

June 21, 2024

Legislative Press Bureau at (401) 528-1743

THIS YEAR AT THE GENERAL ASSEMBLY

STATE HOUSE — Here are the highlights from news and events that took place in the General Assembly this year. For more information on any of these items visit <http://www.rilegislature.gov/pressrelease>



HOUSING

- Legislators approved and sent to the governor several bills included in the legislative package put forth by Speaker K. Joseph Shekarchi (D-Dist. 23, Warwick) to address [the state's housing crisis](#). Many of the bills are aimed at speeding housing production by streamlining and removing roadblocks in permitting processes.
- Lawmakers provided a boost to housing production by helping Rhode Islanders to develop [accessory dwelling units](#) on their property.
- Legislators put forth a [\\$120 million bond question](#) on the November ballot to support more affordable housing creation. The bond would provide \$80 million for affordable housing, \$20 million for acquisition and revitalization, \$10 million for homeownership programs, \$5 million for site acquisition, \$4 million for housing-related infrastructure and \$1 million for municipal planning.
- A new law gives [Rhode Island tenants more notice](#) when landlords plan to raise their rent.
- The General Assembly passed a law on local zoning ordinances relating to the number of [unrelated individuals living in the same home](#).

HEALTH CARE

- Several bills that were included in the [Senate leadership's HEALTH](#) (Holistic Enhancement and Access Legislation for Total Health) initiative were enacted by General Assembly, including bills to join five interstate licensing compacts to make it easier for Rhode Islanders to access the care they need and budget provisions to purchase medical debt and incentivize providers to enter primary care fields.
- The Assembly included over \$160 million from all sources to fully fund the plan recommended by the Office of the Health Insurance Commissioner to raise [Medicaid reimbursement rates](#) next year, including \$3.8 million for Early Intervention providers.
- The legislature passed the [Healthcare Provider Shield Act](#) to protect medical providers who provide transgender and reproductive health care services in Rhode Island from civil or criminal suits from other states or their residents.
- A new law protects Rhode Islanders from [annual and lifetime limits](#) on health insurance benefits.

- A new law allows for pharmacies registered by the federal Drug Enforcement Administration to [transfer electronic prescriptions](#) at a patient's request.
- The legislature set in motion an update to [the law relating to alcoholism and emergency commitment](#) for drug intoxication, including updates and revisions of statutory language and evidence-based best practices.
- The Assembly included a new program, to be run through the state Treasurer's office, to use \$1 million of general revenue to [purchase medical debts](#) of struggling Rhode Islanders.
- The General Assembly specified the [requirements and procedures](#) for licensing lactation counselors.
- Lawmakers prohibited out-of-pocket costs and [prior authorization for HIV prevention medications](#) PrEP and PEP.
- A new law will establish rules and regulations for [non-emergency medical transportation](#).
- Lawmakers addressed staffing shortages in operating rooms by creating a state licensure program for [certified surgical first assistants](#).
- Lawmakers created a grant program to address the shortage of medical professionals while [increasing the diversity of the health care workforce](#) to match the diversity of Rhode Island's communities.
- A new law allows [patients and medical researchers](#) access to vital national data and research.
- Legislators regulated the [distribution of kratom](#), a natural substance that is used by people to overcome opioid addiction, withdrawal, and to treat anxiety, depression and other ailments.
- A new law allows [graduate registered nurses](#) to begin practicing before taking their national licensing exam.

JUSTICE and PUBLIC SAFETY

- A new law requires that all firearms, when not in use by the owner or another authorized user, be [safely stored](#) in a locked container.
- The General Assembly passed the Law Enforcement Officers' Due Process, Accountability and Transparency Act which will bring significant and long-overdue reforms to the [Law Enforcement Officers' Bill of Rights](#).
- The General Assembly [extended the lookback period](#) for repeat offenses of driving under the influence from five to 10 years.
- The General Assembly created a voluntary "[Blue Envelope Program](#)" for drivers with autism.
- A new law makes the process of [changing an individual's name](#) in municipal probate court more straightforward, while also updating the statute to make the language gender neutral and more inclusive.
- The General Assembly expanded investigative powers for the attorney general's office to protect Rhode Islanders from [persistent illegal conduct](#).

- Lawmakers redefined misdemeanors for [expungement purposes](#) and made prior felonies, subsequently reclassified as misdemeanors, eligible for expungement.

LABOR/WORKFORCE

- The General Assembly expanded Rhode Island's [Temporary Caregiver Insurance](#) program from six weeks to eight, allowing new parents more time for parental leave and caregivers more time to care for a critically ill family member.
- The General Assembly established [Secure Choice](#), a convenient, low-cost public-option retirement savings program for Rhode Islanders.
- A new law requires [workers in domestic service](#) to be paid Rhode Island's minimum wage.
- A new law prohibits contractors and subcontractors from paying employees the [cash equivalent of any applicable health care benefit](#) in lieu of actually purchasing the health care benefit.
- The Assembly prohibited noncompete clauses in [employment contracts for nurse practitioners](#).
- Lawmakers prohibited [noncompetition agreements](#) specifying that an employee must not enter into competition with an employer after the employment period is over.
- A new law removes the sunset on a provision that allows hotels [to evict guests who verbally abuse or threaten hotel staff](#) or other guests.

EDUCATION K-12

- Under the spending plan approved by the Assembly, [schools will receive a \\$70.9 million increase in state aid](#).
- Under the budget, [multi-language learners](#) will get 20% extra over the core education aid, which will be incorporated directly into the education funding formula.
- A new law allows cities and towns to authorize "partner" programs to assist students with an [individualized education plan](#) (IEP) for specially designed physical education classes.
- Learn365RI, the governor's [initiative for out-of-school learning](#), was allocated \$5 million by the General Assembly in the annual budget.
- The Assembly re-established the [Sheila C. "Skip" Nowell Academy](#), an institution that focuses on the diverse needs of pregnant and parenting teens, as a state school.
- A new law will provide [information about type 1 diabetes](#) to the parents and guardians of all public-school children.
- Lawmakers updated the laws [governing school safety drills](#) to ensure the drills are age and developmentally appropriate, and to ensure schools provide debriefings for students and teachers after actual emergencies.
- The Assembly made several changes [that give parents more insight and control](#) in changes in their child's individualized education plan, and set the wheels in motion for a much-needed overhaul of the state's regulations.

HIGHER EDUCATION

- The budget provides an additional \$1 million in operating supports for Community College of Rhode Island and \$2 million for University of Rhode Island, and continues both the [Rhode Island Promise and the Hope scholarship](#) programs, which provide two years of free tuition to Rhode Islanders at CCRI and Rhode Island College, respectively.
- A November bond question would [fund two major facilities at URI and RIC](#). It would provide \$87 million to build a state-of-the-art Biomedical Sciences Building at the Kingston campus of the University of Rhode Island. It would also provide \$73 million to fully fund renovation of Whipple Hall at RIC to house the new Institute for Cybersecurity and Emerging Technologies.
- URI, RIC and CCRI will see [numerous campus improvement projects](#), many funded partly through state Capital Plan funds.

ENVIRONMENT

- The Assembly [added open space programs to the “green bond”](#) to appear on November’s ballot: \$5 million for farmland protection, \$5 million to the Department of Environmental Management’s open space program and \$3 million to DEM’s Division of Agriculture and Forest Environment to fund forest and habitat management on state property.
- Lawmakers created the [Rhode Island Renewable Ready program](#) to ensure renewable energy projects, such as solar farms, are built without increasing electric rates or clearing Rhode Island’s forests.
- The General Assembly banned so-called [“forever chemicals,”](#) a group of manufactured chemicals that have detrimental health effects.
- The legislature is preparing for the development of [electric energy storage systems](#) as Rhode Island moves away from carbon emission-producing fuels and toward renewable energy.
- The legislature expanded [the legal use of electric bicycles](#) in Rhode Island by modernizing their classification and regulation.
- A new law ensures that [climate change, rising seas and coastal resiliency](#) are considered as the state makes its economic development plans.
- Lawmakers changed the procedures for [reporting vehicle collisions with wildlife](#) and for collecting the resulting roadkill for consumption.
- The legislature mandated the creation and maintenance of a [statewide coastal resiliency](#) plan to assess community vulnerabilities, recommend mitigation strategies along ocean and riverine coasts, and recommend financing strategies.
- Lawmakers created the [Rhode Island Lake Management Program](#) to aid with lake and pond management issues relating to the control of invasive aquatic plants.
- The Assembly prohibited any commercial development at [Sapowet Cove](#), and authorized the Department of Environmental Management to allow and promote passive outdoor recreation at the management area.

- The Assembly passed a law that will educate new buyers of oceanfront property regarding [shoreline access rights](#) and related conditions during the sale of oceanfront property.

SENIORS

- The budget includes a raise in the income tax [exemption on certain pension plans](#) and annuities income from \$20,000 to \$50,000 for qualified single filers, \$100,000 for joint filers.
- Legislators [repealed the suspension of full annual cost of living adjustments](#) for state employees who retired before 2012, when the state's pension reforms took effect. The calculation for pension benefits was also changed to base it on the highest three consecutive years of earning instead of five.
- A new law allows [nursing home residents to choose](#) to have cameras installed in their rooms.
- The Assembly redirected [\\$10 million in unspent federal COVID funding](#) to nursing homes.
- The General Assembly [made it illegal to charge fees](#) to senior citizens for paper invoices.
- Lawmakers established a 13-member advisory board to keep state leaders informed on current market conditions, wages, benefits and working conditions in Rhode Island's [nursing home industry](#).

BUSINESS/ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT

- The budget doubled the amount of [assistance for businesses hurt](#) by the closure of the Washington Bridge, from \$1.3 million in the recent governor's proposal to \$2.6 million.
- The General Assembly passed a law to make Rhode Island's [banking tax structure](#) more competitive with other states.
- The General Assembly established standards for municipalities to regulate permanent [outdoor dining](#).
- A new law allows [wineries to sell up to three five-ounce glasses](#) and three 750-ml bottles per customer per day on site.
- A law allows the Division of Taxation to send [business owners' tax compliance](#) information to the Department of State in order to keep them apprised of their tax liability.
- A new law allows liquor stores to [offer unlimited free samples](#) once during the month of August, in addition to March and November.
- A new law will help out-of-state businesses [to respond in a rapid manner](#) during declared emergencies in Rhode Island.
- The Assembly put a \$10 million bond referendum on November's ballot to support [arts infrastructure in Rhode Island](#).
- The General Assembly established an [advisory trade commission](#) to promote and advance the relationship between Rhode Island and Ireland.

TRANSPORTATION

- The Assembly added another \$5 million to the \$10 million the governor proposed to help the [Rhode Island Public Transit Authority](#) close a \$18.1 million budget gap following the end of federal pandemic aid, avoiding service cuts.
- The Assembly directed \$7 million of unspent federal ARPA funds — \$2 million more than proposed — for an existing municipal grant [program for construction of roads, sidewalks and bridges](#).
- The spending plan allocates \$83.6 million for the state match for federal funds for the reconstruction of the [shuttered westbound Washington Bridge](#) that brings I-195 over the Seekonk River between Providence and East Providence.
- The General Assembly approved a measure to require [regular monthly updates](#) from the Rhode Island Department of Transportation on the state of the Washington Bridge.

CHILD WELFARE

- Recipients of Rhode Island Works, the state’s cash assistance and work-readiness program for low-income children and their families, will get a 20% raise in cash benefits and higher income disregards, and [children will no longer lose their benefits](#) if their parents are sanctioned.
- The budget adds \$30.6 million to the governor’s request of \$30.3 million to fund pending [increases to support providers](#) contracted by the Department of Children, Youth and Families.
- The Assembly fully funded an \$813,000 proposal by the governor to provide free [breakfast and lunch to the 6,500 students statewide](#) who currently receive reduced-price school meals, and provide them a monthly \$40 benefit for three months in the summer.
- The Assembly increased [eligibility for child care supports](#), raised the rates of center-based providers and extended the child care for child care providers pilot program for an additional year.
- The General Assembly provided funding for a [psychiatric resource network](#) for providers treating children and new parents.

CONSUMER PROTECTION

- A new law protects consumers and ensures a [healthy solar industry](#) by regulating businesses selling home solar systems.
- A new law prohibits debt collectors from [reporting all medical debt](#) to credit bureaus.
- A new law [prohibits auto insurers from charging policyholders](#) more solely because they have been widowed.
- A new law establishes [safety procedures and requirements](#) for the licensing of youth camps.
- The General Assembly passed a law to require the [disclosure of certain information](#) on short-term rental listings.
- A new law protects patients from an insurance scheme called [“white bagging”](#) that interferes with how prescribed drugs are delivered and administered.

- A new law allows municipalities, upon request by the taxpayer, [to issue tax bills](#) digitally or electronically.

VICTIMS' RIGHTS

- A new law exempts [crime victims seeking restitution](#) from having to pay certain court fees.
- A new law helps sexual assault victims [access the state fund that assists victims](#) of violent crime with the costs they've faced as a result.
- The legislature allowed [innocent crime victims to use up to \\$1,000 of funds](#) awarded through the Crime Victim Compensation Program (CVCP) to modify their home to ensure their future safety.
- Lawmakers strengthened [Ryan's Law](#), a measure that penalizes prescribers who overmedicate with death resulting, by including probation and license suspension to the penalties.

ELECTIONS

- The General Assembly allowed [independent voters](#) in primary elections to automatically disaffiliate.
- The General Assembly established a clear process for reporting and investigating [cases of suspected signature fraud](#) involving candidates' nomination papers.
- A referendum question in November will ask voters if they want Rhode Island to have a [constitutional convention](#).
- A new law includes [state legislative elections](#) among those audited by the Board of Elections afterwards to ensure equipment and procedures worked properly.
- Lawmakers eliminated the [requirement of signing with an "X"](#) on mail ballot applications for voters who cannot sign their name due to blindness, disability or inability to read or write.

ANIMAL PROTECTION

- Lawmakers increased the penalty for violations of the [care of dogs statute](#) to a minimum fine of \$100 and a maximum fine of \$1,000 per violation.
- A new law [prohibits captive hunting](#) in Rhode Island. "Captive hunting" is defined in the legislation as a hunt that occurs within a structure designed to restrict the free movement of animals and prevents the animal from escaping.
- Lawmakers created [custody procedures for pets](#) during divorce or separation proceedings.