Police and the public trust

In the wake of high-profile incidents involving officers and civilians, new legislation focuses on transparency, accountability

by Laura Kliewer (lkliwer@cs.org)

n April of last year, Wisconsin lawmak- ers passed a first-in-the-nation bill with new standards on how local law enforcement must handle investigations that involve the death of a civilian by an on-duty police officer.

The legislation, AB 409, didn't get much national attention at the time. But a few months later, after high- profile incidents involving the death of a 18-year-old in Ferguson, Mo., and the acquittal of a New York police officer in the death of an unarmed African-American man, Wisconsin's actions were being held up as a national model.

Recent concerns about officer-related deaths, and the investigations that follow, have resulted in much legislative activity in state capitols in 2015 (see page 6) — calls for an increased use of police body cameras, for example, and new rules for how violent incidents are handled, investigated and publicly reported.

But as timely as the new Wisconsin law now seems, it was, in fact, many years in the making.

"We have been working on this for a while," says Sen. Lena Taylor, the Senate author of AB 409, "and I consider it progress to have the legislation we do."

Details on Wisconsin's new law

The new requirements resulted not only from the work of legislators, but from the advocacy of family members as well.

One of those advocates was the father of Michael Bell, a 21-year-old who died in 2004 after getting into a scuffle with an on-duty police officer.

Bell was returning from a night out when police say Bell was resisting arrest. Police say Bell was resisting arrest. Bell's father, who received part of a $1.75 million civil rights lawsuit settlement, says his son was murdered by overzealous officers.

He spent more than $850,000 on lawyers, newspaper ads and commercials questioning whether police officers should be allowed to investigate other officers involved in the death of a civilian. 

The money and time he spent raising awareness about the issue helped lead to last year's passage of AB 409.

Under the new Wisconsin law, police departments must have a written policy on officer-involved deaths. As part of that policy, at least two outside investigators must be brought in to handle these cases.

Internal investigations are still al- lowed, but they cannot interfere with the work of the outside investigations. The new law also provides clearer assistance to victims' families: They must be informed of their legal rights, for example, and be told how to file complaints and pursue charges if they don't agree with the decision of a local district attorney. Lastly, the investigation of an officer-involved death must be publicly reported if it does not lead to the prosecution of an officer.

The new Wisconsin law was soon put to use.

Seven days after it was enacted, a young man asleep in a park was approached three times by officers. While the first two engagements ended without incident, the third officer to approach Dontre Hamilton got in a struggle with the young man, who was shot 14 times and killed.

The officer has since been fired, but no charges were filed because local prosecutors determined he had acted in justified self-defense.

The Wisconsin Department of Justice Division of Criminal Investigation served

National survey results on five questions about police performance:

How well are police departments, nationwide, doing in ...  

Holding officers accountable when misconduct occurs Using the right amount of force for each situation  
Treating racial and ethnic groups equally Respecting people's privacy Protecting people from crime

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Education

Nebraska bill would help schools deliver more-rigorous curriculum to high school juniors, seniors

After decades of experience in Nebraska’s public schools, including 15 years as a principal, Sen. Rick Kolowski learned quite a bit about the students he taught and helped graduate.

One lesson learned, he says, is that young people need to be prepared for college and careers — now more than ever before. A second lesson is the value of academic and scheduling rigor, which Kolowski says not only challenges students, but also gets them excited about their future.

“We need to work on maximizing the junior and senior years of high school,” Kolowski says. “It is especially important that these students have full, rigorous schedules that get them ready for college or a career.”

As a legislator, Kolowski is now pushing for a new law that would get the state more involved in delivering a better curriculum to students in the final years of their K-12 careers. LB 343 would reimburse school districts with successful existing programs and offer grants to schools that need help in implementing new ones.

One of the distinguishing features of the bill is its funding model. Money would not flow to local schools based solely on total numbers of students, but rather on how many of those students successfully complete a course or program — for example, earning professional certification as the result of career and technical training or passing a competency exam in an Advanced Placement course.

Kolowski’s bill also targets funding for dual-enrollment courses in which students earn college credit and for International Baccalaureate programs. In order to create a dedicated source of funding outside of the current state aid formula for K-12 schools, the bill would initially appropriate $7 million from the general fund to reimburse school districts.

LB 343 would also create a Career and College Readiness Fund, which would support schools that are in the initial implementation phase of a college and career readiness program. In the first year of the program, $3 million would be appropriated to the fund.

According to Kolowski, all of the state’s 245 school districts support the legislation. At a Feb. 3 committee hearing on the bill, testimony was uniformly positive.

Nebraska legislators are also considering a second bill as they seek to ensure that students are prepared for life after high school. LB 101, sponsored by Sen. Kate Sullivan, would require statewide assessments that measure students’ progress toward academic preparedness for postsecondary education as well as a career.

Great Lakes

To protect lakes, advocates say, protecting six-year-old federal initiative must be top priority

Over the last six years, nearly $2 billion has flowed from Washington, D.C., in support of more than 2,000 Great Lakes-related projects.

Much progress has been made under the historic Great Lakes Restoration Initiative, says Todd Ambs of the Healing Our Waters Coalition, but it’s far from a job done.

“It’s really just a down payment,” Ambs says about federal spending to date. “When you’re talking about what needs to be done to restore the Great Lakes, this initiative needs to go on for years.”

President Obama created the program early in his presidency, building on work that had been done by his predecessor, George W. Bush, through the Great Lakes Regional Collaborative.

In each of his proposed annual budgets since fiscal year 2010, Obama has included a line item to fund the Great Lakes Restoration Initiative. But will the initiative continue once he leaves office?

The U.S. Congress could improve the program’s chances of surviving a change in administration by formally authorizing it in federal law. Ambs and other Great Lakes advocates say such a move would put the initiative on much more solid footing during the annual budget-making process.

Late last year, the U.S. House approved such authorization of the Great Lakes Restoration Initiative, but the Senate did not take up the measure before adjourning for the year.

Authorization bills have once again been introduced early in 2015. Meanwhile, several members of Congress from this region are leading opposition to a proposed cut in the Great Lakes Restoration Initiative for FY 2016.

That reduction comes from Obama himself; his proposed FY 2016 budget would allocate $250 million to the initiative. It received $300 million in FY 2015. (Obama’s initial FY 2015 budget also called for a funding cut, to $275 million, but Congress restored funding in its final budget agreement.)

There is very strong bipartisan support to restore the funding levels to $300 million,” Ambs says. “And I think that’s not only because of what we’re seeing in terms of environmental restoration [in the region], but also what the initiative is doing economically.”

As examples, he cites the impact on local communities of cleaning up the Sheboygan River in Wisconsin, the St. Louis River in Minnesota and Waukegan Harbor in Illinois. Region-wide, according to the Healing Our Waters Coalition, the initiative has:

• restored more than 115,000 acres of fish and wildlife habitat;
• opened up fish access to more than 3,400 miles of rivers;
• helped farmers (in combination with other programs) implement conservation programs on more than 1 million acres of rural working lands; and
• accelerated the cleanup of toxic hot spots by delisting three formerly contaminated sites (in the previous two decades before the initiative, only one site had been delisted).

In the past, members of the Great Lakes Legislative Caucus (a nonpartisan group of state and provincial legislators from the region) have written letters of support for formal authorization and opposition to funding cuts. They are likely to weigh in again this year.
Midwest-Canada Relations

Trucks entering Detroit from Windsor, Ont.

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<th>Year</th>
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<tbody>
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<tr>
<td>2014</td>
<td>1,544,352</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Data not for crossing at Detroit, including the Detroit-Windsor Tunnel, which cannot accommodate larger trucks.

Source: U.S. Department of Transportation.

Customs-plaza pact removes last hurdle for new bridge over crucial Detroit-Windsor crossing

The busiest commercial border crossing in North America may finally be on its way to expansion. On February 18, the U.S. and Canadian governments and the state of Michigan announced an agreement to build and operate a new U.S. customs plaza, one of the last major hurdles to the construction of a new bridge between Detroit and Windsor, Ontarios. Over $165 billion in goods, a quarter of all merchandise trade between the U.S. and Canada, traveled through the Detroit-Windsor corridor in 2014, according to the U.S. Department of Homeland Security. The Ambassador Bridge, the only bridge between the two cities, could not continue to handle the projected growth in truck traffic.

Most larger employers in Michigan, including the Big Three automakers; the Michigan and U.S. chambers of commerce and many local chambers throughout the region; and Michigan Gov. Rick Snyder and four of his predecessors, have all pushed for a new bridge. Bilateral trade in goods between Canada and the U.S. states in the Midwest exceeded $243 billion in 2013, with most goods being delivered by truck.

More than 4,200 trucks enter the U.S. at the Ambassador Bridge every day. Between 2010 and the end of 2014, truck traffic grew by 102,000 trucks, or 279 a day. These trucks carry everything from commodities to finished goods to parts that feed into cross-border supply chains. Before entering the U.S., these shipments must be cleared through a customs plaza, and the current facility does not have the capacity to expand.

In 2012, Snyder entered into an agreement with Canada to build a new bridge, called the New International Trade Crossing. The Canadian government assumed responsibility for constructing the bridge, with repayment coming from bridge tolls.

Both governments have moved ahead with some construction plans and appointed governing authorities. The one mayor unfunded piece was the U.S. customs plaza, an essential part of any international crossing. However, no funding for the plaza was included in President Obama’s 2016 budget, and efforts to get a congressional fix also went nowhere.

The agreement announced by Transport Canada and the U.S. Department of Homeland Security states that Canada will take responsibility for the $250 million customs facility. The U.S. has agreed to pay for staffing, operating and maintaining the customs plaza. This adds to the $2.1 billion cost for construction of the bridge. Canada will use a public-private partnership, or P3, to fund the investment. Once the private sector partner is selected, it will pay for construction of the bridge, the customs plazas on both sides of the border and the roads that feed into the bridge.

According to Dr. Bill Anderson, director of the Cross-Border Institute at the University of Windsor, “P3 projects are becoming much more common in Canada.” Such contracts, he says, provide powerful incentives to the builders to keep the project within budget, because they can’t just pass along overruns; to finish it on time, because they don’t get revenue until the facility is operational; and to build it right, because they operate it after it’s built.

The Windsor-Detroit Bridge Authority, the Canadian federal entity that will supervise the construction, will oversee the bidding process for a private sector partner. The partner will be repaid through bridge tolls, over a period that could last some 30-50 years (not unusual for a P3 infrastructure project), before they would be shared between the two governments.

“Now that the final funding issue has been resolved,” Anderson says, “it will take a while to get the P3 contract in place, so it’s not like the bridge will start to go up next week, but the project is definitely moving forward.”

The bridge authority projects that the bridge will open in 2020.

Agriculture and Natural Resources

Fast-growing wine, craft beer industries generating supportive legislation throughout Midwest

In the not-so-distant past, “non-existent” would have been an apt term to describe the Midwest’s wine and craft beer industries. As recently as the year 2000, only 300 acres were in grape production.

But today, ethanol isn’t the only alcohol being produced in this region. There has been big growth in the beer and wine industry, a trend that is allowing for more diversity in farm production and helping expand local and statewide agri-tourism.

The wine and craft beer industries are moving out of the hobby stage and making an estimated $10 billion contribution to the economies of Midwestern states. More than 12,000 acres of grapes and 600 craft breweries now call the Midwest home. This growth has been fueled not only by the development of water-hardy varieties of grapes, but also by more-supportive government policies.

Michigan is a case in point of how the industry has grown, as well as how state laws are being re-examined. In 2013, it became one of the first states in the nation to pass legislation (SB 27) that allows for the tasting and sale of wine at farmers markets.

"Farmers markets benefit from having a diverse array of products, and producers benefit because alcohol tastings improve [their] ability to promote and increase sales,” explains Jen O’Brien, executive director of the national Farmers Market Coalition.

About 50 percent of Michigan’s farmers markets have now opened to wine tasting and sales, according to Linda Jones, executive director of the Michigan Grape and Wine Industry Council.

“Fifteen small wineries have taken advantage of the opportunity,” she explains.

Under the current law, the farmers-market option is limited to wineries producing less than 5,000 gallons annually. Legislation has also been introduced to allow microbrewers to serve samples at farmers markets. The Grape and Wine Industry Council itself, in fact, is an example of the states’ increased role; it is an 11-member group established by the Legislature to promote Michigan’s wine and grape-growing industries.

SB 27 also begins to address one of the obstacles that smaller brewers and winemakers across the country face in trying to market their products. Under the three-tiered system that developed after Prohibition was lifted, producers typically sell to distributors, who then sell to retailers. Smaller producers often don’t produce enough volume for wholesalers to carry their product. Farmers markets, then, are an example of how to facilitate a direct producer-consumer connection. In Michigan, too, small wineries have become part of regional wine trails that attract out-of-state visitors — another way to facilitate a producer-consumer link.

And last year, Michigan lawmakers passed a series of bills designed to expand the state’s craft beer industry. For example, the production threshold for microbrewers was doubled, to 60,000 barrels per year (one of the highest caps in the nation). The statutory changes also limited limitations on dual ownership of a brewpub and microbrewery and allowed for microbrewers to self-distribute.

Other Midwestern states are also making efforts to support local alcohol production and sale. For example, direct-to-consumer shipment of wine is now legal in most Midwestern states (in Indiana, the consumer must purchase the product in person), and in Nebraska, farm wineries that use at least 75 percent state-grown grapes and other fruits pay only 6 cents per gallon in state excise taxes, compared with 91 cents per gallon for other wineries.

This year, just about every Midwestern state is considering legislation changing some aspect of beer and wine sales, marketing or production.

The industry has come a long way in 15 years.
‘Right to work’ law takes hold in another Midwestern state

The third Great Lakes state in four years has passed so-called “right to work” legislation, a trend that has captured national headlines because of the region’s tradition as a union stronghold.

Wisconsin Gov. Scott Walker signed SB 44 into law in March.

Indiana was the Great Lakes region’s first state to ban employer-union agreements in which individuals are required to become a member of a labor organization and pay dues to it. The proposal in Indiana sparked protests at the Statehouse and led Democratic members of the legislature to stage a weeks-long walkout of the 2011 session.

But the measure became law in 2012, and two years later, the Indiana Supreme Court upheld its constitutionality. Michigan became a “right to work” state in late 2012. (Opponents of these measures often dub them “right to work for less.”)

This year, the Wisconsin Assembly’s passage of SB 44 came after a marathon session of floor debate that lasted 24 hours, the Milwaukee Journal Sentinel reports. The measure ultimately passed both chambers on near party-line votes. (One Senate Republican voted against it.)

In the Midwest, Illinois, Minnesota and Ohio are now the only states that allow for employer-union agreements. Illinois Gov. Bruce Rauner proposed this year to allow local communities to create “right-to-work zones” within the state.

Trends in union membership: % of private sector workers in unions

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>State</th>
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<th>1983</th>
<th>% change</th>
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<td>Indiana</td>
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Source: Amy T. Hersh and David A. Mackey (www.nawmich.com)

States in Midwest with bans on collective bargaining agreements that require workers to join unions, pay dues

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<tr>
<td>Wisconsin</td>
<td><strong>Constitutional ban and statutory ban</strong></td>
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Source: National Right to Work Legal Defense Foundation and CSG Midwest

Vaccination, exemption policies scrutinized after measles outbreak

Laws vary on allowing parents to opt out of vaccines for their children; some states have sought to make it more difficult to get exemptions

Nationwide, the number of children entering school who have received the MMR vaccine is 94.7 percent. In some states, the rate is even lower. It is below 90 percent in seven states, including Kansas and North Dakota.

In response, state policymakers are considering new laws that tighten immunization exemptions with the goal of reducing the number of people who are not vaccinated against infectious and deadly diseases.

According to a 2012 study in the medical journal Advanced Preventative Medicine, when it is more difficult to obtain an exemption, fewer parents seek it — and rates of disease go down.

Some states have passed laws that require parents to consult a doctor before claiming an exemption. California, Oregon, Vermont and Washington have these laws.

Under legislation introduced this year in Minnesota (HF 393/SF 380), parents would have to submit an exemption application that includes an explanation of their reasons for opting out of a specific vaccine, as well as a statement from a physician proving they have discussed the risks.

The form would also include an acknowledgement that the child could be barred from attending school during an outbreak of the disease.

Article written by Kate Tormey, staff liaison to The Council of State Governments’ Midwestern Legislative Conference Health & Human Services Committee. She can be reached at ktormey@csg.org. CSG has also developed an issue brief on state vaccination rates and related state policies. It is available at knowledgecenter.csg.org.
**QUESTION OF THE MONTH**

**QUESTION:** What “blue laws” are still in place in the Midwestern states?

“Blue laws” date back centuries and typically place restrictions or bans on certain Sunday activities. Today, they mostly target some type of economic activity, such as liquor or retail sales.

**Indiana** and **Minnesota**, for example, are among the 12 U.S. states that still ban the retail sale of alcohol on Sundays, according to the Distilled Spirits Council of the United States. (Kansas and **Ohio** are among the 16 states that have repealed their bans since 2002.)

The two states’ decades-old bans have once again been the focus of legislative proposals this year. Minnesota’s SF 265/HF 231 would repeal the state law that bans retail, carry-out sales of alcohol, and as of February, the bill’s proponents said the measure was gaining momentum inside the Capitol. But in late February, Indiana’s HB 1624 — an attempt to end the state’s Sunday sales ban — failed to make it out of the House, in part due to opposition over proposed restrictions on retailers (for example, keeping hard liquor behind the counter and limiting displays to designated areas).

Bans on alcohol sales were once much more common. For example, prohibitions on Election Day sales are largely gone, with **South Carolina** now the only state with an outright ban. And only five states (none in the Midwest) still prevent retail stores from providing their customers with alcohol tastings. In 2012, Kansas repealed its restrictions on these tastings.

States, though, continue to have Sunday restrictions on when alcohol can be sold. In **North Dakota**, for example, restaurants cannot begin serving until noon; HB 1434 would allow service to begin at 11 a.m.

When it comes to retail sales, **North Dakota** has among the most extensive blue laws in the country. For example, while stores can be open on Sunday, many items cannot be sold between midnight and noon — from clothing, housewares and linens, to appliances, hardware and computers. As a result, most retail stores in North Dakota do not open until noon.

Current state law in **North Dakota** also protects retail businesses (as part of any lease, franchise or other contractual agreement) from having to open on Sundays. Under SB 2208, those protections would be extended to Thanksgiving Day and Christmas Day.

Thirteen U.S. states, meanwhile, continue to ban or restrict the Sunday sale of motor vehicles, and seven of those states are in the Midwest: **Illinois**, **Indiana**, **Iowa**, **Michigan**, **Minnesota**, **North Dakota** and **Wisconsin**. (Michigan’s ban provides an exemption for counties with fewer than 130,000 people.) **Illinois** (SB 1780) and **Minnesota** (HF 347) are among the states with active bills to repeal the ban on Sunday auto sales.

An article written by Laura Tomaka (ltomaka@csg.org), CSG Midwest senior program manager. Question of the Month highlights an inquiry sent to the Information Help Line. To request assistance, contact us at csginfo@csg.org or 630.925.1922.

**First in Midwest:** Kansas’ role in the women’s suffrage movement

by Mike McCabe (mcmccabe@csg.org)

When the 19th Amendment to the U.S. Constitution was ratified in 1920, American women secured one of the most precious rights of citizenship — the right to vote. The amendment, which represented a significant milestone in the larger and ongoing struggle to ensure equal rights for women, was also the culmination of a 70-year campaign focusing on voting rights.

The women’s suffrage movement that began in the mid-19th century was marked by false starts and setbacks that threatened to leave women mired as second-class citizens in a public sphere still dominated by men. But there was progress too, and along the way, several states played key roles in opening the door to women’s suffrage. Here in the Midwest, Kansas would prove to be the trailblazer.

**Third time a charm in Kansas**

In 1848, Elizabeth Cady Stanton and the Quaker abolitionist Lucretia Mott convened a meeting in Seneca Falls, N.Y., devoted to women’s rights. The convention generated a series of 13 resolutions embodied in a “Declaration of Sentiments, Grievances, and Resolutions.” One of the declaration’s stated objectives was securing voting rights for women.

The nascent women’s suffrage movement effectively came to a halt during the Civil War. But just two years after the war ended, movement leaders turned their attention to the Midwest, where, in 1867, Kansas became the first U.S. state to hold a statewide popular referendum on women’s suffrage.

Having previously granted women a limited right to vote in school district elections in 1861, the Jayhawk State was a logical battleground for expanding voting rights. But this first franchise referendum was defeated, and eventually, a handful of western states would precede Kansas in granting women’s suffrage.

Inspired by these triumphs and buoyed by a successful effort to extend voting rights to women in municipal elections (Kansas became the first state to do so in 1887), suffrage activists in Kansas launched a second attempt to win even broader voting rights in 1894. But once again, a proposed amendment was defeated at the polls.

By the turn of the 20th century, only four states (all out West) had extended the franchise to women, and a proposed U.S. constitutional amendment, introduced for the first time in 1878, had yet to win widespread support.

**In most Midwest states, women voted at higher rates than men in 2012**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>State</th>
<th>% of citizens who voted Female</th>
<th>% of citizens who voted Male</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
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<td>67.9%</td>
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<td>Ohio</td>
<td>65.5%</td>
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<td>Wisconsin</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>United States</td>
<td>61.7%</td>
<td>59.7%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: U.S. Census Bureau
Some states consider increasing use of police body cameras, limiting public access to video

As the outside investigator in the case. Some further tweaking of the new Wisconsin law might be needed, Taylor says. She also wants more mandatory training for police on cultural competency and how to better interact with people suffering from mental illness.

Proposals to follow Wisconsin’s lead

This year, legislation modeled after Wisconsin’s law has been introduced in several states, including Illinois and Minnesota.

“It is about providing transparency to people and helping police do their jobs better... [it is] for the 99.99 percent of police that do their jobs well,” says Illinois Rep. Christian Mitchell, the sponsor of HB 221. “It also helps those in the community know that police are indeed on their side and working to protect them.”

He also believes the measure strikes the right balance between accountability and autonomy for local law enforcement. The accountability, he says, comes from the requirement that outside investigators be brought in to handle officer-involved deaths. But beyond these broad parameters, each local law-enforcement agency can establish its own rules and procedures.

In Minnesota, legislative proposals (HF 543/SF 466) would require the state to develop a model policy on the investigation of officer-involved deaths. The minimum standards would be similar to those in Wisconsin’s new law. Local law-enforcement agencies would then be required to adopt standards similar to the model policy.

“We haven’t had the problems in Minnesota that Wisconsin has had that was the impetus of that law,” explains Rep. Tony Cornish, sponsor of HF 543, adding that all but two departments in the state turn over these cases to outside investigators.

Still, he believes a statewide requirement for outside investigations is good public policy, one that makes sense for police departments and the communities they serve.

Police body cameras focus of new bills

Along with exploring how local investigations should be handled, state legislatures are taking a closer look at the merits of police body cameras.

Would their use, for example, lessen the chance of violent encounters between police and civilians? Would they enhance investigations and help improve public trust in police?

In some local police departments, officers already have begun to use body cameras, and at the federal level, President Obama has proposed a three-year, $75 million matching-grant program for states and localities.

In advocating for this new federal investment, Obama has cited evidence that police body cameras not only strengthen accountability and transparency, but that officers and civilians act in a more positive manner when a camera is present.

But Jim Bueerman, director of the nonprofit, nonpartisan Police Foundation, cautions that not definitive conclusions on the value of police wearing body cameras while on duty.

Obama seeks funding for body cameras; federal task force offers ideas for “21st century policing”

In the wake of the officer-involved shooting death of Michael Brown in Ferguson, Mo., the White House in December called for $263 million in funding for police body cameras and training. Under the proposal, which requires congressional approval, a total of $75 million would be provided over the next three years to purchase 50,000 body-worn cameras. To receive federal dollars, states or localities would have to provide 50 percent of the funding to buy the cameras.

President Obama also created the Task Force on 21st Century Policing, which released its initial findings in early March. The group’s recommendations include many ideas being considered in state legislatures (see main article). For example:

- require training to police on how to de-escalate volatile situations and how to use less-than-lethal technologies;
- establish local serious-incident review boards (made up of law enforcement and community members) to review officer-involved shootings; and
- provide more training to police on accountability and how to manage such incidents so that officer’s use of force ends in death;
- establish local serious-incident review boards (made up of law enforcement and community members) to review officer-involved shootings; and
- require police agencies to report data to the federal government on all officer-involved shootings as well as any in-custody death.

In late 2014, the U.S. Congress passed and President Obama signed HR 1447 (the Death in Custody Reporting Act), which requires police departments to report deaths in police custody to the U.S. Department of Justice. The report must provide demographic data, give the circumstances surrounding the death, and disclose whether the death occurred in police custody or during arrest. The U.S. attorney general must then study the information and develop ideas to reduce the number of deaths that occur during police custody.
“It is for the 99.99 percent of police that do their jobs well. It also helps those in the community know that police are indeed on their side and working to protect them.”

Illinois Rep. Christian Mitchell, sponsor of a bill that sets new requirements on how local law enforcement handles investigations of officer-involved deaths

He notes that proponents of these cameras often cite a study done of police-civilian encounters in the California town of Rialto. After a year, the study found, Rialto officers wearing the cameras had almost 90 percent fewer uses of force and almost 60 percent fewer complaints against them.

“That is highly suggestive that body-wear cameras can have great value in reducing force and complaints,” Buemaran says. “But that is one study, and you can’t really generalize the findings to other situations.”

Use of cameras raises privacy questions

For legislators, police body cameras also raise a number of other policy questions — above and beyond whether they are worth the investment.

For example, which law enforcement officers, if any, should be required to wear body cameras? When do the cameras have to be turned on? How long do police agencies have to retain audio and video from body camera recordings? Who has access to the recordings? Who pays for the cameras and for the data storage?

Some bills introduced in the Midwest this year try to begin addressing some of these issues.

In North Dakota, HB 1264 would exempt police body-camera images from the state’s open-records requirements, giving local law enforcement discretion on what audio and video can be withheld from the public. Under current law, any communication with a public entity or official relating to public business must be released upon request.

Cornish, meanwhile, has proposed legislation in Minnesota to limit public access to the camera footage; only law enforcement and the subjects of the video could view it.

“There are basically no laws governing [the use of body cameras],” he says, explaining that under current Minnesota law, anyone can now request to view hours of video. “I want to protect citizens so they are not seen on the Internet on the worst day of their life.”

A separate Minnesota proposal (SF 754) would impose a statewide moratorium on police body cameras until May 2016. This delay would give legislators time to study what measures should be put in place to balance privacy, the public’s right to information, and concerns about the length and amount of data retention.

Conversely, Kansas’ HB 2137 would require all state, county and municipal law-enforcement officers to wear body cameras while performing their duties.

Under the legislation, the cameras would have to be continuously activated, with some limited exceptions — if the officer is engaged in a personal matter, for example, or if a person asks the officer to turn off the camera before entering a residence on a non-urgent matter.

Video and audio would have to be retained for at least two weeks (longer for incidents involving force).

No state funding is provided in the Kansas bill; instead, the measure instructs law enforcement agencies to seek funding from the federal government or other public and private sources.

In Kansas’ largest city, Wichita, some officers have been using body cameras since 2011. To date, the department has about 60 cameras, and last August, the department decided it would set a goal of equipping each of its approximately 500 police officers with a body camera by the end of 2015.

The initial cost for the purchase of 444 additional cameras and equipment is about $927,000, and the police department expects to pay for it through grants and various funds within the department.

The cost of the ongoing training, storage and employees to process the data is estimated at about $350,000 per year.

“It’s not inexpensive,” notes Robert Layton, Wichita’s city manager, “and anything that can help reduce these costs would allow us to maintain existing service levels.”

For nearly 10 years, Illinois has had a grant program to expand the number of dashboard cameras on police cars in communities across the state. Fees and fines imposed for certain criminal or traffic offenses are used to fund the program.

Under SB 710, introduced earlier this year, local governments could use the grant money to purchase body cameras.

The legislation would also set certain standards for the use of these cameras. They would have to be turned on whenever an officer is dealing with a member of the public, and data from the video would have to be kept for at least two years.

In addition, law enforcement personnel, local state’s attorneys and any individuals in the video would have a right to access it.

Buemaran, who worked for a local police department in California for nearly 33 years, says an increased use of body cameras is not the only policy that local law enforcement and states should be considering. Other ideas include:

• Statewide reporting on officer-involved shootings (see sidebar);
• Training on “implicit bias,” a formalized way for individuals to understand their subconscious judgments, attitudes and beliefs;
• Putting less-lethal tools in the hands of police officers,

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• Statewide reporting on officer-involved shootings (see sidebar);
• Training on “implicit bias,” a formalized way for individuals to understand their subconscious judgments, attitudes and beliefs;
• Putting less-lethal tools in the hands of police officers, such as pepper spray, pepper balls, bean-bag guns and electronic control devices.
• Ensuring all officers have had training on how to de-escalate situations, especially those involving people who suffer from mental illness.

States lack data on officer-involved shootings

How prevalent are officer-involved shootings and deaths? Jim Buemaran, president of the national, nonpartisan Police Foundation, says too little is known, from a scientific standpoint, on that subject.

“There is no national database for capturing officer-involved shootings,” he notes. “You have to understand the problem, the nature of the problem, before you can fix it.”

For states, then, he recommends creation of a standardized, mandatory reporting system: Every time an officer discharges his or her firearm in the line of duty, it would be reported to the state.

“I expect that data set to have a lot of factors in it, not just how many shots were fired,” he says.

“What were the environmental conditions? Was it daytime/nighttime? Were they responding to a call? Were they trying to stop someone on a proactive enforcement stop? What was the ethnicity of the officer and the person that was shot or shot at? How long has the officer been in police work? What was their training?”

“We would then have a good picture of how often police use force in the performance of a duty.”

In a recent speech, FBI Director James B. Comey also acknowledged the need for better data on police encounters.

“Not long after riots broke out in Ferguson [Missouri], I asked my staff to tell me how many people shot by police were African-American. They couldn’t, and it wasn’t their fault,” he said in the Feb. 12 speech to Georgetown University students.

“Demographic data regarding officer-involved shootings is not consistently reported to us . . . because reporting is voluntary, our data is incomplete and therefore, in the aggregate, unreliable.”

Data on number of officers killed in line of duty

Every year, the National Law Enforcement Officers Fund collects data on the number of officers killed in the line of duty.

In 2014, an estimated 126 law-enforcement officers died, a 56 percent increase from 2013. Firearms-related incidents were the leading cause of death. The most common circumstance was an ambush of some kind. In the 11-state Midwest, 14 officers died in the line of duty in 2014, according to the Officers Fund’s preliminary data.

Preliminary data on # of officers killed in the line of duty in 2014

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Iowa Senator Amanda Ragan

13-year legislative veteran remains focused on ensuring care for the most vulnerable, and helped craft recent Medicaid expansion

by Kate Torney (ktorney@csg.org)

Even before being elected to the Iowa Senate in 2002, Amanda Ragan knew her way around the Capitol. She previously had been a legislative page and, early on in her career, served as a legislative clerk.

But it was another experience that uniquely prepared Ragan to serve during this period in Iowa’s political history. She grew up with parents of two different political parties — her father was a staunch Democrat and supporter of President Franklin Roosevelt; her mother had lost a brother in World War II and was not of the same opinion. She says, “My parents got along fine; they just felt there were different parties that answered their needs.”

That perspective has served Ragan well during her 13 years in the Iowa Legislature, a period in which bipartisan control of state government has, more often than not, not been divided. That means bipartisan compromise has not just been a goal in Iowa; it has been a necessity for state government to work.

Take, for example, Iowa’s recent Medicaid expansion.

Achieved through a federal waiver, the Health and Wellness Plan was developed by Ragan and other legislators from both sides of the aisle. Because of that bipartisan work inside the Capitol, people across Iowa have now been enrolling in health coverage through the expansion for over a year.

Providing help inside, outside Capitol

Ragan was raised on an Iowa cattle farm, and the northern Iowa district that she represents today includes a mix of rural areas and bigger towns such as Mason City (where she now lives).

But wherever she goes in the district — and she knocked on 10,000 doors during the most recent election — Ragan says her constituents share similar goals and priorities.

“For the entire time I have been in the legislature, people of any age are concerned about education,” she notes. “Whether they are grandparents or have no children, they understand that [it] is a great investment. It’s the infrastructure of what your state is going to be and of how it will care for the next generation.”

CSG Midwest talked with Ragan about her own policy priorities and insights on the future of her state. Here are excerpts from the recent interview.

Q. You decided to run for state office in part because of some experiences you’ve had outside the legislature. What inspired you to run?

A. In the real world, I come from a farming background, we raised cattle. And then I became a single mom for a while with two kids, so I understand the struggles families face. Right now I am the director of a Meals on Wheels program and community kitchen; I’ve done that for about 17 years. The soup kitchen started in the 1980s, and I’ve seen a lot of people go through there that have needs that many people would not see.

One of the things I saw were a lot of elderly people who were on fixed incomes and were struggling with prescription-drug costs and a wide variety of other things that affect them because of their health issues.

Many times, my focus is on the most vulnerable people who don’t have a voice. There are a lot of others that do that as well, I just have the opportunity to see them in my other job, too. There are a lot of issues with child care and helping families that are struggling that go unnoticed.

Q. You were instrumental in helping to craft Iowa’s Medicaid expansion. Can you talk about how it came together?

A. Rep. [Linda] Upmeyer and I worked on the Iowa Health and Wellness Plan, which was the expansion of Medicaid. We didn’t seem to be getting anywhere because both parties had their ideas of how to solve the problem. So we worked hard on it, and I think our state has done very well in getting people signed up and making sure they receive services.

Learning to work together is something we should be proud of. It made such a difference in so many lives, and when you’re working on it, you don’t always realize that. But I feel really good that people are able to access health care and that compromise does work. When people work together, there is a light at the end of the tunnel.

While it wasn’t a perfect piece of legislation and there are probably things that both parties would have done differently, I think we can be proud of it.

Q. Iowa is moving a large part of its Medicaid population into managed care. You’ve said you have concerns about that transition; what are they?

A. The [state] Department of Human Services is moving to managed care, which is a $4.2 billion change. While we understand that many states are doing that, I think that it would have been important to involve the Legislature in that process. [We’ve come up with] some basics we can put in to protect the consumers and the providers, and we hope the governor is agreeable to that.

There are a lot of unknowns out there. For example, when it comes to [care for people with] mental health issues and disabilities, there is $51 million to be saved in the first six months. We think that is an interesting number because we don’t have any details on [how that will happen], so we are concerned about that to say the least.

It is a large change from the services we have now. We have had managed care in substance abuse and other programs ... but we have to be sure it all fits together and people don’t fall through the cracks.

We just want to make sure that our constituents who are vulnerable can continue to get services. We have seen successes in other states, and we have seen less-than-successes in other states.

Hands have something as simple as getting their blood-pressure medicine or getting a physical. We have been blessed to offer this plan to folks.

When you don’t have health insurance, that can be devastating, so this is something that is going to make a difference for families. I have heard from numerous people things like, “I can get medication that I couldn’t before” and “I was able to get in to see a doctor, and I couldn’t before.”

The hospitals have seen the plan as helpful because their charity care went down, and they don’t see as much of that population in the emergency room, which is where they were seeing them. And that’s costly. ... I hope that other states look at [replicating the plan] — it would be sad if others didn’t take the opportunity.

Q. "Many times, my focus is on the most vulnerable people who don’t have a voice. There are a lot of others that do that as well, I just have the opportunity to see them in my other job, too.”
In South Dakota, survivors of child sex abuse join forces with state policymakers to improve prevention and response

by South Dakota Sen. Deb Soholt (Sen.Soholt@state.sd.us)

It happened in the spring of 2013. When a constituent shared her most compelling story. The one that was impossible to walk away from. Her past included being sexually abused by her father from age 4 to 14. Using talent to overcome, she became a successful basketball player and college coach. But when the Penn State story broke, she knew the secret could no longer be kept and found healing as a courageous spokesperson and catalyst for change. And now she wanted to know if I would get involved.

Child sexual abuse is not a topic that makes you popular. When asked as a legislator what you might be working on and this particular form of child maltreatment is shared, most quickly segue in a new direction. And who can blame them?

To face that our children experience sexual activity where consent is not or cannot be given is to accept that up to 30 percent of our kids—one in four girls and one in six boys—live this nightmare. And nearly 80 percent never tell anyone. Navigating the tortuous ground of trying to recover, or not recover, all alone.

Our original task was to implement Erin’s Law in South Dakota. A child abuse victim herself, Erin Merryn is a national champion for model legislation in every state. But countless conversations with child advocacy professionals, child abuse pediatricians, social workers, counselors, school administrators, parents, victims and others led me to a new understanding about this serious issue: If meaningful change is going to happen in South Dakota, we will have to roll up our sleeves and get to work.

By that fall a small statewide coalition had been loosely formed to help, including a mother whose two grade-school boys had been abused by their uncle. Jolene Loetscher, someone willing to recover, or not recover, all alone.

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By that fall a small statewide coalition had been loosely formed to help, including a mother whose two grade-school boys had been abused by their uncle. Jolene Loetscher, someone willing to publicly speak about the abuse she endured as a child, graciously agreed to become the South Dakota face for the effort.

We strive to ensure children’s safety in so many ways — yet if they are being sexually abused, we leave it up to them to tell, to endure and to heal.

By the end of the 2014 legislative session, we had passed a bill (SB 154) to create the Jolene’s Law Task Force. This group was asked to focus on:

• how to increase awareness of issues regarding sexual abuse of children, including warning signs that may indicate sexual abuse;
• the actions that a child who is the victim of sexual abuse could take to obtain help;
• how to best provide support and assistance to children who are victims of sexual abuse;
• policies to encourage adults to take responsibility for protecting children and to respond appropriately when abuse is suspected; and
• collaboration of public and private groups to help recognize and prevent child sexual abuse and to use research and evidence-based practices.

The task force included four legislators, three executive agency representatives, seven professionals with significant experience in working with child sexual abuse, and one survivor of such abuse — Jolene.

I was privileged to chair this group; our five meetings brought to light the depth and scope of the topic.

We explored the incidence of child sexual abuse in South Dakota; the associated mental, spiritual, physical and chronic adverse health consequences of this type of abuse; programs that could ease the disclosure of sexual abuse by a child; methods by which adults can be educated to recognize and support abuse victims, and what services are most effective in treating victims.

It was important for us to embrace child sexual abuse as an adult problem. In no other way do we make our kids responsible for their own safety, as we give them shelter, clothing, food and education, and take care of them when they are sick. And yet if they are being sexually abused, we leave it up to them — to tell, to endure, to heal.

We came to understand that the sexual abuse of children is a serious and costly public health concern. And that by reducing the issue to individual and family dynamics alone is to miss powerful communitywide or population-based strategies for change.

By immersing ourselves in the subject, we came to fully believe that it is not only possible, but highly probable, to change the landscape of abuse once and for all.

We turn to improve emerged as steps around which to set goals, define strategies and secure funding:

• education/training for mandatory reporters;
• medical health, mental health and spiritual care responses to instances of violence;
• criminal justice and child protection systems;
• prevention initiatives; and
• public awareness and parent-education campaigns.

Facts, figures on child sexual abuse

✓ Most professionals in the field of child abuse estimate rates at between 8 percent and 20 percent. Actual retrospective studies show that one in four women and one in six men were sexually abused before the age of 18.

✓ It is estimated that 73 percent of child victims do not tell anyone about the abuse for at least a year and that 45 percent do not tell anyone for at least five years. Some never tell anyone about it.

✓ Children who live with a single parent who has a live-in partner are at the highest risk — 20 times more likely to be sexually abused than children living with both biological parents.

✓ Children are most vulnerable to abuse between the ages of 7 and 13; the median age for reported abuse is 9 years old.

Source: The Children’s Assessment Center

The role of mandatory reporters

To that end, the task force introduced two pieces of legislation this year: one bill (SB 71) to continue the task force for an additional year and one (SB 70) to strengthen our state’s mandatory reporting law.

Under our state statute, mandatory reporters include medical professionals, counselors, and teachers and other school employees. Under SB 70, these people would have to be available to answer questions to law enforcement when an initial report of child abuse is made.

We want to make sure the person who heard the story of abuse tells it to authorities — rather than leaving it up to a supervisor. This should improve investigations of abuse allegations and better protect victims during the process. (It isn’t left up to the child alone to talk to investigators about the incident.)

Further, we hope SB 70 sparks a conversation about the importance of mandatory reporting. We’ve learned that the primary lever for change in child sexual abuse is to strengthen our mandatory reporters. What signs of abuse should people look for? How should reporters handle incidents in which they suspect abuse? What are their responsibilities, and how should they be held accountable?

Social consciousness is something shared — when together we are aware of the difficulties and hardships within our society. For the past two years, Jolene’s Law has magnified social consciousness about child sexual abuse. It is now time for our heightened awareness to translate into a shared moral imperative — where we will all be compelled to act to save our children.

As a legislator, every now and then space opens up to truly make a lasting difference. I am humbled beyond measure to link arms with others to declare that when it comes to child sexual abuse, we choose to be “silent no more.”

South Dakota Sen. Deb Soholt, a Republican from Sioux Falls, was first elected in 2012.

Submissions welcome

This page is designed to be a forum for legislators and constitutional officers. The opinions expressed on this page do not reflect those of The Council of State Governments or the Midwestern Legislative Conference. Responses to any FirstPerson article are welcome, as are pieces written on other topics. For more information, contact Tim Anderson at 630.925.1922 or tanderson@csg.org.
Deadlines near to apply for CSG’s legislative leadership programs

BILLD is premier leadership program designed for Midwest’s newest state lawmakers; 5-day institute aims to boost policymaking skills, offer networking

Legislators in their first four years of service are encouraged to apply now for the chance to take part in a five-day summer program designed to advance their leadership skills.

The deadline to apply for this year’s Bowhay Institute for Legislative Leadership Development is April 8; applications are available online at www.csgmidwest.org.

The program will be held Aug. 21-25 in Madison, Wis.

The program includes a mix of sessions on public policy, professional development and leadership skills. These sessions are led by nationally renowned policy experts, legislative leaders from the Midwest, and specialists in areas such as media training, consensus building and time management.

The highly interactive curriculum also gives participants the chance to meet, learn from and work with lawmakers from across the region.

Each fellowship covers the cost of tuition, lodging and meals to attend the five-day institute. In addition, BILLD fellows receive a nominal travel stipend, which helps cover a portion of the cost of traveling to Madison.

Close to 700 regional lawmakers have now completed the 21-year-old leadership program. Many BILLD graduates have gone on to hold key leadership positions in their legislatures; others are now serving in the U.S. Congress and in other state government positions.

BILLD is conducted by CSG Midwest in partnership with The Robert M. La Follette School of Public Affairs at the University of Wisconsin-Madison. A bipartisan committee of the Midwest’s legislators oversees the program, including the selection of the BILLD fellows.

Co-chairs of the BILLD Steering Committee


Toll Fellows, CSG’s national leadership program and “intellectual boot camp,” includes participation from rising leaders in all three branches of state government

For legislators who have served longer in office, CSG offers the Toll Fellowship Program for state officials from all over the country.

The intensive, six-day “intellectual boot camp” is for emerging leaders from all three branches of state government. While each year’s program is unique, previous programs have included sessions on leadership personality assessment, media training and crisis management.

The Toll program will be held Aug. 28-Sept. 2 in Lexington, Ky. Applications are due April 15. For more information, please visit www.csg.org/leadershipcenter or contact Kelley Arnold at karnold@csg.org.

Toll Fellows checklist: Things to know

- each Toll class includes 48 of the nation’s top officials from three branches of state government
- graduates have gone on to serve as governors, as chief justices and as members of the U.S. Congress
- competitive application process; deadline to apply is April 15
- program will be held Aug. 28-Sept. 2 in Lexington, Ky.

CSG Midwest brings customized training to capitol

CSG’s commitment to providing customized training to legislators in their capitol has continued in 2015, including two workshops held in Madison, Wis.

Through its Under the Dome initiative, CSG Midwest has now brought policy sessions and professional development to nearly every state in the region.

Early this year, CSG Midwest and the Wisconsin Legislative Council co-sponsored a program that examined health and wellness under the U.S. Affordable Care Act, as well as implications for state policy. Lawmakers and legislative staff heard a presentation on the “Gallup-Healthways Well-Being Index.”

In February, policy experts were brought to Madison to discuss the economic impact of the Great Lakes as well as ways state lawmakers can better protect this freshwater resource.

The Great Lakes Legislative Caucus, a bipartisan group of state legislators that receives staff support from CSG Midwest, helped organize this Under the Dome program.

Launched two years ago under the leadership of the Midwestern Legislative Conference (CSG Midwest provides staff support to the MLC), Under the Dome has delivered a range of programming on professional development and public policy. Workshops on entrepreneurship and Great Lakes policy are being scheduled for later in the year.

CSG Midwest is seeking input from legislators for future workshops. To propose a session in your state, please contact CSG Midwest director Mike McCabe at 630.925.1922 or mmccabe@csg.org.

The Council of State Governments was founded in 1933 as a national, nonpartisan organization to assist and advance state government. The headquarters office, in Lexington, Ky., is responsible for a variety of national programs and services, including research, reference publications, innovations transfer, suggested state legislation and interstate consulting services. The Midwest Office supports several groups of state officials, including the Midwestern Legislative Conference, an association of all legislators in 11 states: Illinois, Indiana, Iowa, Kansas, Michigan, Minnesota, Nebraska, North Dakota, Ohio, South Dakota and Wisconsin. The Canadian provinces of Alberta, Manitoba, Ontario and Saskatchewan are MLC affiliate members.
At the premier event for the Midwest’s state and provincial legislators, participants will have the chance to hear from leading political thinkers as well as some true American heroes.

The Midwestern Legislative Conference Annual Meeting is the only meeting tailored to meet the needs and interests of legislators from the Midwestern states and provinces.

This year’s featured speakers include astronaut Buzz Aldrin, leading national pollster John Zogby and Clint Hill, the former Secret Service agent (and a North Dakota native) who was in the presidential motorcade when John F. Kennedy was assassinated. Anne-Marie Slaughter, the former policy planning director for the U.S. Department of State and current CEO and president of the New America Foundation, will give the keynote address on “Big Ideas for a New America.”

The meeting will also offer professional development training for legislators and include sessions on a wide range of issues: budget policy, early-childhood education, technology and state governments, public health, and the future of energy in the Midwest.

In addition, the MLC’s five policy committees will meet: Agriculture & Natural Resources, Economic Development, Education, Energy, and Midwest-Canada Relations.

The family-friendly conference offers special daytime activities for spouses, guests and children. Evening events will also be held for attendees and their guests at various attractions in the Bismarck area. An early-bird registration discount is available through May 5. Registration can be completed at www.csgmidwest.org.

### MLC committee hosts exchange in South Dakota between state, provincial legislators

Event fostered policy discussions on issues such as agricultural trade

In honor of Canada Day in South Dakota, lawmakers hosted three Canadian provincial parliamentarians in February for a legislative exchange. The Canadian lawmakers, along with the Canadian consul general from Minneapolis, visited committee meetings and observed legislative floor sessions. They also met with Gov. Dennis Daugaard and discussed country-of-origin labeling with South Dakota’s secretary of agriculture. South Dakota Sen. Craig Tieszen and Rep. Fred Romkema co-hosted the exchange.

February’s exchange was organized by the Midwestern Legislative Conference Midwest-Canada Relations Committee, which frequently brings together groups of state and provincial lawmakers.

Iowa adopts 10-cent hike in gas tax — first increase in 26 years

Iowa became the first state in the Midwest this year to approve a plan to raise taxes for roads, but it may not be the last.

According to The Des Moines Register, Iowa’s SF 257 increased the gas and diesel tax by 10 cents (to 33 cents for gas and 22.5 cents for diesel). It will bring in an additional $215 million annually for city, county and state roads. The gas tax in Iowa hadn’t been raised since 1989, the new rates took effect March 1.

Meanwhile, during the final days of its 2015 session, the South Dakota Legislature was considering a proposal to increase the gas tax by 2 cents annually. Different proposals called for that yearly increase to take place with no statutory end date, or over a set period of time: 15 years, eight years or three years, depending on the proposal. (A final decision on the gas tax increase had not been made as of early March.) The state’s current tax on gasoline and diesel is 22 cents per gallon.

In May, Michigan voters will decide the fate of a legislative proposal to increase transportation funding by $1.2 billion a year. If approved, the plan would increase the state’s general sales tax (by 1 cent), raise vehicle-registration fees, and establish a wholesale gasoline/diesel tax (in place of the per-gallon tax).

Illinois tightening oversight of how state, federal grants are used

Illinois lawmakers are hailing a new set of safeguards that they say will improve how the state oversees grants and will protect against fraud and abuse.

The Grant Accountability and Transparency Act (HB 2747) was signed into law last year. The plan for implementing this act was announced in March.

With passage of HB 2747, state Sen. Pamela Althoff says, Illinois became the first state in the country with legislation requiring a comprehensive set of standards to enforce accountability and transparency throughout the grant process.

The new rules will apply to the administration of state and federal grants. They include conflict-of-interest disclosure requirements for grantees and stricter, real-time auditing of grant-funded programs. The legislation also brings all of the state’s procedures up to federal standards.

The Illinois budget includes 462 individual grant appropriations, ranging from $400 to $4.2 billion. In 2013, the legislature formed a commission to examine the state’s grant process. It found that of the $45 billion in estimated grant spending, 6 percent of it was being lost to fraud, waste and abuse.

Jobless rates fall across country, and Midwest leads the way

For the first time in three decades, the yearly unemployment rates fell in all 50 states, and some of the largest declines in 2014 occurred in the Midwest.

The U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics data, released in March, also show three of the region’s Plains states as having the lowest jobless rates in the nation. Here is a summary of some of the key findings for the Midwest.

- Illinois’ unemployment rate fell by a full two percentage points, from 9.1 percent to 7.1 percent, the largest drop of any state in the country. Ohio and Michigan also had among the sharpest declines in the country.
- The average U.S. unemployment rate in 2014 was 6.2 percent. In the Midwest, only Illinois and Michigan had rates higher than the national average. (In 2010, four states in the Midwest — Illinois, Indiana, Michigan and Ohio — had double-digit unemployment figures.)
- In 2014, Michigan had the third lowest jobless rates in the country.
- Minnesota (4.1 percent), Iowa (4.4 percent) and Kansas (4.5 percent) also had among the 10 lowest rates of unemployment among the 50 states.

States taking a closer look at standardized tests given to students

In response to growing concerns about the standardized tests that students must take, legislative proposals have been introduced this year in a handful of Midwestern states.

In February, the Indianapolis Star reports, Indiana Gov. Mike Pence signed a bill (SB 62) to shorten the ISTEP test. Given to third- to eighth-graders, the ISTEP measures student learning in core subject areas. The new law gives the state Department of Education the legal authority to reduce the test by three hours and five minutes. Without any changes, testing times were scheduled to increase from six to 12 hours.

Minnesota Gov. Mark Dayton has proposed eliminating one-third of the 21 standardized tests now given to students in his state. He previously had formed a Testing Reduction Advisory Group, which recommended that the state stop administering four assessments.

In Illinois, opposition to the PARCC exam has intensified. PARCC assesses college and career readiness and is aligned with Common Core standards. New opt-out legislation for parents has been introduced in Illinois (HB 306), and the Ohio Senate has formed an advisory committee of education experts to make recommendations on state-required assessments.

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Stateline Midwest

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