

Legislative Update – HCAOA – January 28, 2022

By Rusty Paul

Mental Health Takes Center Stage – On Wednesday, House Speaker David Ralston walked to the Capital’s second floor and placed mental health at the center of 2022’s big legislative issues. There he held a press conference announcing the most sweeping mental health initiative in decades.

HB 1013 addresses the full mental health treatment spectrum ranging from how insurers cover mental health treatment to increased funding for state mental health programs and facilities to training more mental health professionals across the state.

“Mental health issues touch almost every family in this state,” Speaker Ralston said. “For much too long our mental health care delivery system has been inadequate. The accessibility and availability of treatment has been woefully limited. For a state that is rated number one in the nation in which to do business, this is not acceptable.”

The bill is rooted in approximately 50 recommendations from Georgia’s Behavioral Health Reform and Innovation Commission chaired by former State Rep. Kevin Tanner. A key feature requires insurers to treat mental healthcare coverage on par with their physical health policies. Most insurers restrict mental health coverage meaning many families cannot access or afford effective treatment.

This new \$75 million initiative comes as Department of Behavioral Services said the state experienced a 24 percent jump in contacts with Georgia’s mental health crisis hot line. Rural communities suffered an eight percent increase in suicides between 2019 and 2020 with early numbers showing further increases in 2021.

Meanwhile, mental health facilities already struggled to find therapists, psychiatrists, and other mental health specialists; a challenge exacerbated by the pandemic as many professionals faced burn out. Workforce access and burn out are not limited to mental health as home care providers can attest.

Budget – To that end, HCAOA’s Georgia Chapter will be meeting with House and Senate appropriators in early February to discuss opportunities for including additional Medicaid rate increases in the FY 23 state budget. The chapter won a ten percent increase in the current year’s budget, but funding for home and community-based services are still underfunded and many providers struggle to find caregivers due to comparatively lower wages in the industry. We will be updating members on the progress of these conversations.

State funding for programs like the Speaker’s mental health program at \$75 million, the Governor’s \$1.6 billion personal income tax rebate initiative, the additional \$2000 per teacher raise, \$1000 raise for education support staff and the \$5000 per state employee pay raise is soaking up virtually all state’s revenue growth.

However, HCAOA has been effective in showing the impact of below market salaries on home caregivers, hence last year’s rate hike. We are presenting the economic facts and their impact, particularly in rural areas, and believe there remains an opportunity for some increase.

Legislative Schedule – The General Assembly this week set the legislative schedule for the rest of its 40-day session, establishing April 4 as its last legislative day. Final adjournment is about a week later than

recent sessions, a surprise in an election year where every legislator must introduce themselves to at least a few new voters, particularly rural legislators running in geographically enlarged districts due to population losses found by the 2020 census.

The prohibition on fund-raising during the session means legislators have less than six weeks to raise money and campaign before May's primary elections.

The published legislative schedule builds in more committee workdays than past sessions. Pandemic related restrictions have cramped committee hearing room availability, so the typical pre-session morning and post-session afternoon committee meetings are more difficult to arrange.

Other Legislation: Recently introduced legislation includes:

HB 977 – lowers the threshold for age discrimination from aged 60 to 50 years.

SB 360 – Colton's Law increases penalties for individuals who exploit or abuse disabled persons or obstruct investigations into those cases.