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Rep. Chris Sainato

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And, those facing incarceration because of substance use disorder will have an alternative to jail time, thanks to $117,000 in funding that will allow the Lawrence County Drug and Alcohol Commission to collaborate with local law enforcement and treatment providers to offer a treatment-based approach.

Finally, nearly $184,000 in funding will allow the Human Services Center to provide trauma-focused cognitive behavioral therapy – an evidence-based treatment proven effective for post-traumatic stress, depression and similar illnesses – to help get youth plagued by trauma back on the road to recovery.

Support for the hardest hit: New program helps long-term care facilities combat COVID-19

One of the most difficult aspects of the pandemic has been witnessing its impact on the vulnerable Pennsylvanians we try the hardest to protect.

Much like the rest of the country, Pennsylvania has seen its long-term residential care facilities and nursing homes become ground zero for COVID-19-related infections and deaths. Those most affected include more than 80,000 Pennsylvanians living in skilled nursing facilities and at least another 45,000 in personal care homes and assisted living.

The pandemic has taken its toll: As of mid-July, nearly 70% of the approximately 7,000 Pennsylvanians who have died from COVID-19 – more than 4,800 people – were residents of nursing or personal care facilities.

We’re taking steps to reverse this alarming trend. To help better protect residents and the staff who care for them, the state has launched the Regional Response Health Collaboration Program, which will provide organizational, administrative and clinical support to these facilities.

To implement the program, nine health systems and university medical centers chosen to serve six regions throughout the state will share $175 million in grant funding. Together, they will help long-term care facilities expand testing, including testing of asymptomatic staff and residents; implement contact tracing and best practices for infection control; support clinical care through on-site and telemedicine services; and provide remote monitoring and consultation with physicians.

The program promises to greatly improve pandemic planning, readiness and response at facilities throughout the Commonwealth.
A glance at some new laws

Here’s a look at some health care-related legislation that recently became law.

- **Mastectomy patients’ privilege.** Approved by the governor in July, Act 44 clarifies the law pertaining to mastectomy and breast reconstruction to include coverage of custom breast prosthetics for post-mastectomy patients.

- **Heart and Lung Act Coverage for National Guard members.** Signed by the governor in April, Act 17 allows for National Guard members called to active duty to be covered under the Heart and Lung Act if they contract COVID-19 while performing their duties.

- **Medication synchronization.** Approved by the governor last year, Act 46 allows for patients to synchronize their medications in order to receive them on the same day each month, instead of having to make multiple visits to the pharmacy.

- **Stiffer penalties for assaults on licensed professionals.** Approved by the governor in July, Act 51 adds pharmacists, physicians’ assistants, respiratory and physical therapists, and other licensed health care practitioners to the protected category of health care workers against whom assault carries a second-degree felony charge.

- **Dense breast tissue screening coverage.** Also approved by the governor in July, Act 52 mandates insurance coverage for magnetic resonance imaging or ultrasounds for women at increased risk of breast cancer because of dense breast tissue or family history.

- **Health care worker ID badges.** Approved by the governor in July, Act 54 better protects health care workers from the threat of violence, stalking or harassment by providing that workers’ last names be omitted from facility ID badges.

- **PA Health Care Cost Containment Council.** Approved by the governor in April, Act 15 codifies and modernizes the PHC4 – the agency tasked with collecting and disseminating health care cost data.

- **Telepsychology.** Approved by the governor in May, Act 19 authorizes Pennsylvanians to join the Psychology Interjurisdictional Compact, allowing licensed psychologists to practice telepsychology and/or conduct temporary in-person practice across state lines and helping expand mental health services to rural populations.

- **Long-term care residents.** Approved by the governor in May, Act 24 allocates funding from the CARES Act. To address COVID-19 relief efforts in long-term care facilities, the act requires the Department of Human Services to divide the state into six regions and contract with at least one long-term care collaborative in each region to protect long-term care facility residents from COVID-19.

- **Prescription drug benefit fraud.** Approved by the governor in April, Act 14 will help reduce drug benefit fraud by requiring the Department of Aging to monthly cross-reference its list of beneficiaries with death records maintained by the Department of Health.

- **Stage IV cancer patient treatment.** Approved by the governor in February, Act 6 prohibits health plans covering treatments for Stage IV metastatic cancers from excluding or limiting drugs for patients if the drugs are FDA-approved and consistent with best practices. Patients cannot be required to first fail on one drug before an insurance plan will cover use of a different one.

- **Mothers’ milk bank.** Approved in February, Act 7 establishes the “Keystone Mothers’ Milk Bank Act”, which licenses and regulates donor human milk banks in Pennsylvania.

### Legislative update: A peek at some House bills in progress

The following measures recently passed the House and are now with the Senate for consideration.

**Reduced residency for international grad.** House Bill 1947 would eliminate the additional year of residency required of international medical graduates. This would allow them to have the same two-year requirements as graduates of U.S. and Canadian medical schools. Passed the House unanimously in June.

**Organ donation check-off contributions.** House Bill 30 would increase the optional organ donation checkoff for biennial driver’s license and vehicle registration applications from $3 to $6. Passed the House unanimously last year.

**Long-term care facilities.** House Bill 2437 would require the state or county health department to publish (1) the number of COVID-19 cases as a percentage of the total number of residents each long-term care facility has reported to the Department of Health and (2) the protocol for isolating positive cases. (Facility-specific data is already being collected, but the state Health Department currently only publishes data by county.) Passed the House unanimously this June.

**Pharmacy benefit manager pricing practices.** House Bill 941 – which I am co-sponsoring – would introduce transparency in pricing practices by pharmacy benefit managers in Medicaid and address inadequate reimbursement rates for smaller neighborhood pharmacies. The House unanimously passed the bill last year.

**Patients with psychiatric disabilities.** House Bill 1895 would amend the Mental Health Procedures Act to establish that patients with mental disabilities undergoing treatment have the right to be free from abuse, neglect and exploitation. The bill passed the House unanimously in April.

**Mental Health Parity and Addiction Equity.** House Bill 1695 would require insurers covering behavioral health services to submit certain information each year to the Department of Insurance to help it determine if the carrier is complying with the federal Mental Health Parity and Addiction Equity Act. The bill passed the House unanimously in May.

**Carfentanil.** House Bill 616, which passed the House unanimously last year, would add Carfentanil – one of the most potent opioids in existence – to the list of Schedule II controlled substances, which would severely restrict its availability and make it illegal to possess or distribute without a license or a prescription.

**Human trafficking.** House Bill 2177 – part of a package of Human Trafficking bills that passed the House unanimously in January – would require that offenders who subject a minor to sexual servitude undergo treatment while in prison.

### Stopgap funding, federal relief

Budget time was especially difficult this spring, as the pandemic resulted in unprecedented revenue losses and more questions than answers. To keep the state operating, the legislature passed an interim $25.8 billion spending plan that funds most agencies for five months.

At the same time, the Commonwealth spent an additional $2.6 billion in federal CARES Act funding, putting the money to work addressing the most urgent issues facing Pennsylvania.

One highlight of the package is an allocation of more than $692 million to the most potent opioids in existence – to the list of Schedule II controlled substances, which would severely restrict its availability and make it illegal to possess or distribute without a license or a prescription.


Talking with participants at the disability Mental Health forum in March.
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