benefits has been gradually rising and was set to increase to 35 years later in 2023. Under action of the board Thursday, that increase will be delayed five years, keeping the years-of-service requirement at 34 years. The 1 percent COLA is the second, one-time increase granted following a five-year freeze the system instituted in 2017 to help shore up long-term finances, a move that sparked widespread retiree discontent. Meanwhile, the recently removed gubernatorial appointee to the board, Wade Steen, said he's retained an attorney as he disputes the validity of his replacement.

POVERTY

While the House made progress on ensuring more students have access to free meals at school, there is much more lawmakers can do to ensure students are receiving enough food to learn, Hunger Network in Ohio advocacy fellow Jillian Russell said Friday. Russell was part of an education budget webinar hosted by Advocates for Ohio's Future (AOF). The House accepted an amendment to HB33 (Edwards) that would make school breakfasts and lunches free to all students who qualify for a reduced-price lunch. This provision will cost the state about \$3.1 million, Russell said. "As much as it's not free meals for all students, it's still that little jump to meet halfway," Russell said. "We're hoping that the Senate will at least keep the progress that the House has already made." The best solution, she said, would be to make school breakfasts and lunches free for all students. That would cost about \$363.9 million per year.

The Ohio Poverty Law Center (OPLC) is urging the General Assembly to expand the driver's license reinstatement fee amnesty program and effectively eliminate license suspensions for inability to pay fines or fees. The organization says Ohioans can lose their licenses for a variety of reasons unrelated to driving or public safety, including unpaid court fines, and face the double whammy of additional reinstatement fees imposed by the Bureau of Motor Vehicles (BMV) after the suspension period has expired and/or fines have been paid. "Ohioans can lose their licenses for more than 30 reasons -- many not related to unsafe driving," OPLC states in a new report released at a news conference Monday in Columbus. "It is no surprise that more than one million drivers have a suspended license."

PUBLIC SAFETY

The Ohio State Highway Patrol (OSHP) announced earlier this month that it will use approximately \$6 million in funding from the Ohio Violent Crime Reduction Grant Program to improve its air support to local law enforcement agencies across the state through upgraded aviation technology. The governor and the Ohio General Assembly created the grant program in 2021 to give local law enforcement additional tools to address violence and fight crime. The funding will specifically go toward improving OSHP's livestreaming aviation technology. OSHP's current video streaming capabilities are generally limited to the regions of Columbus and Akron. In other parts of the state, pilots must describe via radio what they're seeing from the air to those on the ground.

STATE GOVERNMENT

Michelle Gillcrist will be the permanent director of the Ohio Lottery Commission (OLC), Gov. Mike DeWine announced Thursday. Gillcrist has been serving as interim director since the departure of Pat McDonald, who resigned as OLC director after an employee accused him of inappropriate texts and unwanted touching. Prior to serving as OLC interim director, Gillcrist served DeWine in various capacities during his tenure as governor, attorney general, and U.S. senator. Most recently, she was DeWine's Northern Ohio regional liaison and the aerospace and defense liaison to the northeast sector of the state.

TECHNOLOGY/AEROSPACE

A regional collaboration led by Case Western Reserve University (CWRU) has won a \$1 million grant from the National Science Foundation (NSF) to plan economic, environmental and manufacturing growth across the 18-county Northeast Ohio region. The NSF's new Engines program was authorized by the CHIPS and Science Act of 2022. Awardees span a broad range of states and regions, reaching geographic areas that have not fully benefited from the technology boom of the past decades.

Members of the House Technology and Innovation Committee Wednesday asked witnesses if there is value to the state use of other social media outlets as they explore instituting a ban on TikTok in the state. Gov. Mike DeWine has already issued an executive order banning the use of TikTok on state devices, one of several issued by states around the country citing concerns of its ties to the Chinese Communist Party. The committee Wednesday held a third hearing on HB17 (Schmidt-Swearingen), which would codify that ban into state law. Katrina Flory, the state chief information officer and assistant director of the Ohio Department of Administrative Services (DAS), told the committee that the administration recognizes the use of social media platforms such as TikTok raise both privacy and cyber concerns for users. She said Ohio is among 37 states that have taken some official action against TikTok and other Chinese-owned applications and platforms, and the federal government has banned employees from using TikTok on government-issued devices as well.

TELECOMMUNICATIONS/BROADBAND

An analysis released by Cambridge Mobile Telematics (CMT) said that the amount of time Ohio drivers spent handling their phone on the road dropped by more than 8 percent since a handheld ban took effect on April 4. Since the provisions of 134-SB288 (Manning) making using cell phone or other electronic devices while driving a primary offense, CMT said Ohio drivers spent an average of one minute 31 seconds per hour handling their phones, compared to an average of one minute, 39 seconds before the ban. CMT said its data show a 10 percent decrease in distracted driving reduces the crash rate by 1.4 percent, and estimates that over 300 crashes, one fatality, and \$8 million in economic damages have been prevented by the ban.

TRANSPORTATION/INFRASTRUCTURE

The Ohio Turnpike and Infrastructure Commission Monday tabled discussion on renewing its business inclusion program until the next meeting after commissioners said they still had questions. The six-year period for the program, which seeks to connect more minority, women, and veteran-owned small businesses with commission contracts, is scheduled to expire in June. Monday, Aimee Lane, the commission's director of contracts administration, and Iris McClish of BBC Research and Consulting presented a proposed update to the program that would include the possibility of holding some contracts for small business enterprise (SBE) bidding only.

McClish updated the commission on the success of the program, saying that between 2019-2021, the commission spent \$100 million with small and disadvantaged businesses. Contractors were consistently meeting the goals of the program as well. She also outlined the proposed update to the program, such as streamlining the business certification program and clarifying factors when establishing contract goals.

The Ohio Rail Development Commission recently approved a grant of up to \$750,000 to Columbus & Ohio River Rail Road (CUOH) to improve capacity at CUOH's Newark Yard and mitigate the possibility of blocked railroad crossings in Zanesville. The work consists of the installation of 5,707 feet of track at Newark Yard and the installation of two radio-controlled switch machines in Zanesville. The total project cost is estimated at \$1,752,740. Newark Yard is CUOH's primary classification yard. Railcars are sorted there for final distribution to area customers or built into trains bound for interchange. Licking County and the surrounding region are experiencing an influx of development related to Intel. CUOH anticipates an increase of 4,000 carloads in 2023 and 2024 due, in large part, to the development: the construction of the Intel facility itself, supplier facilities, as well as roadway improvements and other required infrastructure.

The DeWine administration's Ohio Traffic Safety Office (OTSO) has released an educational video aimed at teenage drivers in recognition of National Youth Traffic Safety Month in May. In the five-minute video, youths "Ava" and "Noah" explain Ohio's traffic laws on sharing the road with bicyclists, school buses, large trucks, emergency vehicles and pedestrians. The video is designed to be included in the required 24 hours of driver education across Ohio. The series' initial video on distracted driving has been viewed over 2,800 times on the Ohio Department of Public Safety's (DPS) YouTube page since its release last July. The new teen driver safety video can be viewed at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=wSDJ2CHRXdg>.

The Ohio Turnpike and Infrastructure Commission announced Wednesday that it is partnering with RecoveryOhio and the Ohio Department of Health's Project DAWN (Deaths Avoided With Naloxone) to provide access to overdose reversal medication naloxone at all 14 service plazas across the 241-mile toll road. Naloxone, also known by its brand name Narcan, is a medication that can reverse an overdose caused by opioid drugs, such as heroin, illicit fentanyl, and prescription pain medications. A nasal spray, it blocks the deadly effects of opioids on the brain and restores consciousness and breathing.

VETERANS

The bipartisan and bicameral Legislative Veterans Caucus discussed budget items and standalone bills during its meeting Tuesday, including a presentation from Unite Us Vice President of Sales Matthew Hall regarding his organization's efforts to connect more Ohio veterans with services. Hall, a U.S. Navy veteran, described how Unite Us helps veterans find jobs and other resources during a post-military transition period that can be "daunting." He is seeking an amendment to budget bill HB33 (Edwards) to provide the group \$3 million over the biennium to scale up its services in Ohio.

WORKFORCE

Gov. Mike DeWine announced Monday the state is expanding its "skill-based hiring practices" as part of efforts to be a model employer at the national level, with a de-emphasis on qualification requirements that are stated in terms of academic degrees. DeWine signed an executive order (EO) as part of this effort. "The state of Ohio has been at the forefront of recognizing the importance of hiring a diverse workforce based upon the skills they bring to an employer," DeWine said. "Today's executive order furthers Ohio's nationwide-leading work with unique initiatives to further our efforts to recruit the best talent regardless of academic degree."

Lt. Gov. Jon Husted announced Thursday that 391 employers were approved for funding in the March round of TechCred, which will enable Ohioans to earn 4,656 tech-focused credentials. It is the 19th round of the program and manufacturing remained at the top of the list of industries applying for credentials. The second-highest industry was professional, scientific and technical services.