

OHIO PUBLIC TRANSIT ASSOCIATION

Bill Information

SB4 EXEMPT EMS LINE OPERATORS-PUBLIC RECORDS *(ROEGNER K)*

To include emergency service telecommunicators and certain Ohio National Guard members as individuals whose residential and familial information is exempt from disclosure under the Public Records Law.

CURRENT STATUS

2/2/2021 - Senate Judiciary, (Second Hearing)

SB15 FISCAL OFFICERS-LIABILITY *(WILSON S)*

To change the circumstances in which certain fiscal officers may be held liable for a loss of public funds.

CURRENT STATUS

2/2/2021 - Senate Local Government and Elections, (First Hearing)

SB18 INTERNAL REVENUE CODE *(ROEGNER K, SCHAFFER T)*

To expressly incorporate changes in the Internal Revenue Code since March 27, 2020, into Ohio law and to declare an emergency.

CURRENT STATUS

2/2/2021 - Senate Ways and Means, (First Hearing)

Week in Review

Friday, Jan. 29, 2021

FY20-21 BUDGET

Ten days before the DeWine administration is set to unveil its proposed budget for Fiscal Years 2022 and 2023 on Monday, Feb. 1, the governor revised the spending for the last six months of the current fiscal year, FY21, -- moves that "set the table" for the next biennium by increasing the spending for two departments and that, as a result, affects the ending fund balance which is the starting place for the next budget. Friday's moves revise the amount the state froze in spending early in the pandemic when the governor issued Executive Order (EO) 2020-19D which reduced expenditures for both FY20 and FY21 by \$775 million each year "across General Revenue Fund appropriations" With this latest executive order, EO 2021-01D, the governor has authorized the release of \$160 million to the Ohio Department of Education (ODE) and \$100 million to the Ohio Department of Higher Education (ODHE). The order also finalizes current year budget reductions at \$390 million across all agencies, less than the \$775 million imposed last year. However,

that does leave approximately \$125 million in frozen expenditures which Office of Budget and Management (OBM) Director Kim Murnieks told *Hannah News* is being held as the state plans "conservatively" so as "not to overspend this fiscal year."

FY22-23 BUDGET

Ahead of the governor's unveiling his proposed FY22-23 budget on Monday, One Ohio Now -- a broad-based, nonprofit coalition of more than 100 organizations that advocates "for great public services that strengthen our communities and the revenues to pay for them" -- Wednesday supported using the state's Rainy Day Fund (RDF) and closing the "LLC loophole" as two ways to address school funding shortfalls, higher education affordability, public health, and help families struggling to make ends meet. According to coalition leaders, the LLC loophole costs taxpayers \$1 billion/year.

CIVIL RIGHTS

The Columbus Metropolitan Club (CMC) Wednesday returned to its ongoing series "Racism: Where Do We Go from Here?" with perspectives from activists in the Columbus area. LaShaun Carter, assistant executive director at Franklin County Children Services, hosted the event and opened the discussion with his thoughts on the current political moment and its toll on the Black community. "If hindsight is 2020, what are we willing to do differently in 2021 to dismantle the influence of systemic racism? What we have come to understand is that the system that is institutional racism was created, implemented and sustained with intentionality, and it is that same intentionality that is required to dismantle it," he commented.

CORONAVIRUS

Gov. Mike DeWine announced late Friday afternoon that he had extended the state's 10 p.m. to 5 a.m. curfew until Saturday, Jan. 30. It had been due to expire on Saturday, Jan. 23. DeWine said the need to continue the curfew is unfortunate, but necessary due to the current level of COVID-19 spread in the state. However, on Wednesday, DeWine altered the curfew further by announcing that, based on the level of hospitalizations due to COVID-19, he was pushing the curfew back to 11 p.m. to 5 a.m., effective Thursday, Jan. 28 through Thursday, Feb. 11.

If hospital utilization subsequently drops below 3,000 for seven consecutive days, Ohio's curfew would be amended to 12 a.m. to 5 a.m. for at least two weeks. If hospitalizations fall below 2,500 for seven consecutive days, ODH would recommend lifting the curfew. DeWine cautioned that it also works the other way -- if at any point the number of coronavirus-related hospitalizations begins to rise, health officials could quickly reinstitute previous curfew measures.

Regarding vaccines, the governor said Ohio has been averaging about 146,000 first doses coming into the state every week. As Ohio's Phase 1A begins to wind down, more doses will be available for those in Phase 1B, DeWine said. The governor said Ohio is second in the nation for the number of people vaccinated in nursing homes. However, because not all residents and staff are choosing to receive the vaccine, Ohio will begin directing approximately 77,000 vaccines set aside to use in nursing homes to others in Phase 1A and 1B, DeWine said.

Gov. Mike DeWine offered additional details on the plan to vaccinate school personnel Thursday, building on remarks made during Tuesday's briefing. Some schools in Cincinnati have already started, he said, while 500 public and private schools will begin vaccinating staff during the week of Feb. 1.

CRIME AND PUNISHMENT

Shots were fired into the home of Ohio Department of Health (ODH) Assistant Medical Director Mary Kate Francis Saturday night, Jan. 23, according to multiple media reports. There were no injuries. A press release from the Upper Arlington Police Division (UAPD) said officers were dispatched on a report of shots fired around 8 p.m. and no suspects were present when they arrived, though the release did not identify the victim.

The state's expedited pardon program has not yet reached its potential, Gov. Mike DeWine said in a virtual event Friday, but the state will work with community groups and law schools to increase awareness and make the process easier. The program had been announced in December 2019 and DeWine discussed how people can commit crimes early in life or as a result of addiction, go through rehabilitation and become "great citizens" but are still held back by difficulties with licensure, volunteering and work opportunities due to their record. As a result, his staff looked at the pardon process and found it is "pretty cumbersome" for most people and can require assistance from a lawyer. The expedited procedure was created as a result, while still maintaining an examination of the criminal offenses and background involved.

DEATH PENALTY

The American Civil Liberties Union (ACLU) of Ohio and Ohioans to Stop Executions (OTSE) say public opinion in the Buckeye State is trending toward abolishing the death penalty. They released poll results Thursday showing just under three out of five voters voice some level of support for life in prison without possibility of parole as an alternative sentence for the worst of the worst murderers.

ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT

Ohio's second "innovation district" will be set up in Cleveland with the goal of making Ohio a global leader in health care fields including pathogen research as part of a project expected to generate 20,000 jobs in the next 10 years and create an economic impact of \$3 billion. The first such district in Cincinnati was announced last March, and Gov. Mike DeWine told *Hannah News* his hope is to see similar districts set up in other areas of the state.

ECONOMY

A new survey of Ohio economists by Scioto Analysis shows the majority think Ohio's economy will improve when K-12 schools can be safely opened in person statewide. The survey was conducted through Scioto Analysis' Ohio Economic Experts Panel, which has over 40 Ohio economists from over 30 Ohio higher education institutions. A majority, 19 of the 32 economists who responded, agreed that "Ohio's economy will receive a substantial boost as soon as K-12 schools can be safely opened in person statewide."

EDUCATION

State Superintendent Paolo DeMaria and Gov. Mike DeWine announced Friday Cerssandra McPherson, a paraprofessional working with special education students in the Toledo Public School System, and Barbara Ward, a school bus driver for the Fairland Local School District, as Ohio's nominees for the first annual national Recognizing Inspirational School Employees (RISE) Award. The award honors the commitment and excellence exhibited by full- or part-time classified school employees who provide exemplary service to students in pre-kindergarten through high school. Each state may nominate up to two candidates annually for consideration for the national award. The U.S. Secretary of Education will announce the national award winner in the spring.

Auditor of State Keith Faber's Office released the performance audit of the Ohio Department of Education (ODE) Tuesday. The report reviewed student assessments, student success, the foundation payment process, Education Management Information System (EMIS), and internal IT. One of the key findings made by the performance audit team is the correlation between student success and district spending per student. The audit focused on the 79 highest performing districts and found that their spending to achieve success varied greatly. The audit team concluded that expenditure per pupil does not always determine student achievement in Ohio.

Ohio School Choice Week kicked off Monday and runs through Saturday, Jan. 30. Ohio communities have plans to hold 1,609 festivities through the week, campaign organizers said. The events will happen online or be socially distanced, and "aim to spark conversations about how different educational opportunities meet families' needs and help kids succeed."

Education leaders in Ohio gathered for a virtual forum Thursday to discuss the toll of the pandemic on students and what to do about that toll moving forward. The "State of Our Students" event was hosted by the Ohio branch of the education-focused nonprofit Communities in Schools.

ELECTIONS

Sen. Michael Rulli (R-Salem) Tuesday introduced legislation that would give state oversight to voter registration databases. SB14 (Rulli) would put voter registration database systems under the purview of a re-named Board of Voting System Examiners. The board currently approves voting machines for use in the state, making sure the machines meet certain standards of security and accessibility before they are deployed.

The status of former Ohio Rep. Clayton Luckie's campaign committee was up for debate before the Ohio Elections Commission Thursday, eight years after he was convicted of misusing campaign funds and sent to prison. The commission was considering a preliminary review of Luckie over failure to file campaign finance reports, but Luckie told the commission in a letter that these matters should have been closed in 2013. The commission also discussed how to handle multiple state ballot initiative committees that appeared to not have any activity other than a filing to establish the committees and the naming of a campaign treasurer.

ELECTIONS 2022

U.S. Sen. Rob Portman (R-OH) announced Monday that he won't run for re-election in 2022, citing the increasing partisanship across the country and in Congress. Portman, who was first elected to the Senate in 2010 and who easily won re-election in 2016, said he doesn't plan to leave his seat early, and that he will use his time left to get things done for the state, including what he called "a number of oversight projects and legislative initiatives."

The announcement triggered many conjectures about who might succeed Portman with several indicating they will not seek the seat: Lt. Gov. Jon Husted, former U.S. Rep. Pat Tiberi, former Ohio State University Football Coach and now Youngstown State University (YSU) President Jim Tressel and U.S. Rep. Jim Jordan (R-Urbana) all said they would not run.

Others still weighing the decision include U.S. Rep. Tim Ryan (D-Niles), Democratic Dayton Mayor Nan Whaley and former Ohio Department of Health Director Amy Acton.

ENERGY

Sen. Mark Romanchuk (R-Mansfield), a leading legislative advocate for utility consumers, is starting the 134th General Assembly with new legislation to repeal key portions of energy subsidy bill 133-HB6 (Callender-Wilkin). SB10 (Romanchuk) would strip the "recession-proof" decoupling mechanism affirmed in HB6 as a special favor to FirstEnergy and limit the company to merely "excessive earnings" guaranteed in energy omnibus 127-SB221. And during the first hearing on the bill, Senate Energy and Public Utilities Chair Sen. Bob Peterson (R-Sabina) indicated the bill may be on a fast track with the possibility of calling for "all testimony" next week.

Ohio is moving forward with another utility-scale solar farm as part of 30 projects in some phase of the pre-application and approval process. The Ohio Power Siting Board (OPSB) has cleared Madison Fields Solar Project to begin construction on a 180-megawatt (MW) generating facility in Madison County -- developer Savion's second utility-scale solar field to be approved in as many months. Madison County's Pike Township solar farm will occupy roughly 1,000 acres in a project footprint roughly twice that size.

FEDERAL

Ohio's U.S. Sen. Rob Portman (R) was one of 45 senators who voted in favor of an objection filed by U.S. Sen. Rand Paul (R-KY) over whether the Senate should hold an impeachment trial of former President Donald Trump. Portman explained, "I've been very clear that former President Trump bears some responsibility for what happened on Jan. 6 through his words and actions. I will listen as a juror, but as I have said, I do have questions about the constitutionality of holding a Senate trial and removing from office someone who is now a private citizen."

Advocates with Families USA, a consumer advocacy group focused on health care issues, said they see a growing appetite in Congress to regulate prescription drugs and tackle the issue of increasing drug prices. Monday's prescription drug roundtable focused on the cost, access and affordability of often life-saving drugs.

U.S. Sen. Sherrod Brown (D-OH) discussed his proposed legislation, "Direct Support for Communities Act, in a Wednesday conference call with media that was joined by Ohio Mayors Tito Brown of Youngstown and Steve Patterson of Athens. The senator explained that the legislation would create a fund to provide direct assistance to Ohio cities, towns, villages and counties struggling financially due to the COVID-19 pandemic.

GAMING/GAMBLING

The newly-formed Senate Select Committee on Gaming will look at the best road forward for legalizing sports betting and electronic bingo in Ohio, Chairman Sen. Kirk Schuring (R-Canton) told *Hannah News* on Tuesday. Schuring, who chaired both the House Medical Marijuana Task Force and the House Select Committee on Medical Marijuana in 2016, said his new gambling committee would work similarly to those panels.

GENERAL ASSEMBLY/STATEHOUSE

At the Controlling Board's first meeting of 2021 Monday, the panel approved all 78 items on its agenda including disbursements of millions in federal funds aiming to provide COVID-19 relief. OBM's Mike Frazier said the \$100 million in federal funds comes from the Consolidated Appropriations Act of 2021 and will specifically be used for rent and utility assistance programs administered by community action agencies across the state. In addition, 10 percent of the funds will be used to pay for administrative costs at community action agencies. Frazier said municipalities can also receive federal funds from the bill. In addition, a request from OhioMHAS will fund a "statewide anti-stigma campaign" about opioids.

The Joint Committee on Agency Rule Review (JCARR) held a quick meeting Monday, its first of the 134th General Assembly, with all rules in both the regular and no change agendas clearing the panel without any questions.

Describing it as an effort to place "checks and balances" on the governor's authority, Sens. Terry Johnson (R-McDermott) and Rob McColley (R-Napoleon) offered sponsor testimony to the Senate Government Oversight and Reform Committee on SB22, which was also introduced and referred Tuesday. McColley had previously offered 133-SB311 (McColley-Roegner), which would have modified the law governing public health orders, quarantine and isolation and was vetoed by Gov. Mike DeWine.

Sen. Nathan Manning (R-North Ridgeville) Tuesday called for swift passage of three pieces of legislation that stopped just short of the gate last year as he launched the Senate Judiciary Committee's first meeting of the 134th General Assembly and his first hearing as judiciary chairman. The committee took a range of sponsor and proponent testimony on SB2 (Gavarone), a twin reboot of 133-SB58 (Gavarone) and 133-SB258 that would reform competency evaluations and criminal mental health treatment and insert Ohio in the Psychology Interjurisdictional Compact (PSYPACT); SB4 (Roegner), a reintroduction of 133-SB31 (Roegner) that would include "emergency service telecommunicators" and certain Ohio National Guard members in public record exemptions; and SB14 (Lang), the current iteration of 133-HB251 (Lang-Hillyer) that would shorten the statute of limitations on written contracts from eight to six years and oral contracts from six to four years and establish a statute of repose for a legal malpractice suits.

The Ohio Senate Democratic Caucus Thursday presented its budget and policy goals for the 134th General Assembly, which focus on supporting families and workers. The senators said they will introduce and support legislation to increase fairness and help for small businesses, schools and local governments.

Lobbyists should attempt to keep their presentations short and to-the-point during this budget cycle, Rep. Bride Rose Sweeney (D-Cleveland) and Sen. Stephanie Kunze (R-Hilliard) said Monday. "Zoom fatigue is real," Sweeney said during a "budget and beyond" webinar hosted by G2G Consulting.

Freshman Rep. Monique Smith (D-Fairview Park), who was the lone pickup for the Democratic Party in the Ohio House when she defeated incumbent Rep. Dave Greenspan (R-Westlake) in November's election, had been active in politics, mainly with Moms Demand Action, a group seeking tighter restrictions on gun laws formed in the wake the Sandy Hook school shooting.

HIGHER EDUCATION

A national review of state policies shows that Ohio takes one of the most punitive approaches to collecting and handling both student loan debt and "institutional debt" owed to public colleges and universities and other third parties. The review, conducted by consulting firm HCM Strategies, builds on a 2020 study by Policy Matters Ohio (PMO) that showed Ohio's approach to the collection of student debt disproportionately affects people who have gone to schools that serve higher percentages of Black and Brown students, students who come from families with low incomes, those who attend school part-time, and those who are older than 24.

A new collaboration between the Ohio Association of Community Colleges (OACC) and the Association of College and University Educators (ACUE) aims to help community college teachers hone their online teaching skills through a 25-week course focused on

online college instruction. Beginning in January, 168 faculty members from 22 Ohio community colleges will take Effective Online Teaching Practices, which will teach faculty how to implement a "comprehensive body of evidence-based teaching practices shown to improve student achievement and close equity gaps," OACC said.

A group of trustees of the Youngstown State University (YSU) Foundation has raised an initial \$1.6 million to establish an endowed faculty or executive administrative position in honor of YSU President Jim Tressel.

JUDICIAL

The Ohio Attorney General this week participated in oral arguments before the Ohio Supreme Court, arguing whether the U.S. Commerce Clause gives Congress "exclusive authority" over interstate pipelines running through the state, as a half dozen drilling/engineering firms argue, or whether states' rights protected in the 10th Amendment preserve Ohio's independent authority to punish environmental disasters like Rover Pipeline's two-million-gallon spill of hazardous drilling fluid into the Tuscarawas River wetlands apart from the federal Clean Water Act (CWA) and Natural Gas Act (NGA).

The Stark County Prosecutor's Office is faulting the Ohio Supreme Court for accepting the appeal of a convicted rapist and kidnapper who claims the trial judge violated his constitutional right to a "presumption of innocence" by allowing his victim to sit and confer with the prosecutor as "state's representative" under one interpretation of Marsy's Law. During Wednesday's oral arguments, the Supreme Court considered whether placing Theodis Montgomery's rape victim, A.B., at the prosecutor's table boosted her credibility as a witness and violated his rights to due process and equal protection and to an impartial jury under the 14th and 6th Amendments, as Montgomery claims, or whether judges retain discretion under Rule 615(B) of the Ohio Rules of Evidence to allow victim-witnesses to sit with and advise the prosecutor, as Stark County claims.

LOBBYISTS

Stephen Nielson and Greg Bennett have been named partners of Bennett Byers, Minton & Associates, the Columbus-based state and local government affairs consulting firm announced Wednesday.

MARIJUANA/HEMP

While most of Ohio's few hemp growers and processors are currently focused on plants that yield metabolites like cannabidiol (CBD), the best opportunities for Buckeye State agriculture entrepreneurs might be in the industrial hemp plants that produce grain and fiber, according to Central State University (CSU) cannabis researcher Craig Schluttenhofer.

MENTAL HEALTH

The Ohio Department of Mental Health and Addiction Services (OhioMHAS) announced it has received a \$360,000 grant from Vibrant Emotion Health, the nonprofit administrator of the National Suicide Prevention Hotline, for the state to develop plans to transition to a "988" three-digit dialing code for the National Suicide Prevention Hotline. OhioMHAS will lead development of the transition, considering the projected infrastructure needs, volume growth, and access to the lifeline's new 988 number.

MILITARY AFFAIRS

The Ohio Adjutant General's Department announced Wednesday that approximately 150 military police (MP) members of the Ohio National Guard will be sent to the Washington, D.C. area to assist with security duties that are expected to last through the middle of March. The personnel "will be ready to assist at various locations to enforce security, protect lives and preserve critical infrastructure," according to the department. They are members of the 323rd MP Company, based in Toledo.

PEOPLE

Katherine Kuck, who spent her first years in Columbus as legislative aide to Speaker Pro Tem Barney Quilter and then State Rep. Sandra Harwood, died Saturday, Jan. 23 after a long battle with cancer. She was 70. Besides her days in the Statehouse, Kuck also held positions with the Ohio Bureau of Employment Services, Ohio Primary Care Association, Association of Ohio Health Commissioners, the Ohio Department of Health and, most recently, the Pearl Interactive Network. She was a long-time board member of Universal Health Care Action Network (UHCAN) of Ohio.

Advocacy organization Citizens for Community Values (CCV) announced two new staffers this week: David Mahan as the new director of policy and Troy McIntosh as executive director of the Ohio Christian Education Network (OCEN).

POLITICS

During the Columbus Metropolitan Club's (CMC) Friday, Jan. 22 forum, panelists discussed what to expect next for the new administration of President Joe Biden, as well as the future of the Republican Party.

Moderator Tracy Townsend, co-anchor at WBNS-10TV News, began the discussion by asking panelists for their thoughts on Wednesday's presidential inauguration. Herb Asher, professor emeritus of political science at Ohio State University, noted that former president Donald Trump's choice to break with the long-held tradition of attending the inauguration of the incoming president may have actually worked to President Joe Biden's favor.

PUBLIC SAFETY

Ohio has added another park district to those certified under statewide policing standards, bringing to eight the number of county

park districts fully compliant with Ohio Department of Public Safety (DPS) policies for use of force, including deadly force, and agency and recruitment and hiring. DPS's Office of Criminal Justice Services (OCJS) announced that the Stark County Park District Public Safety Department has completed the certification process for standards approved by the Ohio Collaborative Community-Police Advisory Board.

STATE GOVERNMENT

At its first meeting of 2021, the Ohio Facilities Construction Commission (OFCC) heard a presentation on a school design regarding "student-centered learning environments" and also approved all voting items.

The legislative non-voting members on the commission now include Sens. Mark Romanchuk (R-Mansfield) and Teresa Fedor (D-Toledo), as well as Reps. Don Jones (R-Freeport) and Lisa Sobecki (D-Toledo).

TAXATION

Gov. Mike DeWine's administration announced Monday the approval of assistance for six projects expected to create 2,423 new jobs and retain 18,458 jobs statewide. The projects are expected to collectively result in more than \$173 million in new payroll and spur more than \$347 million in investments across Ohio.

The Ohio Department of Taxation (ODT) announced that while the first day for tax filings is not until Friday, Feb. 12, there is "no need to wait." "You can file your return using tax preparation software, but it won't be processed and you won't receive a confirmation that your return has been received until Feb. 12 or later," Tax Commissioner Jeff McClain said. The IRS delayed the start date to make computer programming changes to ensure the proper processing of federal stimulus payments issued as part of COVID-19 relief programs. McClain also said that Ohio taxpayers will find some new changes that could affect the preparation of their state income tax returns.

TECHNOLOGY

Lt. Gov. Jon Husted announced the state's latest effort to expand broadband access in underserved areas, as a pilot project will use existing Multi-Agency Radio Communications System (MARCS) towers in Scioto and Jackson counties. The towers are part of a statewide, wireless digital communication network for emergency and law enforcement personnel. The project will give Internet Service Providers (ISPs) an opportunity to apply for a state grant to attach the necessary equipment to six towers in the two counties, providing low-cost Internet access.

While legislation updating Ohio's computer crime laws didn't make it through the General Assembly before the end of the previous session, CyberOhio Advisory Board President Kirk Herath said Thursday that he expects a similar bill to be re-introduced and passed this time. Rep. Brian Baldrige (R-Winchester) had sponsored 133-HB368, and Herath told members of the board that he was already working with Baldrige on reintroduction.

TRANSPORTATION/INFRASTRUCTURE

The Ohio Turnpike earned nearly 11 percent less in revenue in 2020 than what was budgeted due to the COVID-19's effect on traffic. Ferzan Ahmed, the executive director of the Ohio Turnpike and Infrastructure Commission, told commissioners that the total reduction in revenue last year was \$41.6 million below budget, or approximately 10.8 percent below the budgeted amount. Most of the decrease was due to lower toll revenue, though there were also decreases in concession revenue, investment returns, lease and advertising revenue, and fuel tax revenue from the fuel sold at the turnpike service plazas. He said the revenue losses were offset in other areas where the turnpike saved money. Operating costs were approximately \$15.9 million, or 11.9 percent below budget, with a large portion of those savings coming from a hiring freeze. Other savings came from decreased fuel usage by turnpike vehicles and utilities.

The Ohio Department of Transportation (ODOT) announced Monday that it will be offering free e-learning courses that will provide Ohio residents the knowledge they will need to take the Unmanned Aircraft Systems (UAS) Remote Pilot Certification Exam. Interested persons can access the courses through the Ohio Local Technical Assistance Program (LTAP) website at <http://learning.transportation.ohio.gov>.

Lima was named as the latest city to benefit from "Smart Gigabit Community" status as part of a joint effort between nonprofit US Ignite and Spectrum Tuesday, and the project will work to reduce vehicle and pedestrian traffic congestion due to rail activity at the city's more than 40 grade crossings. Spectrum and US Ignite are partnering with DriveOhio and InnovateOhio as well, providing a multi-year grant and additional resources to the state for smart transportation initiatives.

TREASURER OF STATE

The Ohio Treasurer of State's office announced the first five projects to be deemed "Pay-for-Success Appropriate and Ready" under the ResultsOHIO program Wednesday, a step that will help them obtain private financing and government commitments for funding reimbursement upon completion. Treasurer Robert Sprague offered further details in an interview with *Hannah News*, saying ResultsOHIO was created "to unlock Ohio's brightest minds in the private sector to solve Ohio's biggest problems in the public sector." Those problems include addiction, infant mortality and poverty, he said, and all decisions in the program are data-driven to ensure that only successful ideas are funded.

UNEMPLOYMENT COMPENSATION

The Ohio Department of Job and Family Services (ODJFS) said Friday that Ohio's unemployment rate for December dropped to 5.5 percent, down from 5.7 percent in November. However, the state lost 11,500 jobs over the month. ODJFS said the state's nonagricultural wage and salary employment went from a revised 5,253,200 in November to 5,241,700 in December. The number of workers unemployed in Ohio in December was 315,000, down from 328,000 in November. The number of unemployed has increased by 78,000 in the past 12 months from 237,000. The December unemployment rate for Ohio increased from 4.1 percent in December 2019. The U.S. unemployment rate for December was 6.7 percent, unchanged from November, and up from 3.6 percent in December 2019.

The Ohio Department of Job and Family Services (ODJFS) is finalizing system updates that will allow more than 95,000 additional Ohioans to begin claiming unemployment benefits this weekend, the department announced Wednesday. Programming updates for the Pandemic Emergency Unemployment Compensation (PEUC) program will be complete on Sunday, Jan. 31, according to ODJFS. The federal Consolidated Appropriations Act of 2021, signed in December 2020, extends and amends many of the federal pandemic unemployment programs created by the CARES Act. Some provisions in the new law are causing implementation delays for Ohio and some other states.

For the week ending Jan. 23, the Ohio Department of Job and Family Services (ODJFS) reported 49,974 initial unemployment claims to the U.S. Department of Labor (DOL). That is the highest number of new jobless claims since May 2020. It's also higher than last week, when ODJFS reported 42,975 new jobless claims. According to ODJFS, the total number of initial jobless claims filed in Ohio over the last 45 weeks (2,228,112) is more than the combined total of those filed during the last five years.

UNIONS

The wife of late Rep. Andy Thompson (R-Marietta) is asking the U.S. Supreme Court to stop the teacher's union that once opposed her husband's Statehouse candidacy from preempting her First Amendment right to free speech with the Ohio Legislature's help. The Buckeye Institute and Baker & Hostetler LLP are leading Jade Thompson's appeal to the Supreme Court after a unanimous 6th Circuit found "Thompson should prevail" but concluded its hands were tied by the U.S. Supreme Court's 1984 ruling in *Minnesota State Board for Community Colleges v. Knight*.

UTILITIES

The Public Utilities Commission of Ohio (PUCO) Nominating Council is again seeking applications for the position of commissioner of the PUCO to fill a vacancy for the term ending on April 10, 2024 because Gov. Mike DeWine requested additional names to fill this seat vacated by former PUCO Chairman Sam Randazzo. These additional applications are due no later than 5 p.m. EST on Thursday, Feb. 11, 2021. The commission also has returned Commissioner Dennis Deters' name with three others for the governor's consideration for Deters' expiring seat.

PUCO approved the increase of residential natural gas rates by \$1.70 per thousand cubic feet (Mcf) for customers of Columbia Gas of Ohio and \$1.16 Mcf for customers of Vectren Energy Delivery of Ohio Wednesday. Columbia's standard choice offer (SCO) auction resulted in the "retail price adjustment" for the service period April 1, 2021 - March 31, 2022. Vectren's SCO auction resulted in a slightly smaller increase for the same service period.

PUCO says Ohio Consumers' Counsel (OCC) concerns for real cost savings in FirstEnergy's \$683 million grid modernization plan can be addressed in the coming months as it affirmed OCC's immediate call Wednesday for a comprehensive education and marketing program to support the rollout of smart meters and off-peak pricing intended to lower customers' electric bills. PUCO approved FirstEnergy's request for so-called time-of-use (TOU) or time-varying rates (TVR) to bolster lower energy costs during late-night hours compared to peak-demand rates during the day.

WORKFORCE

Democrats in both the House and the Senate announced Monday that they would be introducing legislation to increase Ohio's minimum wage to \$15 per hour by 2027. The current Ohio minimum wage is \$8.80 per hour. The effort is led by Reps. Brigid Kelly (D-Cincinnati) and Dontavius Jarrells (D-Columbus) in the House and Sens. Cecil Thomas (D-Cincinnati) and Hearcel Craig (D-Columbus) in the Senate.