



OREGON STATE REPRESENTATIVE

NEWS FROM ANNA WILLIAMS

Dear Friends and Neighbors,

I'm writing you following the second legislative special session of 2020, which lasted for one *very* long day: yesterday, August 10th. The session was convened by Governor Brown to address the severe budget shortfall that has resulted from the coronavirus pandemic. I'm pleased that, despite the recession and the hard times for our state budget, the budget for our public schools will remain whole so that our kids can continue to learn and grow through this pandemic. There's a lot of information to share, so I've taken care to skip over some of the more complicated (and possibly dull) details. If you have specific questions about any of the bills I discuss below, or want more detailed information than I've provided in this newsletter, please don't hesitate to email or call (503-986-1452) so either my staff or I can get you answers!

Recent Op-Eds

Before I discuss the bills that passed (and one important bill that failed) during the special session, I want to note that some of the bills touched on subjects I discussed in two recent op-eds.

In a recent issue of [Hood River News](#), I expressed my deep disappointment in the fact that the Employment Department, although it has made great strides in expanding its capacity, is still working on a massive backlog of unprocessed claims. My office continues to get calls every week from people who have been waiting for unacceptable amounts of time (some as long as four and a half months!) to get the help they need and deserve from the state.

As I will discuss below, the legislature has stepped in to help the Employment Department with some policy adjustments that should speed their response times slightly, but one such measure failed during the short session, which only adds to my frustration.

Also, in an [op-ed in the Oregonian](#) this past weekend, my Republican colleague Ron Noble and I wrote about the urgent need for legislative leadership and the Emergency Board to

address the needs of Oregon's children's advocacy centers, or CACs. CACs are required by law to perform medical examinations on victims of child abuse in order to collect evidence to assist law enforcement, yet the state government that passed that law offers them little in the way of funding. During the pandemic, their need for state funding has increased dramatically (along with the number and severity of child abuse incidents), but leadership had all but ignored my calls for funding at the time Rep. Noble and I penned the op-ed.

The special session's main budget bill included the dedication of \$1 million (less than half the amount the CACs requested) for potential future appropriation for this purpose, but I will keep pressing for more during future Emergency Board meetings and special sessions.



In February, before the pandemic began, Rep. Noble and I attended an event where we were both honored with awards for our championing of CACs.

The Budget Bill(s)

The main event of the special session was the balancing of Oregon's state budget. After our revenue experts reported that we would face a shortfall of over \$1 billion for the remainder of this budgetary period (and more in future periods), the state constitution required the legislature to make enough cuts in spending to balance things out. There were several budget-related bills discussed, all of them about as complicated as you might imagine, and they all passed.

Although the main budget bill, Senate Bill 5723, passed the House on a 35-22 vote, I did not join the majority of my Democratic colleagues in supporting it: **I voted no**. Quite simply, although the budget authors made admirable efforts to avoid unnecessary cuts to programs that are vital for those most in need, they were not entirely successful in those efforts. A few major sticking points for me were:

- Repeal of a pilot program that would have put recipients of TANF (a program to support families temporarily in need) into secure housing;
- Cuts to the Farm-to-School program that will have direct negative impacts on farmers and students alike in our part of the state;
- Cuts to STEM (science, technology, engineering, and math) and CTE (career technical education) programs from the Department of Education;
- Cuts to Early Learning Hubs (which help coordinate services for at-risk kids under the age of five and their families) and the Healthy Families program (which provides home visiting and parental support for families in need); and
- Cuts to the Solar Energy Rebate program, which encourages property owners to install solar panels and put more renewable energy into Oregon's power grid.

I supported some of the other budget-related bills that were a bit less painful for Oregonians in need. I'm grateful that the main budget bill *only* called for \$362 million in cuts: we were able to meet the rest of the revenue shortfall by **passing House Bill 4303, which maintains school funding through the use of reserve funds** that past legislatures set aside for this exact type of economic downturn, which I happily supported. I was proud to take this vote that enabled us to prevent any cuts to our schools.

I also appreciated that the main budget bill included a \$1 million "Special Purpose Allocation" for CACs. This funding (which comes in response to my near-constant nagging of legislative leadership...see my op-ed, above) doesn't go nearly far enough to address CACs' needs during this crisis, but I'm very happy that it was included.

Police Accountability

The legislature is responding to calls to ensure that our police forces keep all Oregonians safe. **House Bill 4301, a bipartisan bill which I supported**, bans the use of chokeholds by police and corrections officers. It also modifies the standards by which police and corrections officers may justify the use of force and the use of deadly force. Of course the

use of force can be necessary in tense law enforcement situations, but I agreed with most of my colleagues on both sides of the aisle (there were only 2 'no' votes in the House) that these changes imposed fair limitations that would keep both officers and members of the public safe.

Conversations about other police reform measures are ongoing, and I would encourage you to watch past and future meetings of the Joint Committee on Transparent Policing and Use of Force Reform (all available [online](#)), which I've followed closely. Please reach out to my office if you would like to weigh in on these issues. I always appreciate hearing from people in my community on all sides of these complicated issues...especially if you are a member of law enforcement or have had interactions with law enforcement that you think should inform our decision-making on these matters.

Streamlining Unemployment

The main policy committee for the special session debated three bills that the Employment Department requested from the Legislature, but only two passed that committee's initial vote.

Senate Bill 1701 (which passed with my support) increased the earnings exemption for unemployment recipients so that people can return to part-time work without being cut off from benefits. Previously, many people on unemployment couldn't earn more than \$113 per week without having their unemployment benefits reduced; now, that amount has been increased to \$300. With federal unemployment benefits being cut significantly, this bill struck me (and most of my colleagues from both parties) as essential.

Senate Bill 1703 (which also passed with my support) will allow the Department of Revenue to share a limited amount of data about unemployment applicants with the Employment Department in order to help them more quickly identify those applicants as Oregon taxpayers and verify their income levels, both necessary parts of the unemployment claim process.

Senate Bill 1702, although I would have supported it if given the chance, **failed in committee**. The reasons for this, in my opinion, had more to do with politics than with policy. The bill would have changed an obscure law that had held up thousands of claims in "unemployment adjudication," a process where the Employment Department has to research facts of each individual case to determine whether that person can receive benefits. This bill would have helped non-instructor school employees (like custodians, school bus drivers, and secretaries) access unemployment benefits that are currently off-limits to them despite schools being largely shut down for in-person instruction. Unfortunately, Senate Republicans (and one Senate Democrat) killed the bill that

thousands of workers desperately needed.

They were, quite simply, wrong. Any measure to remove a significant number of people from adjudication and get them the help they need doesn't only help those people; it helps everybody stuck in the slow-moving unemployment system. I will continue doing everything in my power to help people get the benefits they deserve.



The one-day special session didn't adjourn until after 11pm...like I said, a very long day.

Moving Forward

Having completed another special session to respond to the pandemic, I am switching my focus to the more proactive, forward-looking policies that I hope will help Oregonians weather the challenging years to come: increased access to child care, sensible worker protections, and support for community-focused small businesses and family farms in the face of a changing climate. Our challenges are far from over, as COVID and its impacts will be with us for a long time. I look forward to continuing to work on long-term solutions.

I hope you'll all join me in these efforts by writing to me to let me know your thoughts on these and other issues!

Onward,

Anna Williams

