

Under the Gold Dome



District 149 Legislative Update – Weeks 5 & 6 — 2018



Week Five

2018 Amended Fiscal Year Budget

We successfully passed the AFY 2018 budget, House Bill 683, which totals \$25.3 billion. As a member of the Appropriations Committee who takes an active part in crafting the budget and after countless hours of compromise and work, I am always glad to see the budget pass the House. The amended version of the 2018 budget focuses primarily on required growth in education, healthcare and human services, while providing targeted funding for key initiatives recommended by the House Rural Development Council (RDC) to assist in development and meet needs in rural communities across our state.

K-12 Education allocations

- \$102.1 million for enrollment growth for 7,515 additional students, as well as for charter system grants and State Commission Charter School supplements.
- \$15.5 million to purchase 200 new school buses for school systems statewide.
- \$400,000 to establish a leadership academy for principals across the state.

Higher education allocations

- \$10.7 million to meet the needs of 4,720 new Dual Enrollment students.
- \$10 million for the Board of Regents to cover the growing cost of graduate-level medical education at Augusta University.
- \$8.1 million in lottery funds for HOPE and Zell Miller scholarships.
- \$75,000 to plan for the Center for Rural Prosperity and Innovations, as recommend by the RDC.

Health and Human Service allocations

- \$1 million to fund an electronic visit verification system for home and community-based services.
- \$1.25 million for child autism crisis services.
- \$15.1 million for out-of-home care growth for the rising number of children in Georgia's foster care system.
- \$100,000 for a statewide medical fair to recruit employees in rural areas.
- \$75,000 for the Office of Rural Health to identify a postsecondary institution to house the Rural Center for Health Care Innovation and Sustainability.
- \$1 million for more behavioral health crisis stabilization beds.

Critical need allocation

- \$10 million to the OneGeorgia Authority to fund beach nourishment projects in communities that were impacted by Hurricane Irma
- \$10 million to replenish Gov. Deal's emergency fund.
- \$3 million to purchase equipment to prevent and combat wildfires.
- \$25.2 million to lengthen rural runways to accommodate larger aircrafts to increase economic development and investment in the rural communities.
- \$5 million for the Criminal Justice Coordinating Council to implement the statewide criminal justice e-filing initiative.
- \$500,000 for the Georgia Bureau of Investigation to purchase supplies needed to process DNA sexual assault kits.

HB 683 is now under review in the Senate. If approved, the measure will then go to Governor Deal's desk for his signature.

Military Measures

As a Veteran, who knows firsthand the sacrifices of our service members and their families, I am always proud to support efforts protecting Georgia's military communities. Last week we passed two bills last week aimed at supporting our service members. The first came in the form of House Bill 700, followed by the passage of House Bill 699.

If passed into law, HB 700 would expand the National Guard Service Cancelable Loan program. Currently, loans are limited to undergraduate degree programs and public postsecondary technical schools. The expansion would cover the cost of graduate degree programs for National Guard members. To be eligible for the loan, HB 700 stipulates the following:

- Loans used to repay the cost of tuition in exchange for National Guard service, cannot exceed the cost of tuition.
- Loan recipients must remain in good standing with the National Guard and serve two consecutive years upon graduation.
- Interested members must file a Free Application for Federal Student Aid (FAFSA), utilizing all available funds before seeking the loan.

This program has been instrumental in helping our state recruit and keep National Guard members. Currently, 228 National Guard members participate in the program. Allowing graduate level coursework would add about 50 individuals to the program annually, allowing us to remain competitive with neighboring states that have similar legislation.

To assist veterans, who would like to continue their public service, we also passed House Bill 699. Current law requires all firefighters successfully complete a basic training course within one year of their hire date. However, this bill would allow those who have served the United States armed forces, Coast Guard, Georgia National Guard or Georgia Air National Guard to be exempt from the required firefighter basic training.

Opioid Crisis Legislation

Did you know that Georgia is ranked 11th in the nation in opioid overdoses? House Bill 701 works to address the opioid crisis by modifying current state law to mirror federal law, which requires candidates for federal government employment be tested for opioids. Therefore, all candidates for state employment will also be screened for the drug. Potential employees with valid and legal opioid prescriptions will not be affected. We have worked diligently to pass measures aimed at fighting our state's opioid crisis and we are confident that bills such as HB 701 will help us defeat this epidemic!

Child Abuse Measure

Last week we also passed House Bill 655, which would require that k-12 state schools post child abuse hotline signs in public areas. Operated by the Division of Family and Children Services and the Department of Human Services, the hotline will be available to students 24/7 as an outlet to report incidents of child abuse or neglect within their homes. Twenty-seven other states have passed similar bills, and if signed into law, we would join these states in the effort stop child abuse nationwide.

Adoption Update

As a foster grandparent over the years, I am pleased to report that House Bill 159, the adoption bill, overwhelmingly passed the Senate last week! The final version of the bill updates Georgia's adoption laws for the first time in nearly three decades. This legislation expedites the adoption process, helping thousands of our children find forever homes in a timelier manner. This is a major victory for Georgia's foster care children, birth mothers and adoptive parents. The legislation now heads to Governor Deal for his final approval.

Week Six

Emergency Services

Last week we passed House Bill 487, which would give Civil Air Patrol volunteers the same leave allowances as American Red Cross volunteers for specialized emergency services. Under the legislation, state agency employees, who are certified Civil Air Patrol disaster service volunteers, will be eligible to receive annual paid leave for up to 15 work days to participate in disaster relief efforts activated by certain state or federal agencies. Further, HB 487 protects those who volunteer from losing seniority, pay, vacation, compensatory / sick time or earned overtime because of their assistance in emergency situations. Our district has seen firsthand how devastating natural disasters can be. This bill is a step in the right direction to ensure we have enough volunteers and resources to help those in need during times of disaster.

Healthcare

Did you know that two out of three Georgians will receive a surprise medical bill in the next two years? In an effort to end surprise hospital bills for scheduled procedures, we passed House Bill 678. This bill provides consumer protections regarding health insurance, preventing patients from receiving “surprise” bills, which can be 10 to 12 times higher than the expected in-network charges. The legislation stipulates the following:

- Requires hospitals, health care providers and insurers disclose which doctors in a treatment team are in a patient’s insurance network; which health care plans they participate in; which hospitals they are affiliated prior to providing nonemergency services.
- Requires non-network providers give the patient an estimated bill upon request.
- Allow patients to request information about potential costs in other medical facilities before care is given.

To further protect patients, the bill also requires insurance providers to bill patients for services within 90 days. Those receiving a surprise bill would have the same 90-day window to secure payment or file a dispute with an arbitrator from the insurance department. The House’s passage of this legislation is a positive step forward in eliminating this frustrating practice and increasing transparency between patients, health care providers and insurers.

Public Safety

We also passed House Bill 79, which helps to strengthen Georgia’s privacy laws. HB 79 requires law enforcement agencies, obtaining license plate information through automated license plate recognition systems, destroy unused data after 30 months. Currently, there is no limit to how long law enforcement agencies can save this data. Agencies would only be allowed to keep and share the information beyond 30 months if the data is part of an ongoing investigation. Further, the bill imposes penalties for unlawfully sharing this information, and most importantly, captured license plate data would be exempt from open records requests.

Military Measures

As a veteran and advocate of supporting our military families, I was pleased to see House Bill 749 pass. HB 749 benefits Georgia's retired veterans and their families by excluding military retirement income from Georgia income tax. Under the legislation, surviving family members of Veterans, receiving any military retirement income, would also be excluded from state income tax. Georgia is currently one of only nine states in the nation that does not address military retirement pay tax exemptions.

Education

If passed into law, House Bill 740 will prohibit schools from expelling or suspending students in public preschool through third grade for five or more days per school year without first providing the student with a multi-tiered system of supports. This multi-tiered system of supports includes a team of educational professionals who identify and address a student's academic and behavioral needs to help them succeed in the classroom. This program is critical in identifying students' academic, behavioral and emotional learning needs. However, the bill does suspension of a student who is in possession of a weapon, drugs or other dangerous item. There are approximately 2,600 students in Kindergarten through third grade who are assigned out-of-school suspension for five or more days on an annual basis. We are hopeful that HB 740 will address a student's underlying needs, in turn helping to improve education outcomes.

Elderly Abuse Prevention

As our elderly population continues to grow, so does the need for ensuring they are well taken care of and protected. House Bill 635 would authorize district attorneys in each judicial circuit to establish an Adult Abuse, Neglect and Exploitation Multidisciplinary Team. This team, made up of representatives from the District Attorneys office, law enforcement agencies and Adult Protective Services would be responsible for coordinating investigations of suspected elder or disabled adult abuse, neglect or exploitation. These teams would also be responsible for identifying ways to improve local notification, response policies and procedures when an elderly or disabled person is abused, neglected or exploited.

All bills receiving favorable action in the House last week will now move to the Senate for further review. We will return to the Gold Dome, Tuesday for day 23 to resume legislative business. I will continue to update you on issues important to our state. In the meantime, if you need anything at all, please feel free to contact me anytime. Thank you for allowing me to serve on your behalf under the Gold Dome!