COVID-19 roundup: Legislature closures update

(April 23, 2020) - As the COVID-19 pandemic forces state governors across the country to issue stay-at-home orders, legislatures are seeking ways to adapt to a new normal. Many legislatures have chosen to postpone or suspend their sessions indefinitely.

Other states have made moves to allow for virtual meetings and remote voting so lawmakers can work to address the issues caused by the growing crisis. A handful of states are continuing to hold their legislative sessions while implementing social distancing measures and closing the statehouses to the public.

U.S. Congress

Some Congressional lawmakers returned to the Capitol on April 20 to negotiate a new round of emergency legislation to address the COVID-19 pandemic. The Senate approved a second round of the CARES legislation April 21, which provides approximately $480 billion to replenish the Paycheck Protection Program and additional funds for hospitals and testing. The House approved the legislation April 23 while implementing social distancing in the chamber, with only 20 House members at a time allowed on the floor to vote.

Speaker Nancy Pelosi scrapped plans to vote on a temporary rule change to allow proxy voting in the House after conversations with Republican leadership. The House instead voted to establish a coronavirus select committee to oversee the federal government’s response to the pandemic.

State Legislatures

The Alabama House of Representatives and Senate will reconvene for the 2020 session April 28.

The Alaska Legislature recessed its 2020 session early after approving emergency relief for Alaskans affected by the pandemic, including a $1,000 dividend payment for each resident.

Arizona’s lawmakers plan to meet May 1 to officially adjourn the 2020 legislative session.

The Arkansas Legislature will reconvene April 24 to adjourn its 2020 fiscal session.

California’s Legislature extended the suspension of its 2020 session until May 4. Lawmakers had planned to reconvene April 13.

Colorado’s Legislature plans to resume its session May 18. Lawmakers adjourned the session March 14 because of the coronavirus outbreak. Republican lawmakers challenged the move, saying Colorado’s constitution requires the legislative session to end May 6 after 120 consecutive days. The state’s high court ruled 4-3, saying the Legislature can meet after May 6 to make up days missed due to the virus.

The Connecticut Legislature will adjourn its regular 2020 session without any further action before the May 6 constitutional adjournment date. Lawmakers are planning to meet for a special session in the summer.

Delaware’s General Assembly has postponed its legislative session until further notice. The legislative hall is also closed to the public indefinitely.

The Florida Legislature’s 2020 session ended March 19. There is currently no plan to hold a special session to address the outbreak in the state.
Georgia’s General Assembly suspended its 2020 legislative session indefinitely beginning March 13.

The Hawaii Legislature is currently in recess until further notice. All previously scheduled hearings have been canceled, and no additional hearings or public meetings will be scheduled.

Idaho’s Senate on March 19 adjourned indefinitely. The House of Representatives adjourned indefinitely March 20.

The Illinois House of Representatives session has been postponed indefinitely. The Illinois Senate session is currently postponed until April 28.

Indiana’s Legislature on March 11 adjourned the 2020 session.

The Iowa Legislature announced April 2 that it would extend the suspension of legislative activities until April 30, after the state’s governor announced Iowa schools would remain closed until that date.

Kansas’ Legislature adjourned its session until April 27.

The Kentucky Legislature met April 15, the last day of the shortened regular session. Legislators voted on the state budget, which creates a legislative COVID-19 task force. Republican lawmakers overrode several line-item vetoes by Democratic Gov. Andy Beshear.

Louisiana’s Legislature is adjourned until further notice. The state House Speaker and Senate President will decide when the session will resume.

Maine’s Legislature on March 17 adjourned without announcing a date of return.

Maryland’s General Assembly on March 18 announced the legislative session would be suspended until further notice. The assembly plans to reconvene for a special session in late May.

Massachusetts’ Legislature has not announced a suspension or postponement of its 2020 session.

The Michigan Legislature will reconvene April 30. Democratic Gov. Gretchen Whitmer sought an extension of her emergency powers until June 10, but Republican legislators approved the extension until April 30, when the state’s stay-at-home order is set to expire.

Minnesota’s Legislature reconvened April 14 to approve a fourth COVID-19 relief bill appropriating $500 million for economic relief and pandemic preparedness. Lawmakers continue to hold some committee hearings remotely.

The Mississippi Legislature is adjourned until further notice.

Missouri lawmakers reconvened April 8 to pass a supplemental state budget to address the pandemic. The governor may call legislators back for a June special session.

Montana’s Legislature is not in session in 2020. All interim committee meetings are canceled until further notice.

The Nebraska 2020 legislative session and all public hearings have been suspended indefinitely.

Nevada’s Legislature is not in session in 2020. Most interim meetings were canceled in March.

New Hampshire leaders extended the postponement of the state’s legislative session until May 4. The Legislature passed an emergency rule allowing leadership to extend deadlines for legislative action due to the pandemic.

New Jersey’s Legislature met April 13 to pass relief legislation to address the COVID-19 outbreak in the state. Lawmakers passed additional COVID-19 legislation April 15.

The New Mexico Legislature on Feb. 20 adjourned the 2020 session indefinitely.

The New York State Assembly is currently in recess. The state Senate on March 31 held its first remote session to approve the state budget.

North Carolina’s Legislature is not currently in session. The 2020 session is set to begin April 28.
The North Dakota Legislature is not in session in 2020. All interim committee meetings will be live-streamed, and attendance at meetings will be limited to prevent the spread of the virus.

The Ohio Legislature will reconvene April 29.

Oklahoma legislators convened April 6 to pass emergency legislation related to the coronavirus outbreak while implementing social distancing measures on the voting floor. Republican leaders have asked the state Supreme Court to intervene so lawmakers can tap into the state’s rainy day fund.

Oregon’s Legislature on March 8 adjourned indefinitely. The Legislative Emergency Board met April 23 to vote on a $30 million package to address the outbreak in the state.

Pennsylvania’s House of Representatives reconvened April 14. The state Senate met April 15 to vote on legislation. The state House and Senate have amended their rules to allow for remote voting during the pandemic.

The Rhode Island Legislature has canceled all sessions and committee hearings this week. The Legislature will reconvene April 28.

South Carolina’s Legislature reconvened April 8 but failed to agree on either a spending plan or an agreement to set the parameters for a special session. The state has a May 14 deadline for the regular session to end.

The South Dakota Legislature on March 30 reconvened for its final day of the session. The state governor indicated she does not plan to call for a special session.

Tennessee’s Legislature adjourned March 16 and plans to postpone its session until June 1. Legislative offices were closed for two weeks beginning March 23.

The Texas Legislature is not in session in 2020. All interim Senate committee meetings have been postponed indefinitely.

Utah’s Legislature held a special virtual session April 23.

The Vermont Legislature has not announced a suspension of its legislative session. All staffers, except for essential personnel, are working remotely, and the State House is closed to the public indefinitely.

Virginia’s General Assembly convened for session April 22. The House met in a large tent outside the Capitol building. The Senate held its session near the Science Museum of Virginia.

The Washington state Legislature on March 12 adjourned its 2020 session indefinitely and announced the 2021 session would convene Jan. 11.

West Virginia’s Legislature ended its 2020 regular session March 7.

The Wisconsin Assembly passed a COVID-19 relief bill for the state April 14. The state Senate passed the same bill April 15 and Democratic Gov. Tony Evers signed the legislation the same day.

Wyoming’s Legislature on March 12 adjourned indefinitely. The Legislature’s Management Council met April 16 to decide topics for remote interim committees during the outbreak.

Other Legislatures

The District of Columbia’s Council held a virtual meeting April 21 to vote on emergency COVID-19 legislation to implement mortgage relief during the pandemic.

Puerto Rico’s Legislature has not announced a postponement or suspension of its 2020 session.
The **U.S. Virgin Islands** Legislature held a special session on March 27 to address emergency legislation related to the COVID-19 outbreak.

**Guam**’s Legislature held an emergency session April 14.

By Gavin Hart, Esq.