COVID-19 roundup: Legislature closures update

(June 15, 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

The U.S. House of Representatives’ Democratic leadership introduced police reform legislation June 8 as lawmakers seek ways to respond to national protests over the death of George Floyd in Minneapolis. The White House and Senate Republican leadership say they will begin negotiations on the next round of COVID-19 relief in July. The congressional physician has advised legislators returning to Washington to wear masks, stay 6 feet apart and limit the number of staff on Capitol Hill.

State Legislatures

The Alabama Legislature concluded its 2020 regular session May 18 after lawmakers authorized the state government to tap into the $1.8 billion in federal relief funds for coronavirus-related expenses.

The Alaska Legislature’s 2020 session came to an end May 20 after the state Senate approved a ratification bill outlining the governor’s spending plan for the state’s $1.5 billion in federal relief funds. The state House of Representatives approved the bill May 19.

Arizona’s Senate met and adjourned May 26 after refusing to consider legislation from the state House of Representatives that would address liability for businesses during the COVID-19 pandemic.

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

California’s Legislature convened May 26 as a committee of the whole. Democratic legislators used this opportunity to criticize Gov. Gavin Newsom’s proposed state budget, which includes cuts for education funding.

The Colorado Legislature is in session as lawmakers work to approve a state budget for the next fiscal year beginning July 1. Lawmakers also passed a package of coronavirus relief legislation, including expanded paid sick leave for employees and whistleblower protections for employees who speak out about a lack of workplace safety measures during the pandemic.

Three Connecticut lawmakers met in the Capitol building to officially bring the regular 2020 legislative session to an end. The COVID-19 pandemic forced lawmakers to recess March 11.

Delaware’s current legislative session ends June 30. The General Assembly is meeting via Zoom to address a state budget hard-hit by the pandemic and related business shutdowns.

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 resumed the 2020 legislative session June 15.
The Hawaii Legislature will reconvene June 22. Lawmakers plan to pass legislation to address the economic impact of the pandemic, as well as police reform legislation.

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

The Illinois Legislature is adjourned until further notice.

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

The Iowa Legislature resumed its session June 3. Legislators are working to draft a $8.24 billion state budget.

Kansas’ Legislature on May 22 wrapped up its 2020 session by passing a bill to reduce the impact of the governor’s emergency powers.

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.

The Louisiana House of Representatives passed a state spending plan June 10 to address the $900 million shortfall in the state budget. The spending plan now heads to the state Senate for approval.

Maine’s Legislature on March 17 adjourned without announcing a date of return. Republican leaders on May 4 called for the Legislature to reconvene to end the civil state of emergency and remove the governor’s emergency powers.

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 reconvened June 2.

Minnesota’s Legislature began a special session June 12. Legislators plan to introduce police reform and accountability legislation in light of the killing of George Floyd in Minneapolis.

The Mississippi Legislature approved a $300 million relief package May 13 for small businesses affected by the COVID-19 pandemic.

Missouri’s Legislature reconvened May 11.

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

The Nebraska Legislature will resume activity July 20, according to the Speaker of the Legislature, state Sen. Jim Scheer. Scheer said the schedule may be adjusted if COVID-19 cases peak in the state after lockdown measures are loosened.

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

New Hampshire’s Legislature reconvened June 11. Legislators met inside a university hockey arena in order to observe social distancing.

New Jersey’s Legislature reconvened June 4.

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

New York’s Legislature passed police reform legislation June 8. It includes a ban on race-based profiling, a ban on chokeholds and a requirement that the police and courts track arrests by race and ethnicity to identify patterns of racial bias.

North Carolina’s Legislature passed an updated bill to allow bars and gyms to reopen despite Democratic Gov. Roy Cooper’s executive order. Cooper vetoed the original legislation passed in late May.

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 is in recess until further notice.

Oklahoma’s Legislature overrode Republican Gov. Kevin Stitt’s veto of the state’s $7.7 billion budget. Stitt previously criticized the Legislature’s budget, saying it backs the state into a financial corner.

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 Legislature voted June 9 to revoke Democratic Gov. Tom Wolf’s emergency order shutting down the state’s economy over the pandemic.

The Rhode Island Legislature’s Emergency Spending Task Force met June 9. The task force reviewed the state’s spending plan for the coronavirus response.

South Carolina’s Legislature adjourned May 12.

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 returned June 2 as legislators work to address the state’s revenue shortfall caused by the pandemic.

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 convened May 15 for a two-day special session where lawmakers will work to appropriate $1.25 billion in COVID-19 federal relief funds.

Other Legislatures

The District of Columbia’s City Council unanimously passed a police reformation bill June 9 that bans neck restraints and the use of chemical irritants and rubber bullets to disperse peaceful protestors. Democratic D.C. Mayor Muriel Bowser said June 10 she plans to sign the emergency bill.

Puerto Rico’s Legislature has not announced a postponement or suspension of its 2020 session.

The U.S. Virgin Islands’ Legislature convened June 12 as a committee of the whole to receive testimony on the expansion of medical cannabis use in the territory.

Guam’s Legislature convened June 1 for a two-day session.

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