Senate Approves Bill to Improve Reporting of COVID-19 Deaths

Legislation that would improve transparency and eliminate inconsistencies in how COVID-19 deaths are being reported in Pennsylvania has passed the Senate.

Senate Bill 1164, authored by Sen. Judy Ward (R-Blair/Fulton), would ensure county coroners are notified of all suspected deaths in their jurisdiction caused by this virus and other contagious diseases that constitute a health emergency.

State law requires county coroners to investigate the facts and circumstances surrounding any death – including those due to contagious diseases – except in cases of death by natural causes. However, many coroners are not being notified of suspected COVID-19 deaths in hospitals, nursing homes, and other care facilities because the Department of Health is interpreting the law differently. This leads to discrepancies between the number of COVID-19 deaths reported by the Department of Health and the number reported by county coroners, creating confusion.

“We can’t have two different sets of numbers of deaths from COVID-19. These reporting discrepancies throw a wrench into every community’s efforts to plan for emergencies,” Ward said. “All COVID-19 deaths should be reported to the coroners and medical examiners not only to ensure accurate reporting of the deaths, but also for the safety and well-being of our communities.”

The bill is being considered in the full House.

Legislation Would Allow for EMS Hazard Pay

Sen. Scott Martin (R-Lancaster) will introduce a bill to distribute up to $5 million in federal funds to provide hazard pay to emergency medical services (EMS) personnel.

The Wolf Administration recently provided $50 million in grants to employers in life-sustaining industries to provide hazard pay to employees. However, a recent Senate Veterans Affairs and Emergency Preparedness hearing highlighted the fact that EMS organizations were not included in the governor’s program.

Martin said his bill will distribute money from the state’s share of funding from the Coronavirus Aid, Relief, and Economic Security (CARES) Act to correct this error and ensure frontline EMS workers qualify for hazard pay.

“Our EMS personnel put themselves in harm’s way throughout the pandemic by responding to calls for patients who exhibited symptoms of COVID-19,” Martin said. “They are the very definition of frontline workers, and their exclusion from the governor’s hazard pay program is unacceptable.”

As of the deadline of Borough News, the legislation had not been assigned a bill number.
Legislation Would Enable COVID-19 Tracing Through Wastewater

House Bill 2883 introduced by state Rep. Rob Matzie (D-Beaver/Allegheny) would establish a more effective way to trace and detect COVID-19 by creating a system of testing for the virus in wastewater.

The legislation would establish the Targeted Outbreak Detection Act, which would create a wastewater-testing program that is both cost-effective and more efficient than traditional methods of tracking the virus.

Matzie said implementing COVID-19 wastewater tracing would be feasible and relatively simple because testing resources are already in place.

“Most wastewater treatment systems are already required to perform routine testing of water samples,” Matzie said. “Sending a portion of those samples, on request, to a designated laboratory to test for the presence of COVID-19 would establish a critical early warning system that would arm health authorities with the data they need to better protect our communities.”

Matzie said the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) is building a National Wastewater Surveillance System to collect data from local wastewater utilities and that, while some forward-thinking facilities are already conducting some testing, the CDC does not have authority to mandate participation.

He added that testing wastewater for the presence of opioids has been a tool utilized by public health agencies in recent years.

The bill is before the House Environmental Energy and Resources Committee.

Revisions to Steer Clear Law Introduced

State Sen. Doug Mastriano (R-Adams) and State Sen. Kim Ward (R-Westmoreland) are proposing revisions to the state’s Steer Clear Law in an effort to protect emergency responders, such as tow truck drivers and law enforcement.

Senate Bill 1281 would rebrand the Steer Clear Law as the Move Over Law to clarify how the motoring public should react when approaching or passing an emergency response area.

“The goal of our proposal is simple: Move Over and slow down when you approach an emergency response area,” said Ward, who chairs the Senate Transportation Committee.

The proposal by Mastriano and Ward would establish a new point system for a Move Over violation; double the fines for a summary offense; strengthen public awareness by requiring PennDOT to educate the public throughout the year; and implement new requirements for drivers approaching an emergency response area.

According to data from the PA State Police, 7,075 citations were issued in 2018-19 for Section 3327 (Duty of Driver in Emergency Response Area) violations. Additionally, there were 3,204 warnings issued during that same timeframe.

“The steeper fines and point assessment introduced in this legislation should act as a deterrent against repeat offenders, while also providing another opportunity to educate drivers on the ‘Move Over Law’,” said Mastriano.

“It is my hope that this legislative effort helps saves lives.”

The bill was before the full House for consideration.
Senate Approves Legislation Banning Deceptive “Spoofing” Phone Calls

Senate Bill 764, authored by Sen. Michele Brooks (R-Crawford/Erie/Mercer), would crack down on deceptive and nuisance telephone calls by banning the practices of called ID “spoofing,” has passed the Senate.

The legislation is designed to protect citizens from misleading telemarketing “robocalls,” particularly those that disguise their real phone number by making it look like a local number, increasing the likelihood that the call will be answered.

Unfortunately, these computerized telemarketing messages can be intrusive, and can also prey on trusting Pennsylvanians, including vulnerable senior citizens.

“Our citizens should not be fooled into thinking a spam call is a local call,” Brooks said. “Many of these calls are intended to harass, defraud, or otherwise harm or take something of value from innocent parties, and should not come across the caller ID as being a local number when they are, many times, being made from other states or from who knows where.” Brooks noted that the legislation also prevents telemarketing calls after 8 p.m. and before 8 a.m.

“It is my hope that this legislation will help to better protect Pennsylvanians from fraudulent calls as well as the many inconveniences caused by telemarketing calls at all hours of the day and night.”

Senate Bill 764 is before the full House for consideration.

Senate Approves Bill to Provide Expanded Broadband Access in PA

The state Senate unanimously approved legislation sponsored by Sen. Wayne Langerholc, Jr. (R-Bedford/Bradford/Clearfield) that would establish a grant program to extend deployment of broadband services in underserved areas.

Langerholc said access to broadband has become even more crucial during the COVID-19 health crisis, connecting residents with services and information. Specifically, his office has heard from parents of students who were taking classes remotely, school officials, farmers, individuals tele-working, senior citizens, and fire and emergency workers.

Senate Bill 835 will provide funding to improve access to high-speed broadband internet in rural areas of PA, which currently do not have access to reliable networks. It would limit funding to entities that have demonstrated the ability to construct and administer internet services and require that they provide 20 percent of the funding for the project.

“The COVID-19 pandemic has brought into view what we in rural Pennsylvania have known for some time – broadband is essential to connectivity, education, safety, and productivity,” said Langerholc. “The time is now to ensure all state residents are afforded the same opportunities.”

The bill was before the full House for consideration.
DiSanto Proposes Constitutional Amendment to Eliminate School Property Taxes

Sen. John DiSanto (R-Dauphin/Perry) introduced a proposal that would allow residents to vote directly on the elimination of school property taxes through an amendment to the state constitution.

“Constituents in my district and across the Commonwealth are suffering greatly under the weight of constantly increasing school property taxes. The status quo is unacceptable, and voter approval of this constitutional amendment would force the General Assembly to address this issue once and for all. Powerful and entrenched special interests opposing reform would no longer be able to block needed action,” DiSanto said.

For decades, relief measures such as school property tax referendums and casino gaming have fallen short of expectations and have done little to ease the burden of Pennsylvania homeowners – especially seniors living on fixed-incomes.

As recently as 2017, Pennsylvania voters overwhelmingly approved a constitutional amendment expanding the homestead exclusion to 100 percent of a home’s assessed value, yet three more years have passed with no meaningful property tax reforms.

Much like the Property Tax Independence Act, this constitutional amendment would have the General Assembly replace school property tax revenues with a combination of state and local sales and income taxes.

DiSanto said his proposal would guarantee that local school districts received the same amount of revenue as they did from the property tax, so education funding would be more equitable for taxpayers, while ensuring school needs are met.

Legislation Would Provide Grants and Tax Credits to Restaurants That Sell PA Preferred Products

State Rep. Chris Rabb (D-Phila.) has introduced legislation to provide grants of up to $50,000 and tax credits of up to $100,000 to restauranteurs who sell PA Preferred groceries to customers in underserved neighborhoods.

“Food deserts have been a problem for a long time,” Rabb said. “Food deserts exist in both urban and rural neighborhoods, and people in those neighborhoods aren’t able to easily access healthy food within their local area, beyond canned goods and pre-packaged foods. In order to improve the health and well-being of our communities, we need to ensure everyone has easy access to healthy foods.”

The Food Trust reported that more than two million people, including over 500,000 children, live in food deserts across Pennsylvania.

This program has two parts – grants and tax credits for enterprising, socially conscious restaurateurs who sell PA Preferred groceries to customers in under-served neighborhoods.

The grants of up to $50,000 or tax credits of up to $100,000 would assist qualifying restaurants in fortifying their business operations, while offering Pennsylvania-sourced groceries, such as meat, fruit, vegetables, dairy, and eggs. Rabb said the program would also create local jobs in economically distressed communities.

As of the deadline of Borough News, the legislation had not been assigned a bill number.