



Arkansas House Newsletter

December 31, 2020

2020 Legislative Review



While we prepare to enter a new year and begin the 2021 Regular Session, we want to take a moment to review what has been taking place at the State Capitol in 2020. Some of the work accomplished in 2020 lays the foundation for future legislation.

In April, the House convened for an Extraordinary Session to address the urgent funding needs in our state created by the COVID-19 crisis. The legislation passed created the COVID-19 Rainy Day Fund by redirecting surplus funds. The fund helped to purchase ventilators and PPE for state hospitals. It also assisted agencies facing cuts due to a revised economic forecast for Fiscal Year 2020. The legislation also made it possible to extend the state tax deadline to July 15.

During the 2020 Fiscal Session, the Arkansas General Assembly passed a balanced budget prioritizing \$5.9 billion in spending for the fiscal year. The House convened at the UALR Jack Stephens Center for the Extraordinary and the Fiscal Sessions to provide additional space for social distancing.

The House and Senate Education Committees spent this year working with the consulting firm Augenblick, Palaich and Associates to complete the state's first comprehensive study of public school funding since 2003.

The consultants made several recommendations, including revisiting current incentives to increase the number of highly qualified teachers serving students at high-need schools and small schools. Another recommendation is to conduct a larger-scale study every 6-10 years to focus on districts with specific challenges. These recommendations will be considered in the 2021 Regular Session.

The House Aging, Children and Youth, and Legislative Affairs Committee met jointly with the Senate State Agencies and Governmental Affairs Committee at various locations across the state to hear concerns from veterans and agencies that provide services to veterans. After hearing testimony, the committees proposed the following recommendations:

- Develop a grant system and increase funding for non-profits that directly assist veterans;
- Increase staffing for the Department of Health Injury and Violence/Suicide Prevention Program and the Suicide Prevention Hotline; and
- Create a Veterans' Advocacy Board.

The Arkansas Legislative Council provided oversight for all CARES Act funding distributed in Arkansas. Members approved requests to direct a portion of those funds for grants to assist struggling business owners and bonus pay for front line workers. Other CARES Act expenditures approved included funds to the Department of Health for testing and supplies to aid in contact tracing. And since more Arkansans were relying on the internet, House and Senate leadership requested a transfer of \$100 million of CARES Act funding to the Arkansas Rural Connect Program (ARC). The Arkansas Legislative Council ultimately approved the measure.

We, like many of you, are looking forward to a promising new year. The 2021 Regular Session begins on January 11. Every committee meeting and floor session will be live-streamed and archived at www.arkansashouse.org.