

Week in Review

06/12/2023

ADDICTION/SUBSTANCE ABUSE

Ohio and 40 other states are wrapping up seven years of legal action against the creator of opioid addiction treatment drug Suboxone with Friday's announced anti-trust settlement of \$102.5 million with Indivior Inc. The states and District of Columbia note the company's predecessor, Reckitt Benckiser Pharmaceuticals, introduced the chemical combination of naloxone and buprenorphine in 2002 to reduce opioid cravings under the trade name Suboxone in a patent running through 2009. In 2016, former Ohio attorney general and now-Gov. Mike DeWine joined other states in suing Indivior under the federal Sherman Act and state anti-trust laws. They accused it of colluding with MonoSol Rx to replace Suboxone tablets in the U.S. with a sublingual film to protect Indivior's federal patent and to prevent or delay cheaper generics' entrance in the market.

AGRICULTURE

The Ohio Department of Natural Resources (ODNR) and Medina County Parks recently celebrated the completion of the new Litchfield Wetland Restoration Project. The project transformed once farmed land into 80 acres of wetland. The wetland will filter out the nutrients that cause algal blooms before they flow into the Black River in Medina County.

ARTS, SPORTS AND ENTERTAINMENT

Several Ohio minor league baseball and hockey teams are receiving a total of \$30 million in American Rescue Plan Act (ARPA) dollars, the Ohio Department of Development (DOD) announced. The \$30 million was included in 134-HB66 (Hoops), which passed during the lame duck session and was signed by Gov. Mike DeWine early this year. The following minor league baseball teams will receive funding:

- Akron Rubber Ducks: \$3,869,612
- Dayton Dragons: \$6,208,396
- Lake County Captains: \$1,635,081
- Lake Erie Crushers: \$1,032,260
- Mahoning Valley Scrappers: \$927,487
- Toledo Mud Hens: \$7,414,769

The following minor league hockey teams will receive funding:

- Cincinnati Cyclones: \$3,590,364

- Toledo Walleye: \$5,321,219

ATTORNEY GENERAL

The Ohio Attorney General's (AG) Office Friday rejected the petition summary of a proposed constitutional amendment titled "Protecting Ohioans' Constitutional Rights," which seeks to add a Section 22 to Article I of the Ohio Constitution. The petitioners originally submitted the summary under the title "Civil Action for Deprivation of Constitutional Rights" on May 3, 2021, and again on Aug. 23, 2021. They then submitted it under the title "The Ohio Civil Liberties Restoration Act" on Nov. 22, 2022, and under the title "Protecting Ohioans' Constitutional Rights" on Feb. 27, 2023. All of these previous submissions were rejected. A response letter sent to the petitioners says, "We identified omissions and misstatements that, as a whole, would mislead a potential signer as to the actual scope and effect of the proposed amendment."

Under a settlement reached with the Ohio Clean Water Fund, Ohio Attorney General (AG) Dave Yost announced Wednesday that the sham charity must turn over more than \$131,000 in pocketed donations so the money truly does benefit East Palestine residents. Under the agreement:

- The Ohio Clean Water Fund must pay \$131,904.88, including \$116,904.88 in restitution and \$15,000 in civil penalties.

- The Ohio Clean Water Fund must dissolve.

AUDITOR OF STATE

Auditor of State Keith Faber's survey to 1,108 school fiscal officers seeking information on their financial support of the EdChoice voucher lawsuit drew only 417 responses, Faber spokesperson Marc Kovac said Tuesday. Schools were asked to respond by Friday, June 2. The auditor's office has now distributed a follow-up survey, and is asking for responses by Friday, June 9. Kovac noted the following preliminary results in an email:

- 335 schools responded "no" on whether they are supporting the litigation.

- 35 schools responded "yes" on whether they are supporting the litigation.

- 47 schools responded "unsure" on whether they are supporting the litigation.

- 691 schools did not respond.

BALLOT ISSUES

Ohio Business Roundtable (OBRT) President and CEO Pat Tiberi told reporters Monday that while the OBRT has been concerned with the level that "out-of-state interests" had access to the ballot historically, its members have "chosen to stay out of" the Issue 1 matter "because of the other issues" related to it.

Asked about abortion specifically, he said OBRT doesn't get involved in "social issues" and though some people will say that is not one, "it certainly has become about social issues." Contrary to OBRT, the Ohio Chamber of Commerce and the National Federation of Independent Business (NFIB) support the 60 percent amendment, with the chamber's board voting to take "no position" on the potential November reproductive rights issue.

Defending the Ohio Ballot Board from a lawsuit challenging ballot language and the ballot title for State Issue 1, which will appear on the Tuesday, Aug. 8 special election ballot, Attorney General Dave Yost argued that an error in how "eligible voters" are described in the language is not material enough for the Court to order a rewrite of the language. One Person One Vote, the opposition group to Issue 1, filed the lawsuit challenging the language adopted along party lines by the board during a May meeting, arguing that the language and title violate legal standards established by the Ohio Revised Code and the Ohio Constitution as well as Ohio Supreme Court precedent. In a reply brief filed Friday, Yost said the language accurately reflects the changes to the Constitution that the amendment, if passed, would make.

FY22-23 BUDGET

Incomes taxes generated more than \$200 million above expected collections in May, bearing out the Office of Budget and Management's explanation that an April miss of about \$120 million was mostly a matter of timing, according to preliminary revenue figures released this week. The monthly report puts Ohio's FY23 overage at more than \$840 million as lawmakers enter the final month of deliberations on the FY24-25 biennial budget. May's income tax collections reached \$1 billion versus expectations of \$759.6 million, nearly \$242 million or 31.9 percent more than expected.

FY24-25 BUDGET

The Senate would further flatten Ohio's income tax structure to two brackets from the current four and the House's three, while eliminating some school funding guarantees and granting at least partial EdChoice scholarships to all comers, under a substitute version of HB33 (Edwards) adopted by the Senate Finance Committee Tuesday. The Senate version would also reform how Ohio uses surpluses going forward, with an increased cap for the Rainy Day Fund and the conversion of automated income tax cut mechanisms into an expanded sales tax holiday. The Senate sub bill proposes state-only GRF spending of \$27.5 billion in FY24 and \$28.9 billion in FY25, respectively \$691 million and \$770 million lower than the House-passed version. Total GRF funding -- \$41.5 billion and \$45.4 billion -- is down \$1.35 billion and \$1.27 billion compared to the House version. All Funds spending -- \$94.18 billion and \$94.89 billion -- is down by \$2.88 billion and \$919.7 million. Finance Chair Sen. Matt Dolan (R-Chagrin Falls) outlined the budget plan as spanning four major funding sources: ongoing General Revenue Fund (GRF) spending, GRF surplus, Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF) and American Rescue Plan Act (ARPA.)

Senate changes also would tighten the State Appropriation Limitation (SAL), which is meant to curb growth in state spending. The substitute bill lowers the growth factor from 3.5 percent to 3 percent and eliminates an alternative growth factor based on population growth and inflation, and

specifies that the SAL encompasses more appropriations, including appropriations made to another fund supported by cash transfers from the GRF.

In education, Dolan and Senate President Matt Huffman (R-Lima) said they've retained the base cost calculations and the House-added FY22 cost inputs for the Cupp-Patterson formula, but are proposing to eliminate two guarantees. The Senate expanded further the executive and House versions' moves to increase voucher eligibility, providing for universal eligibility for EdChoice, but with reductions in scholarship amounts for higher-income families. Any student from a family earning up to 450 percent of poverty would qualify for a full scholarship of \$6,165 for K-8 and \$8,407 for high school, but scholarship amounts would gradually reduce as family income rises, with a minimum scholarship of 10 percent of the full amount for the highest earners. DeWine's introduced budget raised income eligibility to 400 percent of poverty, and the House boosted that to 450 percent.

The sub bill also increases the cap on revenue that can be put into the Rainy Day Fund from 8.5 percent of revenues to 10 percent.

County engineers appeared before the Senate Finance Committee Thursday opposing language inserted by the Senate into the proposed FY24-25 budget that would remove the requirement that county engineers be both a registered professional engineer and a professional surveyor. The issue has come up over several sessions and county engineers have appeared before lawmakers in the past to push back on it, arguing that the requirement in current law needs to be maintained due to the office's duties. The substitute version of HB33 removes the requirement that a county engineer be a registered surveyor. It also allows the engineer to contract with private surveyors as needed.

CITIES

Mayors from across the country converged on the Ohio capital Friday to urge state and federal authorities to support local decision-makers with direct funding and without government preemptions against self-rule. The capital hosted the U.S. Conference of Mayors' (USCM) annual meeting for the first time in its 91 years, with the gathering running Friday, June 2 to Monday, June 5 at the Columbus Convention Center and downtown Hilton. It was a packed four days of plenary and breakout sessions covering everything from entrepreneurship to immigration to safe drinking water and more. A Friday morning session highlighted the American Recovery Plan Act (ARPA) as a "game-changer" for city infrastructure and services.

ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT

During a JobsOhio Board of Directors meeting Friday, the economic development entity's President and CEO J. P. Nauseef said there was "record performance" for JobsOhio in 2022, with over 26,000 new jobs added through its projects being the second-highest figure behind 2021. There were also new record highs for new payroll at \$1.85 billion and capital investment at \$30.8 billion. JobsOhio's 10 targeted industries have seen more than 203,000 new jobs from 2010 to the third quarter of 2022, and Nauseef detailed the JobsOhio inclusive economic development strategy and vibrant communities program as well.

There are a "record number" of economic development deals in the JobsOhio pipeline, Nauseef added, but also a current "record slowdown" in how long companies take to make decisions. Deals that usually take 250 to 300 days to close now take over 400 days, and the number is creeping upward in spite of the low unemployment numbers across Ohio. The state's economic diversity is a strength as a result.

The Ohio Minority Development Financing Advisory Board (MDFAB) has approved more than \$1.1 million for two Ohio businesses, the Ohio Department of Development (DOD) has announced. The support helps minority- and women-owned businesses sustain and expand their operations, DOD said. Those businesses include Ascension Construction Solutions LLC (Franklin County) which was approved for \$1,063,193 from the Minority Business Direct Loan Program and Servant's Heart General Contracting LLC (Pickaway County) which was approved for \$123,750 from the Women's Business Enterprise Loan Program.

ECONOMY

The May national unemployment rate rose to 3.7 percent, up from 3.4 percent in April. Total employment rose by 339,000, according to the report Friday from the Bureau of Labor Statistics (BLS). The number of unemployed people in May was 6.1 million, up 440,000 from April. President Joe Biden issued a statement on the creation of 339,000 new jobs, saying the total added in his presidency is now over 13 million. That is higher than the number for any president's four-year term. He also said the unemployment rate remained under 4 percent for the 16th month in a row, which has not been achieved since the 1960s.

Ohio saw the country's second highest increase in weekly unemployment claims, ranking it dead last in jobless claims per 100,000 people in the labor force, according to financial advisory website WalletHub. "Weekly unemployment claims in Ohio increased by 61.17 percent compared to the previous week. This was the second biggest increase in the U.S.," WalletHub said. Ohio had 288 unemployment claims per 100,000 people in the labor force, followed by California (252 claims per 100,000 people in the labor force), Alaska (200), Connecticut (191) and Minnesota (180).

EDUCATION

Attorney General (AG) Dave Yost won't issue the formal legal opinion requested by the State Board of Education (SBOE) on the constitutionality of a measure to strip most of the board's powers, saying that would tread on the proper role of other government branches. At the May board meeting, members voted 13-4 to ask Yost for an opinion on how SB1 (Reineke) and HB12 (Jones-Dobos) comport with the Ohio Constitution. The SBOE was established as an independent body by voters via constitutional amendment in the 1950s, although the amendment specifies that the board's powers and duties are left to lawmakers to determine. Under both bills, the board and state superintendent would lose most of their powers to a renamed Department of Education and Workforce (DEW), which would be led by a cabinet director appointed by the governor. As of Tuesday, the language of SB1 is now incorporated into the pending biennial budget bill, HB33 (Edwards).

State-funded preschool partially recovered last year from the toll of the COVID-19 pandemic, but longstanding problems in early education persisted, according to the 2022 State of Preschool Yearbook, which was released recently by Rutgers University's National Institute for Early Education Research (NIEER). While enrollment grew, the report found preschool access remained below pre-pandemic levels, inadequate funding, and that quality standards failed to improve. The annual report showed substantial year-over-year gains in enrollment -- a 13 percent increase in the number of children in state-funded preschool in 2021-2022 with 180,668 more preschoolers enrolled than in the prior school year, and growth in nearly every state. Despite this, preschool enrollment was still down by 8 percent compared to pre-pandemic levels, from the high of 1.66 million in 2019-2020 to 1.53 million in 2021-2022. Thirty-two percent of 4-year-olds and 6 percent of 3-year-olds were enrolled in state-funded preschool in 2021-22. Adding in Head Start and Early Childhood Special Education, public preschool enrollment was 41 percent at age 4 and 17 percent at age 3.

Differences of hundreds of millions of dollars in proposed spending for both traditional K-12 districts and EdChoice vouchers highlight the contrasting priorities for education finance between the House and Senate budget drafts, school funding expert Howard Fleeter said Wednesday in an address to the City Club of Cleveland. Meanwhile, Fleeter published research through the Ohio Education Policy Institute (OEPI) earlier in the week showing how voucher changes in the past several years have shifted the type of children using the scholarship programs. Fleeter was complimentary of the fact that senators stuck with the House's decision to update cost inputs to use FY22 data, but said his initial impression is that the reductions in the Senate version as compared to the House version stem from a change in how state and local share are calculated.

ENERGY/UTILITIES

The Office of Ohio Consumers' Counsel (OCC) has answered the Federal Trade Commission (FTC) with an "emphatic 'yes'" on whether the FTC should put real teeth into its pronouncements against energy "greenwashing." OCC defines the term as a "conveying of a false impression" of an energy source's actual carbon footprint in its recent filing with the FTC. The federal agency has posed a series of questions around a possible update to its published Guides for the Use of Environmental Marketing Claims and potential rules to regulate green sales practices and punish violators. "Since the commission's 2012 revisions, increased attention to environmental concerns, including climate change and issues driven by the COVID-19 public health crisis, have likely encouraged continued environmental claims related to various products, packaging, services and manufacturing processes," FTC says, citing a "proliferation of environmental benefit claims" including some not covered by the guides. In its request for comment, the agency issued a long list of questions and identified terms warranting greater clarity when used by utilities and energy marketers -- "sustainable," "ozone-friendly," "energy efficiency," "biodegradable," "organic" and the like.

The Office of Ohio Consumers' Counsel (OCC) and legal aid societies are calling on the DeWine administration to intervene in the apparent backlog of home energy assistance applications threatening low-income and elderly households with utility disconnection in a time of spiking consumer electric costs.

OCC, Pro Seniors, Ohio Poverty Law Center (OPLC), Advocates for Basic Legal Equality (ABLE) and Legal Aid Society of Southwest Ohio say community action agencies that partner with the Ohio Department of Development (DOD) to process applicants for the Percentage of Income Payment Plan (PIPP), PIPP Plus, Summer Crisis Program and Home Energy Assistance Program (HEAP) -- agencies DOD identifies as "energy assistance providers" -- warn of insufficient staff to fulfill appointments and finalize applications for federal assistance.

ETHICS

With recent media attention to additional, lump sum federal stimulus dollars being directly allocated to cities, the Ohio Ethics Commission sent a letter reminding cities that uses of those funds are subject to the state's ethics law. The letter to Ohio mayors notes that directly using any public position to authorize a public contract, or even influencing the process, to favor oneself, a family member, or an outside business associate, is a potential fourth degree felony under the ethics law. A helpful resource referenced in the letter is Ohio Ethics Commission Advisory Opinion 2009 '06, which explains that long-standing conflict of interest laws must be observed regarding stimulus funds and grants. The opinion can be found online at <https://tinyurl.com/eacjceh5>.

FEDERAL

President Joe Biden on Saturday signed bipartisan legislation to increase the debt ceiling, preventing the U.S. from defaulting on its debt. Biden said the compromise bill cuts spending, reduces deficits and protects priorities like Social Security, Medicare, Medicaid, veteran services and infrastructure investments. Members of the U.S. Senate had voted 63 to 36 Thursday night, June 1, to approve the legislation following passage by the U.S. House earlier in the week. Ohio's U.S. Senators J.D. Vance (R) and Sherrod Brown (D) split on the vote, with Vance being the only member of Ohio's congressional delegation to vote against the Fiscal Responsibility Act, the compromise budget deal between Biden and U.S. House Speaker Kevin McCarthy (R-CA). The agreement suspends the debt limit until January 2025 -- after the 2024 election.

Ohio congressional delegation members including U.S. Sen. Sherrod Brown (D) and U.S. Reps. David Joyce (R), Marcy Kaptur (D), Max Miller (R), Joyce Beatty (D), Shontel Brown (D), Emilia Sykes (D) and Greg Landsman (D) Tuesday called on the Biden administration to choose Ohio's Wright-Patterson Air Force Base (WPAFB) in Dayton as the headquarters for the U.S. Space Command and to locate additional U.S. Space Force units in Ohio in partnership with the NASA John H. Glenn Research Center's Neil Armstrong Test Facility in Sandusky. In a letter to President Joe Biden, Secretary of Defense Lloyd Austin, Secretary of the Air Force Frank Kendall and Chief of Space Operations General B. Chance Saltzman, the lawmakers wrote that the numerous industry and university parties in the state -- along with existing U.S. Air Force and NASA bases and facilities -- make Ohio ideally suited to host U.S. Space Command and Space Force units, should the Department of Defense (DoD) choose to re-locate the Command HQ.

GAMING/GAMBLING

Ohio's sports gambling operators and casinos had a relatively slow month in April 2023, according to data provided by the Ohio Casino Control Commission (OCCC). Sports betting companies reported their lowest numbers in handle and revenue since they began operating in January. Ohioans placed \$520.6 million in sports bets (handle) in April, down from \$737.2 million in March, \$638.8 million in February and \$1.1 billion in January. The vast majority of sports bets in April were placed online, with more than \$505.6 million placed on websites while nearly \$15 million was placed in brick-and-mortar sportsbooks. Total taxable revenue for sports gaming was \$63.8 million in April, down from \$95.2 million in March, \$81 million in February and \$209.3 million in January. Online taxable revenue was \$62.3 million, while retail taxable revenue was \$1.5 million.

GENERAL ASSEMBLY/STATEHOUSE

The non-consensual installation of a tracking device on another person's property would generally be prohibited under legislation passed by the Senate on Wednesday. The chamber unanimously passed SB100 (Manning-Antonio), which would make the illegal use of a tracking device or application a first-degree misdemeanor in most situations, and a fourth-degree felony under certain circumstances. Sen. Nathan Manning (R-North Ridgeville), a co-sponsor of the legislation, said he was surprised to learn that this conduct is not already covered by Ohio's anti-stalking laws.

In other action, the Senate voted along party lines to pass SR115 (Brenner-Wilson), which urges President Joe Biden to rescind the Federal Housing Finance Agency's new loan-level price adjustments for purchase, rate-term finance and cash-out refinance loans. The Senate also unanimously passed SB44 (Brenner), which requires state occupational licensing agencies to accept electronic license applications, and SB40 (Roegner), which would enter Ohio into the Dentist and Dental Hygienist Compact.

After session, Senate President Matt Huffman (R-Lima) told reporters that the Senate Finance Committee will likely amend budget bill HB33 (Edwards) to include more funding for the August special election. The Senate version of the budget includes \$15 million, but the election will likely need closer to \$20 million, Huffman said. Senate Minority Leader Nickie Antonio (D-Lakewood), who also spoke with reporters after session, agreed that more funding is necessary for the August election.

Asked why the Senate reinserted language increasing the sports gambling tax rate from 10 percent to 20 percent, Huffman said it will help pay for other priorities in the budget.

House State and Local Government Committee Chair Marilyn John (R-Shelby) told the committee Tuesday that they plan to start hearings on occupational licensing entities in the fall. The committee discussed how it will proceed with the review after House Speaker Jason Stephens (R-Kitts Hill) last week directed the committee to review the boards, commissions and state agencies as required under 132-SB255 (McColley). According to a memo from the Legislative Service Commission, the following boards are up for review this session:

- Ohio Peace Officer Training Commission
- State Cosmetology and Barber Board
- Accountancy Board
- Department of Agriculture
- Architects Board and Ohio Landscape Architects Board
- Ohio Casino Control Commission
- Department of Commerce - Division of Financial Institutions
- Department of Commerce - Division of Real Estate and Professional Licensing
- Department of Commerce - Superintendent of Industrial Compliance
- Motor Vehicle Repair Board
- Department of Public Safety - Bureau of Motor Vehicles
- Department of Public Safety
- State Board of Registration for Professional Engineers and Surveyors
- Department of Mental Health and Addiction Services
- State Racing Commission
- Secretary of State

Recently sworn in member of the Ohio House Brian Lorenz said that he plans to focus on infrastructure improvements using his experience as a city planner and as a member of the Powell City Council for more than a decade. He also said he is interested in creating new incentive structures for local governments to use and improving existing one like tax increment financing (TIF) or joint economic development districts (JEDDs). Lorenz replaced former Rep. Kris Jordan (R-Ostrander), who died earlier this year.

The Senate Community Revitalization Committee took informal testimony Wednesday from two organizations, including one focused on reuniting foster children with extended family and friends and a second that operates substance abuse clinics in nine states including Ohio.

In other action, the House Families and Aging Committee reported out HB7 (White-Humphrey), which addresses infant and maternal mortality; the House Ways and Means Committee reported out HB125 (Mathews-Santucci), which modifies tax deductions for contributions to 529 plans

and ABLE accounts; the Senate Financial Institutions and Technology Committee reported out SB50 (Wilson-Smith), which revises the 911 service law; the House Insurance Committee reported out HB152 (Weinstein-B. Young), which requires coverage of hearing aids for those 21 and younger; and the Senate Workforce and Higher Education Committee reported out SB117 (Cirino-McColley), which establishes institutes at Ohio State University and the University of Toledo.

GREAT LAKES

A total of \$30 million is available for restoration projects that advance environmental justice in underserved and overburdened communities in the Great Lakes region, the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency (USEPA) has announced. The funding was provided through the Bipartisan Infrastructure Law, USEPA said. "Many communities in the Great Lakes Basin lack the resources needed to apply for, obtain and oversee the implementation of federal grant projects. USEPA's new Great Lakes Environmental Justice Grant Program will ease these administrative barriers by funding 'principal recipients' who will help underserved communities effectively access federal funding for important local projects. In addition, this investment will encourage even greater environmental, economic, health and recreational benefits for underserved Great Lakes communities, including those near severely degraded sites, known as 'areas of concern,'" USEPA said. The Bipartisan Infrastructure Law provided a total of \$1 billion in the Great Lakes Restoration Initiative (GLRI) to accelerate Great Lakes restoration and protection.

HEALTH AND HUMAN SERVICES

The Ohio Department of Health (ODH) and Ohio Environmental Protection Agency (Ohio EPA) urged Ohioans to limit their outdoor activity as poor air quality caused by smoke from the Canadian wildfires continued through Friday, June 9. Ohio EPA had initially issued a statewide air quality advisory on Wednesday. President Joe Biden said the wildfires are "another stark reminder of the impacts of climate change," and urged Americans to use AirNow.gov to check air quality in their area. "Since May, more than 600 U.S. firefighters, support personnel, and firefighting assets have been deployed, working alongside Canadian firefighters to tackle what is likely to be the worst fire season in Canadian history, and one that has huge impacts here in the United States," Biden said in a statement.

Cincinnati Children's Hospital was named one of the nation's Top Hospitals and Health Systems for Diversity by a company that evaluates organizations on inclusion and diversity in workplace practices, leadership accountability, and suppliers. Of the 20 hospitals and health systems recognized by DiversityInc for 2023, Cincinnati Children's ranked No. 17 and was the only pediatric health system to make the list.

HIGHER EDUCATION

Gov. Mike DeWine and Lt. Gov. Jon Husted reiterated their budget proposals on higher education Monday in a press conference at the Ohio Business Roundtable (OBRT) office and were joined by OBRT President Pat Tiberi. The three specifically focused on how the proposals, including creation of merit-based scholarships and expansion of the Ohio College Opportunity

Grant (OCOG), can help fill current and future workforce needs. DeWine's OCOG proposal would make 15,000 more students eligible by raising the income threshold to \$87,000 so it is available to the "working middle class" for the first time. The maximum amount would increase to \$6,000 per student as well.

Case Western Reserve University (CWRU) President Eric W. Kaler Monday announced plans for a roughly 200,000 square-foot research building. Estimated to cost \$300 million, the Interdisciplinary Science and Engineering Building (ISEB) represents the university's largest-ever Case Quad project. Research in the new building will aim to address issues like climate change, applications of artificial intelligence and multiple aspects of improving health outcomes, such as reducing health disparities. The structure will offer spaces for researchers with complementary expertise to work together in order to encourage interdisciplinary work.

Sarah "Sally" Ross Soter and the Soter Kay Foundation recently pledged \$15 million to the Ohio State University (OSU) College of Medicine to establish the Sarah Ross Soter Women's Health Research Program. The funding will create a multidisciplinary research hub focused on new therapies to prevent and treat diseases that disproportionately affect women. It will include new and expanded engagement programs to better reach women from underrepresented communities.

The House Higher Education Committee Wednesday approved legislation to establish the Foster-to-College Scholarship Program. Co-sponsored by Reps. Dontavius Jarrells (D-Columbus) and Bill Seitz (R-Cincinnati), HB164 would appropriate \$7.5 million in both FY24 and FY25 for the program aimed at awarding scholarships to Ohio youth who have spent some of their teenage years in the foster care program. The bill requires the Ohio Department of Education (ODE) to hire a full-time foster care liaison to work with public children's services agencies and others to provide services to foster youth related to school placement. In addition, it requires the chancellor of higher education to employ four full-time foster care student navigators to assist students in applying and enrolling in the program and colleges and universities.

Groups representing various school officials and counselors Wednesday praised legislation that would update the College Credit Plus (CCP) program based on a state audit, saying it will improve student access and outcomes, but also made a few suggested changes beyond what is currently in the bill, including the funding of a coordinator to handle the program duties in each district. The Senate Workforce and Higher Education Committee received an overview of the changes in SB104 (Cirino-Brenner) from Tom Hancock, the legislative director for Auditor of State Keith Faber, who said the bill is an effort to address the program improvement recommendations identified in the office's performance audit of CCP. He said the program, which was created in 2015 to increase participation in dual enrollment programming with minimal or no cost to the student, has largely achieved that initial objective. He noted that the number of credit hours taken in the final year of CCP's predecessor was approximately 190,000 hours, while CCP had more than 650,000 hours taken during the 2021 academic year.

HUMAN SERVICES

The Office of Criminal Justice Services (OCJS) is now accepting proposals for its Culturally Specific 2023 Violence Against Women Act (VAWA) grants, which help nonprofit, community-based organizations administer justice for racial and ethnic minority groups and strengthen services to victims of domestic violence, dating violence, sexual assault and stalking. Funded activities may include direct services, crisis intervention, transitional housing, legal assistance, court improvements, and training for law enforcement and courts.

JUDICIAL

The Ohio Supreme Court Thursday announced Robert W. Horner III as administrative director of the Court. He begins his new position on Monday, July 10. As chief administrative officer of the judicial branch of Ohio government, the administrative director works closely with the chief justice and justices of the Court and judges of the state to develop and communicate the vision, values and direction of the Ohio judiciary. Horner is an attorney who served as senior vice president of corporate legal affairs and secretary for Nationwide Insurance. Following his retirement from Nationwide, he served as executive director and chairman of the board for Honor Flight Columbus.

In a decision that could have far-reaching consequences for K-12 education, the Ohio Supreme Court will determine whether the Ohio Teacher Evaluation System (OTES) supersedes collective bargaining agreements between unions and school districts and whether classroom observation disputes instead raise unfair labor practices under the sole jurisdiction of the State Employee Relations Board (SERB).

MENTAL HEALTH

The Ohio Association of County Behavioral Health Authorities (OACBHA) convened its annual Opiate Conference this week with two days of sessions on prevention, education, intervention, treatment and related topics. The conference kicked off Monday with remarks from Lori Criss, director of the Ohio Department of Mental Health and Addiction Services (OhioMHAS), and Dr. Jeff Coady, Region V director for the federal Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA). Criss discussed Gov. Mike DeWine's FY24-25 budget priorities, including a pledge to strengthen the community mental health system that is not broken so much as it was never fully built out in the first place. Coady discussed several topics, including what drove the pandemic-era increase in overdose deaths. While the stresses of the pandemic and increase in number of people using drugs alone rather than in groups were contributing factors, fentanyl played a major role, he said, noting a growth in the share of unintentional drug overdose deaths attributed to fentanyl increasing from 38 percent in 2015 to 81 percent in 2020.

NATURAL RESOURCES

The Ohio Department of Natural Resources (ODNR) Division of Wildlife recently received a donation of 177 acres of land in Pike County for use as a public wildlife area. The property was donated by Patricia Ann Conkel through her trust in honor of her husband Fred Conkel and his

father Marion Conkel. The area comprises mostly wooded, steep terrain with abundant white-tailed deer, wild turkeys, and squirrels. Former pastureland provides grassland habitat that benefits birds, butterflies, insects and rabbits

Congress and the Biden administration should act quickly to restore and protect the Ohio River, according to environmental advocates from Ohio and the 13 other states in the Ohio River Basin. Nonprofit organization American Rivers recently designated the Ohio River as the second most endangered river in the country. ODNR Director Mary Mertz cited the river's degradation as a major reason the General Assembly should fund Gov. Mike DeWine's proposed H2Ohio Rivers Initiative in the state budget.

OHIO HISTORY

The Ohio Department of Natural Resources (ODNR) and the Ohio History Connection announced \$2.27 million in upgrades at Glacial Grooves Geological Preserve on Kelleys Island. These improvements will improve the visitor experience and help protect the grooves from the kinds of natural impacts that cause degradation over time, the department said. Visitors will find new bridges, parking, fencing, signage and even selfie spots at the preserve.

PARKS/RECREATION

The Columbus Zoo and Aquarium and The Wilds have recently been awarded a \$2.625 million gift from Battelle to be used "to make a positive impact on people, wildlife, and wild places through educational scholarships, school group educational opportunities, and conservation-focused experiential learning projects." Battelle's support will ultimately affect more than 200,000 students and 7 million zoo guests over three years.

Cuyahoga Valley National Park is asking the public to review and comment on -- from now through Tuesday, July 11 -- the draft Circulation Environmental Assessment (EA), which is a component of implementing the park's Community Access Plan. The EA analyzes the effect of select trail and parking actions in the plan. The park will hold two virtual public information sessions on Tuesday, June 13 at 2 p.m. and 6:30 p.m. No registration is required. Visit <https://go.nps.gov/2rsi4o> to access the meeting links, available now. The meetings will provide an overview of the EA and the commenting process.

Visit <https://tinyurl.com/4wwyumx3> to learn more about the Community Access Plan, read the EA and enter comments.

PUBLIC SAFETY

Gov. Mike DeWine announced Friday that 14 Ohio State Highway Patrol (OSHP) troopers and supervisors will go to Texas in the coming weeks for a two-week assignment. They will assist with border surveillance and will not be assigned with making arrests, the DeWine administration said. The assignment is in response to a request for assistance from Texas Gov. Greg Abbott, and follows a July 2021 assignment of 14 OSHP personnel to Texas as well. Ohio National Guard members have been at the border since October 2020, when DeWine deployed

approximately 115 members to support Southwest border operations at the request of the U.S. Department of Homeland Security and the National Guard Bureau. Since then, nearly 325 additional National Guard personnel have been deployed and 125 remain there now. A new rotation of 50 Guard members is scheduled to deploy to Texas in October 2023.

Nearly nine out of 10 Ohio peace officers now work for law enforcement agencies meeting minimum state standards promulgated by the Ohio Collaborative Community-Police Advisory Board. The Office of Criminal Justice Services (OCJS), which administers the program, added to their numbers Monday with the announced certification of three more police departments: Botkins (Shelby), Clair Township (Columbiana) and Trenton (Butler). The three jurisdictions have adopted state policing standards for use of force, including deadly force, and agency recruitment and hiring.

TECHNOLOGY/AEROSPACE

Ohio Chief Information Officer (CIO) Katrina Flory, also an assistant director of the Ohio Department of Administrative Services (DAS), was recently named among 22 state executives of the year in the 2023 StateScoop 50 Awards. Other recipients included state CIOs in California, Delaware, Tennessee, Utah, New Hampshire, Florida, Virginia, Illinois, Wyoming, Arizona, Rhode Island, Minnesota, North Carolina and Wisconsin, as well as additional technology-focused government officials in other states.

TRANSPORTATION/INFRASTRUCTURE

The Ohio Department of Transportation (ODOT) will dedicate nearly \$28 million to support local projects to repair, replace, or demolish 24 aging bridges in Ohio, Gov. Mike DeWine and ODOT Director Jack Marchbanks announced Friday. This funding from the Municipal Bridge Program supports the total replacement of 16 bridges, the repair of four bridges, and the demolition of four bridges. Although ODOT said it considers the 20 bridges being repaired/replaced safe for traffic, significant improvements are necessary to ensure that the structures do not become dangerous in the future. The four bridges that will be demolished have each been out of use for several years.

The Mid-Ohio Regional Planning Commission (MORPC) Thursday announced the launch of Gohio Mobility -- a website aimed at helping Ohioans get accessible, affordable transportation. The new site is a free, statewide platform that brings together various modes of transportation. Users can search for transportation options using filters for location, payment type, and accommodations such as wheelchair-accessible vehicles. The website was developed out of a partnership with ODOT and Northeast Ohio Areawide Coordinating Agency (NOACA). Mobility managers across the state will be regularly updating the website and available to assist users, MORPC said.

Two rail crossings in Ohio were among the projects to receive federal funding through the inaugural round of the Railroad Crossing Elimination (RCE) Program. The \$570 million in grants announced by the U.S. Department of Transportation (USDOT) Monday will address more than 400 at-grade crossings nationwide, which the agency said will improve safety and

make it easier to get around railroad tracks by adding grade separations, closing at-grade crossings, and improving existing at-grade crossings where train tracks and roads intersect. In Ohio, the Butler County Transportation Improvement District will receive up to \$3 million for the Symmes Road Grade Separation Project and the Ohio Rail Development Commission (ORDC) will receive up to \$7.24 million for the grade separation of South Town Street in Fostoria.

UNEMPLOYMENT COMPENSATION

At a time when Ohio is seeing a construction boom with the advent of Intel and the expansion of Honda and Google, opponents to the SB116 (Lang-Romanchuk) said provisions of the bill that include a reduction in benefit weeks and reduced benefits has the potential to drive the state's current construction workers into other jobs or warmer climates where the industry is not so affected by weather. Yet, despite detailed opposition testimony from Policy Matter Ohio's Zach Schiller, the Ohio Poverty Law Center's Danielle DeLeon Spires, the Associated General Contractors of Ohio's Andrea Ashley and the Ohio Association of Foodbanks' Lisa Hamler-Fugitt, the Senate Insurance Committee Wednesday had questions only for Matthew Szollosi of the Affiliated Construction Trades Ohio on the proposed unemployment compensation overhaul bill, SB116, from Sens. George Lang (R-West Chester) and Mark Romanchuk (R-Ontario). And one of those questions, from Sen. Frank Hoagland (R-Adena), was whether his association had looked into creating its own unemployment program.