



STATE REPRESENTATIVE

THOMAS CALTAGIRONE

127TH LEGISLATIVE DISTRICT



LEGISLATIVE REPORT

MARCH 2010

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Caltagirone Joins Statewide Veterans' Task Force

It is a sad reality that our military veterans often return from duty with wounds that are psychological as well as physical. It is the responsibility of government to take care of their needs, which is why I was honored to join the statewide task force on Veterans and the Criminal Justice System.

Over the course of the next several months, the task force will research issues that impact the state's veteran population, including post traumatic stress disorder, depression and traumatic brain injury, which often lead to substance abuse.

When hundreds of thousands of veterans are plagued with these problems, it stands to reason that some may find themselves caught in the justice system, and we need to do something about it. I vow to do all I can to address their problems through my role as chairman of the House Judiciary Committee, and I will keep you updated about the task force's progress.



Pictured left to right are: Jeffrey A. Beard, Ph.D., secretary of the Pennsylvania Department of Corrections; Rep. Caltagirone; Pennsylvania Supreme Court Justice Seamus R. McCaffrey; and state Rep. Paul Drucker.

2009-10 STATE BUDGET

The 2009-10 state budget was signed into law on Oct. 9. It was a relief to reach the compromise so that schools, child-care providers and human service agencies that rely on state funding could meet the needs of the people they serve.

As we discussed the budget, it was important to preserve the programs that have been most effective in increasing student achievement. Every dollar we invest in early education generates enormous future savings by avoiding dropouts, unemployment, criminal justice costs and lost tax revenue. The 2009-10 budget maintains Pre-K Counts at \$86.4 million and Accountability Block Grants, which are responsible for nearly doubling full-day kindergarten programs, at \$271.4 million. The basic education subsidy for all Berks County schools also was increased.

Nearly every line item of the \$27.8 billion budget was cut as we worked to close a \$3.2 billion deficit. But the budget does allow us to fund critical needs as we work our way out of the recession.

Recent Changes to Laws Affecting Health-Care Coverage

You should be aware of recent changes affecting your health-care coverage. Here is information that may be helpful to you regarding those changes.

Adult children

Adult children in Pennsylvania can now remain on their parents' health insurance policy through the age of 29, provided they are unmarried, have no children, and are residents of Pennsylvania or are full-time college students. Employers are not required to carry the extension in their health plans.

For more information, contact your employer or insurance company. My office also has brochures available on this law and other health insurance options available for young adults.

COBRA changes

A new federal law provides a 65 percent reduction in COBRA premiums, using the federal stimulus program to pay the difference for workers laid off from their jobs. This will help thousands of Pennsylvania workers.

To be eligible for a reduced rate for COBRA coverage, a person must meet the following guidelines:

- Be eligible for COBRA continuation coverage any time during Sept. 1, 2008, through Dec. 31, 2009.
- Choose COBRA coverage when first offered or during the additional election period.
- Be eligible for COBRA coverage as a result of involuntary job loss during the period beginning Sept. 1, 2008, and ending Dec. 31, 2009.

More information on federal COBRA requirements is available from the U.S. Department of Labor by calling toll free 1-866-444-3272 or visiting www.dol.gov/cobra.

LIHEAP provides home heating assistance

Pennsylvania's Low Income Home Energy Assistance Program, which helps lower-income families pay their heating bills, is now accepting applications for this winter heating season.

The program provides cash grants to families to help pay regular monthly heating bills. You do not have to have an unpaid heating bill to qualify. LIHEAP also provides crisis grants to families that are facing heating emergencies, such as broken heating equipment or leaking lines that must be fixed or replaced, a fuel shortage, termination of utility service, or the danger of being without fuel or of having utility service terminated.

LIHEAP Eligibility Guidelines	
Household Size	Income Limit
1	\$16,245
2	\$21,855
3	\$27,465
4	\$33,075
5	\$38,685
6	\$44,295
Each additional person add \$5,610	

Eligibility is based on family size and income. For example, a family of four earning up to \$33,075 may qualify for LIHEAP. (See chart for additional income guidelines.)

LIHEAP will run through April 2, 2010, or as long as funds remain available.

For more information about this program, contact my district office at 610- 376-1529.



COBRA coverage extended to small businesses

A new law in Pennsylvania makes COBRA health insurance coverage available to employees in small businesses with fewer than 20 employees. In the past, the law only applied to businesses with more than 20 employees. Last year, there were more than 236,000 businesses in Pennsylvania with 19 or fewer employees. This means, when a person loses their job, they are able to continue their health insurance coverage through their previous employer for a certain time under this federal program.

PennDOT launches 511 system

The state Department of Transportation has launched a free, 24-hour information system that provides traffic warning delays, weather forecasts, regional tourism information, and links to transit agencies and major airports.

The service is available by calling 511 on mobile phones and land lines or through the Internet by visiting www.511PA.com. Drivers are urged to pull over before dialing.

The 511PA system includes all Pennsylvania interstates and the turnpike, as well as major roads in Harrisburg, Philadelphia and Pittsburgh. Information for the majority of this network includes incident reports such as accidents, construction and winter road conditions.

State can help answer your consumer finance questions

Now, more than ever, Pennsylvania residents have a lot of questions about consumer finance-related issues and products.

The state Department of Banking protects the public from financial abuse and ensures the safety and soundness of financial institutions in Pennsylvania. The department's Consumer Services Division is available to answer complaints and questions from the public. Consumers in Pennsylvania can contact the Department of Banking toll free at 1-800-PA-BANKS or by submitting a request online at the department's Web site: www.banking.state.pa.us.

The staff of trained professionals is available Monday through Friday to provide accurate information on a variety of financial issues. The office also has a growing list of resources available online, including information on potential scams, enforcement actions taken by the Department of Banking and informational materials.



Over the years, Rep. Caltagirone has been instrumental in helping the Sovereign Center and the Sovereign Performing Arts Center become a reality. He authored the hotel room tax that provided funding for the center and supported the capital budget request for the project by working tirelessly with Governor Ed Rendell and the state Department of Economic Development. He has also worked closely with Al Boscov, Reading Mayor Tom McMahon and other community leaders to keep the project moving for much-needed job creation and economic development in the city of Reading. The most recent phase of the project is the construction of a parking garage across from the center for event parking, courthouse employees, and guests at the Doubletree Hotel, which is expected to be completed next year. Pictured is the lot where the parking garage is being built.

Reputable home improvement contractors now registered online

Reputable contractors in Berks County now have another way to make sure their good names aren't ruined by fly-by-night operators who scam homeowners out of their money.

The Home Improvement Consumer Protection Act requires ALL contractors to register with the state attorney general. The registration information also is available to homeowners online by visiting www.attorneygeneral.gov and clicking on the "consumers" tab, and via a toll-free number, 1-888-520-6680.

Ask Here PA offers prompt answers to your questions 24/7

Did you know that the state library system offers a unique online question-and-answer service?

Through **Ask Here PA**, librarians will answer your questions online within 15 minutes any time of the week. If the answer requires extensive research, they'll help get you started and point you in the right direction.

To access the online service, just visit www.AskHerePA.org and follow the directions. Please note that the service does not apply to information related to your individual library records, overdue fees, book renewals, etc.


\$8,000 tax credit for first-time homebuyers available

The American Recovery and Reinvestment Act of 2009 expanded the first-time homebuyer tax credit to include home purchases made before Dec. 1, 2009. Congress recently extended the program through April 30, 2010.

The maximum tax credit is \$8,000 and can be claimed on your 2008 or 2009 federal tax return. If you've already filed your tax return for 2008 but bought a house after April 15, 2009, you can also claim the credit by filing an amended return. For more information and for updates on the future availability of the tax credit, visit www.irs.gov.

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My office can help you with:

- Car registrations, special tags, handicap placards, titles and driver's license applications
- Information on financial assistance for higher education
- Assistance in obtaining and completing state forms of all kinds
- Voter registration and absentee ballot applications
- Unemployment compensation, disability and workers' compensation
- Birth and death certificates
- Problems with the Department of Public Welfare (food stamps, medical and income assistance)
- Pennsylvania income tax questions or problems
- Requests for literature of all kinds – bills, regulations, statutes, Pennsylvania maps, senior citizen information
- Citations from the Pennsylvania House of Representatives for outstanding accomplishments and family milestones
- Complaints or questions about utilities and the Public Utility Commission
- Complaints and problems with insurance companies
- Renewal of state-issued licenses or certifications
- Property tax/rent rebate problems or questions
- Problems or questions about the state lottery
- PACE cards for senior citizens
- Consumer complaints
- Liquor Control Board concerns or questions
- Tours of the state Capitol for individuals or groups
- Information about federal, state and local government agencies

Any state-related concern!