Access to oral health care

Midwest states expand telemedicine, allow dental therapists among steps to open wider access to dental services

by Jan Davis (jdavis@cs.org)

It's often overlooked in the national debates and discussions about health insurance, dental care is having something of a moment in the Midwest as states embrace ways to expand oral health access.

“The need is great, according to the Pew Charitable Trusts. More than 56.7 million people in the United States live in areas with shortages of dentists, and only about one-third of dentists accept public insurance, which limits access for the 72 million children and adults on Medicaid or the Children’s Health Insurance Program (CHIP).

The Midwest has 1,448, or one-quarter, of the nation’s 5,834 designated Health Professional Shortage Areas for dental care, according to the U.S. Health Resources & Services Administration. Which is why John Grant, project manager of Pew’s Dental Campaign, says the biggest problem “as far as the states go, especially in the Midwest, is expanding the dental workforce.”

“Basic dental care is out of reach for most Americans,” Grant says. “Unlike the flu, dental decay doesn’t get better with time; it gets worse. For a lot of people, there’s a quality-of-life issue; people miss work because of pain or can’t get a job because their teeth look bad.”

(Another benefit of improved oral health care access may be increased prevention of Alzheimer’s disease. New research suggests a possible link between the main bacteria in gum disease, Porphyromonas gingivalis, and Alzheimer’s; and gum disease is a known risk factor for the disease.)

Pew identifies trends that are likely to expand access to oral health care in 2019, many of which have already been adopted by Midwest states:

- Medicaid expansion under the Affordable Care Act. States aren’t required to offer dental benefits to adults on Medicaid, but most of the 31 states that have adopted ACA expansion do. Nebraska voters approved Medicaid expansion 53.5 percent to 46.4 percent in the November 2018 general election; the state could include dental coverage in its expansion plan, which must be submitted to the federal government by April 1.
- Integration of medical and dental care. Locating both services in one office or clinic can expand access to both kinds of service. The Advancing a Healthier Wisconsin Endowment is funding a three-year “Medical-Dental Integration” project that began in January to add dental hygienists to primary medical care teams serving pregnant women and children ages 5 and under. The program aims to place hygienists in 15 clinics statewide by the end of the $500,000 grant.
- Authorization of dental therapists. This is a relatively new mid-level position that is roughly equivalent to a physician’s assistant; in 2009, Minnesota became the first U.S. state to authorize the position. In December, Michigan became the second Midwest state to do so when SB 541 became law.

Dental therapy?

Dental therapy bills were introduced, but failed to pass last year, in Kansas (SB 312 and HB 2139), Ohio (SB 98), North Dakota (HB 1256) and Wisconsin (SB 784).

Proponents in North Dakota introduced a similar bill, HB 1426, in January. Wisconsin Rep. Mary Felzkowski, who sponsored SB 784, says she introduced it late in last year’s session “to get the conversation started,” and will introduce a new version before the end of February.

Emily Mallory, president-elect of the North Dakota Dental Hygienists’ Association, says the new bill limits dental therapist practice settings to Federally Qualified Health Centers, not-for-profit or governmental dental practices, and clinics authorized by the federal Indian Health Services.

North Dakota’s HB 1426 also gives the state Board of Dental Examiners the authority to approve dental therapy programs (based on the American Dental Association’s Commission on Dental Accreditation). In comparison, HB 1256 would have cleared comparison, HB 1256 would have cleared the way for dental therapists to practice in any dental practice settings to Federally Qualified Health Centers, not-for-profit or governmental dental practices, and clinics authorized by the federal Indian Health Services.

The changes should address the concerns that helped defeat HB 1256, Mallory says. “I believe this supports the intent for which dental therapy was first introduced: to
Education

Graduation rates rising, but states have long way to go to reach goals

The nation’s high school graduation rates continue to rise, new federal data show, though progress has slowed on this achievement indicator — one of the fundamental ways that states will assess the performance of their schools, districts and overall K-12 systems under the U.S. Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA).

In the Midwest, rates for the 2016-17 school year ranged from a high of 91.0 percent in Iowa (tops in the nation) to a low of 80.2 percent in Michigan. Illinois, Kansas, Nebraska, North Dakota, Ohio and Wisconsin joined Iowa in exceeding the U.S. average of 84.6 percent, which was up half of a percentage point from the previous school year.

The U.S. graduation rate is nearly 10 percentage points higher than it was in 2008.

Monika Kincheloe, senior director of strategic initiatives and partnerships for America’s Promise Alliance, cites at least two factors for this rise. The first is the availability of better data. This, in turn, has led to the spread of various evidence-based strategies: changes in discipline to limit out-of-school suspensions, a greater focus on adolescent literacy, early intervention for students at risk of falling behind, and initiatives to address children’s behavioral or social-emotional needs.

Second, the school curriculum now has closer ties to college and career pathways, making it “much more engaging to young people,” she says.

States still have a long way to go to reach their goals for high school graduation, however: ESSA plans in the Midwest call for overall rates of at least 90 percent, as well as a significant closing of achievement gaps (see table).

According to the latest U.S. Department of Education data, the gap in graduation rates between white and African American students is currently at least 10 percent in every Midwestern state, and more than 20 percent in Minnesota and Wisconsin. There also are 1,300 U.S. high schools where on-time graduation is a “50-50 proposition,” according to a study released last fall as part of the GradNation campaign (an initiative of America’s Promise and other groups). Five states in the Midwest — Illinois, Indiana, Michigan, Ohio and Wisconsin — had high concentrations of these “low graduation” schools.

Under ESSA (the U.S. education law signed in late 2015), states must identify and provide support to high schools with graduation rates of 67 percent or less, as well as schools where certain subgroups of students are performing poorly. Unlike previous federal law, though, states are left to decide the policy responses, in terms of both how to help these struggling schools and to hold them accountable.

Kincheloe recommends that states focus on building new partnerships that address all of the barriers — including non-academic factors such as chronic absenteeism, economic instability and trauma — that can keep students from finishing school. “It’s not just about the school; it’s about the community as well,” she says.

Great Lakes

Ohio putting more dollars into reuse of dredged materials, as ban on open-lake disposal looms

By July of next year, a practice in Ohio’s commercial harbors will no longer be allowed — the dumping of dredged materials into the open waters of Lake Erie.

This ban is the result of a bill passed by the legislature in 2015 (SB 1), and is part of the state’s broader efforts to keep excess nutrients from entering the shallowest of the Great Lakes, causing harmful algal blooms and degrading water quality.

The legislative action from four years ago, along with subsequent funding commitments, has led to an unprecedented effort in the state to find beneficial uses of these materials — the rock, sand, gravel, mud and clay removed from the bottom of shipping channels to keep them safe for navigation.

Earlier this year, the state announced the awarding of close to $10 million for three Ohio port communities’ dredging-related projects. The city of Lorain, for example, will get $4 million to construct a facility where dredged materials will be sent and then reused for soil at an adjacent brownfield site, The (Cleveland) Plain Dealer reports.

In all, the state will spend $20 million on projects like these over the course of the biennium. The money comes from a mix of capital funding and general fund dollars authorized under SB 299, a bill passed by lawmakers in 2018 to finance various Lake Erie protection initiatives.

David Emerman, who manages the Lake Erie Dredged Material Program for the Ohio Environmental Protection Agency, says three types of uses have been identified by the state: “dredge to habitat,” “dredge to marketable soil,” and “dredge to farmland.”

In Toledo, a Dredged Material Center for Innovation has opened and is testing the use of these materials to enhance soil quality on agricultural land and to prevent nutrient runoff. The center also is researching the feasibility of dredged materials being used in blended soil products.

Every year, about 1.5 million cubic yards of material is dredged from Ohio’s eight federal navigation channels; activity at Toledo Harbor accounts for 25 percent of all dredging in the Great Lakes.

According to the Great Lakes Dredging Team, a partnership of state and federal agencies from across the basin, anywhere from 30 to 50 percent of the sediment dredged from harbors and channels currently is placed in the open waters of the Great Lakes. Other management practices include placing the materials in confined disposal facilities or using them to combat beach erosion and restore habitat.

Issue Briefs cover topics of interest to the various groups and policy committees of CSG Midwest, which provides staff support to the Midwestern Legislative Conference, Great Lakes-St. Lawrence Legislative Caucus, Midwest Interstate Passenger Rail Commission and Midwestern Radioactive Materials Transportation Committee.
Agriculture & Natural Resources

States reviewing hemp laws in wake of changes at federal level that removed production barriers

For decades, the lack of a commercial hemp industry has made the United States an outlier among most of the world’s developed countries. That may soon change, and some states in the Midwest have already been pursuing policies to ensure their farmers can make the most of this new market opportunity.

“Hemp could be a valuable crop,” North Dakota Rep. Dennis Johnson says, “but we need processors and market diversity and reliable regulations.”

“The 2018 farm bill goes a long way toward doing this.”

Enacted at the end of last year, the new law legalizes industrial hemp (it must have a THC concentration level of below 0.3 percent), allowing for market-scale cultivation and the interstate sale of products. In another important change for producers, the new farm bill allows hemp to be included in federal crop insurance.

What is the role for states?

Some may choose to serve as the primary regulatory authority of hemp production, by establishing a licensing system that conforms with federal guidelines and that gets approved by the U.S. Department of Agriculture. This is the purpose of legislation introduced in early 2019 in states such as North Dakota (HB 1349), Minnesota (HB 303) and Indiana (HB 1385 and SB 546). To conform with federal guidelines, any state-run licensing programs must include restrictions on locations, THC testing procedures, and plans for crop disposal and farm inspection. In states that don’t request to have their own regulatory and licensing programs, hemp growers will be able to apply directly to the USDA.

But to grow hemp legally, growers must also live in a state that permits production. At least as of early 2019, prohibitions on this activity were still in place in some Midwestern states.

The trend in recent years, though, has been a loosening of state restrictions. For example, after the 2014 federal farm bill began allowing for smaller-scale research and pilot projects, most states in the Midwest followed with legislation of their own.

And over the past two years — prior to passage of the new farm bill — legislators in states such as Illinois (SB 2298), Michigan (HB 6330, HB 6331 and HB 6380) and Wisconsin (SB 119) passed laws to allow for hemp farming and state-run licensing systems. (Michigan voters also legalized industrial hemp via a ballot measure this fall.)

In contrast, in states such as Iowa, Ohio and South Dakota, statutory language does not differentiate marijuana and hemp. As a result, hemp production is illegal. (As of the end of January, legislation to address hemp production was being discussed in all three of these states, but no bills were close to passing.)

Among the Midwest’s states, North Dakota has long stood out for its policies to allow for industrial hemp production, as well as its legal battles with the U.S. Drug Enforcement Agency over the issue.

Now, federal policy is aligning much more closely with the vision long held by many North Dakota lawmakers and farmers.

“It all comes down to very persistent growers, legislators and agriculture commissioners who saw the value in this crop,” Samantha Brunner of the North Dakota Department of Agriculture says.

Since the 2014 farm bill began permitting pilot research projects, North Dakota and Minnesota have been among the nation’s top-producing states for hemp. Some other Midwestern states are now hoping to join them.

As production increases, processing becomes an important consideration for growers. Cannabidiol (CBD) oil appears to have the greatest potential for profitability among growers because of rising consumer demand for it. However, the sale of CBD oil is illegal in some states — in Nebraska and South Dakota, for example. In states such as Iowa and Ohio, statutory language doesn’t distinguish hemp-produced CBD oil from prescription-required medical marijuana. Discussions related to CBD oil are ongoing in all of these states.

Criminal Justice & Public Safety

Legislation seeks to improve how states handle cases of missing, murdered indigenous people

Two bills introduced early in North Dakota’s 2019 legislative session aim to raise awareness and improve law enforcement’s responses to cases of missing and murdered indigenous people within the state, but outside of tribal lands.

Under HB 1311, the state’s police officers and prosecutors would receive training on these specific types of cases. HB 1313 would require North Dakota’s existing information-sharing system for law enforcement to include “data related to missing and murdered indigenous people.”

The bills are similar in intent to federal legislation that advanced through the U.S. Senate in 2018 before stalling in the U.S. House. Known as Savanna’s Act — named after a Native American pregnant woman from North Dakota who was murdered while living in Fargo — the legislation would have implemented data collection and training standards at the federal level. Another version of Savanna’s Act has been introduced this year.

The federal government investigates and prosecutes most violent crimes committed on tribal lands, while states and localities are responsible for surrounding areas. The overlapping nature of these law enforcement jurisdictions can lead to poor criminal-reporting practices and missing information.

Most Native Americans, too, live in urban areas. Two years ago, the Urban Indian Health Institute sought data from 71 U.S. cities on cases of missing and murdered indigenous women and girls. It identified a total of 506 cases, including 80 in the Midwest, though that number is likely an “undercount,” institute researchers say.

“We do not want to forget about our urban populations,” says Rep. Ruth Buffalo, a Native American woman from Fargo who was elected to the North Dakota Legislature in 2018 and who introduced HB 1311 and 1313 in early 2019.

“Savanna’s murder happened in Fargo. Savanna was a member of a federally recognized tribe, but once you leave the reservation, you lose some of those protections.”

Rep. Buffalo first began working on the issue as the member of a local task force that formed in the wake of Savanna’s disappearance and death. One of her takeaways from the work on that task force: the need for proper data collection and sharing.

“It raises awareness and shows that there is a need for special attention to this issue,” she says, “because if there is no data to be shown, then it looks like there is not an existing problem.”

North Dakota Rep. Ruth Buffalo

Brief written by Mitt Arvidson, staff liaison to the Midwestern Legislative Conference Criminal Justice & Public Safety Committee. He can be reached at marvidson@csg.org.
Seven Midwest governors gave State of the State addresses in January — here is one policy idea from each

1. **Indiana Gov. Holcomb: Help local schools raise pay of state’s teachers**

   To make teacher pay in Indiana competitive with neighboring Midwestern states, Gov. Eric Holcomb told the state General Assembly, policymakers must do more than his proposed 2 percent-a-year boost in K-12 funding. His idea is to use the state’s current surplus to pay off a pension liability of $140 million for local schools. These schools, in turn, would dedicate all of that freed-up money to raise salaries for teachers. Holcomb also is establishing a Next Level Teacher Pay Commission, which will make longer-term recommendations in time for the 2021 legislative session.

2. **Iowa Gov. Reynolds: Cultivate rural growth with more housing, broadband access**

   Iowa Gov. Kim Reynolds focused the Legislature’s attention on two needs in the state’s rural communities: access to high-speed internet and more housing. The state already has an existing grant program that provides up to 15 percent of the costs for broadband projects in underserved/unserved areas. Reynolds proposed spending an additional $20 million over the next two years. She also wants to double the amount of tax credits (up to $10 million) that the state provides to housing developers in rural communities.

3. **Kansas Gov. Kelly: Expand Medicaid to save lives and keep rural hospitals open**

   In making her first pitch to legislators to expand Kansas’ Medicaid program, newly elected Gov. Laura Kelly tied this policy change to the future well-being of the state’s rural hospitals and communities. Such an expansion, she said, would provide affordable care to 150,000 residents and, in the process, help keep rural health facilities open. According to Kelly, up to 30 percent of Kansas hospitals “are considered financially vulnerable.” Kansas is one of three states in the Midwest that has not expanded Medicaid under the U.S. Affordable Care Act. The others are South Dakota and Wisconsin. (Nebraska will expand because of a voter-approved ballot measure this past fall.)

4. **Nebraska Gov. Ricketts: Invest in scholarships that lead students to good jobs**

   Nebraska Gov. Pete Ricketts asked lawmakers to invest in a new scholarship program for students in targeted areas of study. These $4,000 scholarships would be spread among students at the University of Nebraska, the state’s colleges and community colleges. Eligible areas of study would include math and science, health care, information technology, the skilled trades, criminal justice and agriculture. Along with assisting students, Ricketts said, the additional 2,100 scholarships would help Nebraska’s postsecondary schools attract more talent.

5. **North Dakota Gov. Burgum: Address workforce shortage with new career academies**

   North Dakota Gov. Doug Burgum started the legislative year with a speech that emphasized the adverse effects of ongoing workforce shortages in the state. “[It] remains our No. 1 gating factor for economic growth,” he said. Burgum wants part of the state’s policy response to be a new $30 million investment in career academies — partnerships between local K-12 schools and colleges that provide students coursework in high-demand, high-wage fields. His plan for alleviating workforce shortages also includes a scholarship program funded by state and philanthropic sources as well as changes in occupational licensing that make it “easier for people from other states to transfer their skills to North Dakota.”

6. **South Dakota Gov. Noem: Find the “next big thing” to drive the state’s economy**

   Kristi Noem’s first State of the State address as South Dakota’s first female governor included a long list of policy ideas, from broadband to workforce development. But she also presented an overarching challenge: “Search for the next big thing,” an industry sector that can kick-start the state’s economy. She noted that in the early 1980s, South Dakota deliberately changed its laws and regulatory environment to become a hub of the nation’s credit card industry — a move that continues to pay off, Noem says. She wants to identify, and then attract, the “next big industry.” In her speech, she discussed the potential for South Dakota to be an epicenter of value-added agriculture, health and crop technology, and cybersecurity.

7. **Wisconsin Gov. Evers: Commit state to funding two-thirds of school costs**

   Gov. Tony Evers previously served as Wisconsin’s state school superintendent, and K-12 education was a focus of his State of the State address. He asked lawmakers to appropriate more money for education so that the state could fund at least two-thirds of the state-local cost of schools. According to Associated Press reports, the estimated cost to get to that level is $130 million. Evers also pressed the Legislature to invest more in specific areas of education — for example, a fivefold increase in school-based mental health programs and an expansion of early learning and summer school in high-need urban districts. In his speech, Evers proposed an unprecedented $680 million boost in special education funding, saying the state has failed to fully fund these services and “forced local school districts and taxpayers to squeeze resources from other areas.”

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Article written by Tim Anderson, CSG Midwest publications manager. He can be reached at tande@csgrist.org. Future editions of Stateline Midwest will cover the State of the State speeches in Illinois, Michigan, Minnesota and Ohio.

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### Estimated % of Midwest states’ counties that lost housing units between 2010 and 2017

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<thead>
<tr>
<th>State</th>
<th>2010</th>
<th>2017</th>
<th>Change</th>
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<tr>
<td>South Dakota</td>
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### % of state’s population covered by Medicaid, 2017

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<td>Ohio</td>
<td>21%</td>
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<tr>
<td>South Dakota</td>
<td>22%</td>
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</tbody>
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### Revenue for public elementary and secondary schools: State sources vs. local property taxes, 2013–14 school year

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>State</th>
<th>State sources</th>
<th>Local property taxes</th>
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<tr>
<td>Wisconsin</td>
<td>45%</td>
<td>42%</td>
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</tbody>
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*Revenues for K–12 schools also come from federal dollars, other local sources and private sources.*

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*Source: National Center for Education Statistics*
With few exceptions, the Midwest’s legislatures have more women serving in them this year than in 2018. And in six of the region’s states — Illinois, Indiana, Michigan, Nebraska, North Dakota and Ohio — the numbers are at historic highs.

Why the jump? Why is there a gender gap in politics? What kind of effect does more female representation have on policymaking? Those questions have been the subject of much political science research over decades, and the answers are sometimes simple, sometimes complex. Here is what CSG Midwest learned in a interview with Debbie Walsh, director of the Center for American Women and Politics at Rutgers University.

Why the rise in 2019?

The difference in the 2018 elections was that so many more women were on ballots across the country — a total of 3,418 female candidates sought state legislative seats. That is a nearly 480-person jump from the previous election and by far the largest number on record.

“When women run for office, they win at about the same rates as men,” Walsh says.

The gender gap, then, is rooted in what occurs — or doesn’t occur — at the decision-to-run stage. For example, as a group, male candidates tend to seek office based on a general interest in politics, whereas female candidates need to be motivated by a specific policy issue or problem. Women also report higher levels of concern about being able to raise enough campaign money.

The recruitment of candidates has been another barrier. Men are more likely to be asked to run (by party leaders, for example), as well as to run without being asked. One big change in 2018, Walsh says, was that women didn’t wait for the “ask”; they chose to run on their own, motivated by factors such as the 2016 presidential race and the #MeToo Movement.

What’s the difference in legislating?

Every person brings a unique set of life experiences and policy perspectives to his or her role in the legislature, Walsh says, and female officeholders tend to place a greater priority on issues related to families and children.

“Female and male legislators believe that women legislators have a special responsibility to represent women concerns … and that the presence of women has enhanced the representation of women in society and increased the access of other underrepresented groups to the legislature,” the Center for American Women and Politics notes in its study “Poised to Run.”

Men still outnumber women in every U.S. state legislature except one: Nevada. In the Midwest, Illinois women and politics notes in its study “Poised to Run.”

Still outnumber women in every U.S. state legislature except one: Nevada. In the Midwest, Illinois women and politics notes in its study “Poised to Run.”

The most recent election cycle — a drop in representation by Republican women. “We’re not going to get to parity without female legislators from both parties,” she says.

Capital Closeup is an ongoing series of articles focusing on institutional issues in state governments and legislatures. Previous articles are available at csgmidwest.org.
New federal law will support local oral health initiatives

Beyond the Affordable Care Act, federal legislation in recent years regarding oral health care has focused on improving access to care rather than expanding insurance coverage.

Late last year, the Action for Dental Health Act of 2018 (H.R. 2422) was signed into law. It will allow more groups and organizations to qualify for federal grants to develop programs and expand access to oral health education and care in states and tribal areas. The new law also authorizes those grant programs through federal fiscal year 2022 and provides $13.9 million a year through 2023.

Grantees are expected to include dentistry and hygiene programs working in rural and under-served locales, organizations helping to increase oral health literacy and disease prevention in low-income and minority communities, and mobile/portable dental projects to deliver care to patients in settings such as nursing homes and schools.

As of late January, legislation introduced in the new congressional session included:

- S.22, which would create a new dental benefit for seniors under Medicare (Part B) by repealing the Social Security Act’s statutory exclusion on Medicare coverage of dental care and dentures;
- H.R. 576, which would expand Medicare coverage beyond the federal Community Health Care program, which works in under-served communities and includes oral health care; and
- S.192, which would extend fundamental dental coverage for the federal Community Health Care program, which works in under-served communities and includes oral health care; and for the National Health Service Corps, which provides scholarships for medical students, including those in dental school.

Other states, other steps

In Illinois, SB 2587 (signed into law in 2018) added dentists to the list of practitioners allowed to use telemedicine. Ohio did likewise in January when SB 259 was signed at the end of the Legislature’s lame-duck session.

Examples of recent legislation and other activity in Midwest related to oral health care access

**Wisconsin**
- Gov. Scott Walker signed SB 287 in April 2018, allowing dentists to reimburse dental therapists for their services.
- SB 404, signed by Walker in April 2018, would authorize dental therapists to perform certain procedures without a dentist’s supervision, such as in mobile dental vans.
- SB 538 (of 2018) would allow state-funded dental therapy programs to extend to more communities.

**Iowa**
- Gov. Dan Reilly signed SF 287 in March 2018, adding dental therapists to the list of medical professionals eligible to use telemedicine.
- SB 98 (of 2017), which would have authorized dental therapists, died in the Senate. HB 184 (also of 2017) expands the procedures a dental hygienist can perform without a supervising dentist’s consent.

**Kansas**
- In March 2017, Gov. Pete Ricketts signed LB 340 into law; the law allows dental hygienists to place sealants on children’s teeth in school-based programs without prior examination by a dentist.

**Michigan**
- In February 2017, Gov. Rick Snyder signed HB 5552 into law, which allows dental therapists to perform certain procedures without a supervising dentist’s consent.

**Minnesota**
- In March 2017, Gov. Mark Dayton signed HF 1205 into law; it requires health insurance plans issued after Jan. 1, 2019, to cover anesthesia and hospital or ambulatory surgery.
- In February 2017, Minn. House of Reps. voted down HB 1256, which would have allowed dental therapists (while SB 312 passed the Senate unanimously, it didn’t get a vote in the House).

**Nebraska**
- In March 2017, Gov. Pete Ricketts signed HB 1516 into law, which allows dental hygienists to perform certain procedures without a supervising dentist’s consent.

**South Dakota**
- In February 2018, S.D. House of Reps. voted down HB 1350, which would have allowed dental therapists to perform certain procedures without a supervising dentist’s consent.

**Wisconsin**
- In February 2017, Wis. House of Reps. voted down SB 404, which would have allowed dental therapists to perform certain procedures without a supervising dentist’s consent.

**North Dakota**
- In February 2017, N.D. House of Reps. voted down HB 1256, which would have allowed dental therapists.

**South Dakota**
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**Wisconsin**
- In February 2017, Wis. House of Reps. voted down SB 404, which would have allowed dental therapists to perform certain procedures without a supervising dentist’s consent.
“We know there are situations, especially in rural areas, where [people] don’t have access, where a dentist can [remotely] supervise a dental hygienist working in a nursing home or in a mental health facility,” says Illinois Sen. Dave Syverson, one of SB 2587’s sponsors and ranking member on the Senate’s Human Services and Public Health committees. “We added [dentists], knowing things are changing.”

Syverson says legislators are now negotiating “a complete rewrite” of Illinois’ telemedicine law to clarify and broadly codify who can use telemedicine and under what circumstances, to keep abreast and possibly ahead of the changing technology.

And while the state’s 2019 budget includes (for the first time) funding of dental prevention services for adult Medicaid recipients — and requires reimbursement rates to comply with a 2005 court decree from the case Memisovski v. Maran — Syverson says legislators will also look at adjusting the state’s dental reimbursement rates in 2019.

“Even with some adjustment, the reimbursement rate will still be so low that general dentists will be willing to see [Medicaid] patients,” he warns. “But, having said that, we have dental schools that see patients, we have federal health centers that see patients, and you have a number of family practice dentists who will see patients pro bono.”

In 2015, Illinois passed HB 500, which allows registered dental hygienists to place sealants on children’s teeth in school-based programs without the prior examination of a dentist. The idea is to let sealant programs run more efficiently, saving the state money, and to get more children access to treatment in a shorter amount of time.

Indiana HB 1116, which took effect July 1, allows dental hygienists to perform oral care procedures, such as annual cleanings, if they have a collaborative agreement with a practicing dentist, says Rep. Dave Frizzell, its main sponsor.

The legislation came from a collaboration between dentists and hygienists after Frizzell told them to work together if they wanted anything to advance in the legislature — a model he says will also be used for future measures.

“If you want to move forward with this stuff, you have to come together,” Frizzell says. “We always want to come with best practices, and I’m sure we looked at other states, but the dentists and hygienists came up with most of it on their own.”

In Ohio, HB 675 (of 2018) would have allowed counties and municipalities to devote a portion of property tax revenue to establish “Hope for a Smile” programs that deliver basic dental services to school-age children and elderly residents via mobile clinics. Ohio’s Dental Association also worked with legislators to double funding for the Ohio Dentist Loan Repayment Program, whose money comes from a surcharge on dental license renewal fees.

HB 463 (of 2014) doubled the surcharge from $20 to $40. That fund, and the Ohio Dental Hygienist Loan Repayment Program, offer loan repayment assistance to new dentists and dental hygienists who commit to practice for a minimum of two years at an eligible site in a Dental Health Professional Shortage Area or Dental Health Resource Shortage Area, accept Medicaid, and see patients regardless of ability to pay.

Iowa’s Department of Public Health launched the I-Smile program in 2006, one year after a law was signed requiring regular access to oral health care for children ages 12 and younger. The program contracts with 23 private and public nonprofit organizations that serve as the state’s Title V (a federal block grant) maternal and child health program. State-licensed dental hygienists serve as local coordinators.

According to I-Smile’s report for 2017 (the most recent one available), 128,338 Medicaid-enrolled children received dental services from dentists that year, up 57,145 from 2005, the year before the program began. Another 33,362 children received services from dental hygienists or nurses, up 25,499 from 2005, the report said.

Access via education
Expanding access to oral health care also requires more outreach and public education about what services and clinics are already available, Grover says.

For example, she adds, if you look at the number of existing Federally Qualified Health Centers (federally funded, community-based clinics providing primary and preventative services to patients regardless of ability to pay) and dental/hygienist school clinics offering services at minimal fees, there are already more access points than people realize.

States can also create better overall access to oral health care by ensuring that dentists or hygienists are included in community primary care and outreach teams and placed in federally qualified health centers, Grover says.

States that provide dental care for adults in their Medicaid programs should include dentists in advising or supervising dental care, and lower the hurdles for dentists to get accredited for participation in Medicaid, she adds.

“Operational efficiencies and those reforms are two ways states can enhance access to care,” Grover says.

“Patients need to be connected to oral care. People need to understand the importance of oral health.

“You’re talking about value-based, outcome-based, quality care. Those outcomes are enhanced when you have quality oral health,” she says. “Oral health is integrative to overall health.”

**ACG, CHIP, Medicaid, EPSDT? What federal law requires for children’s access to oral health**

Federal law is specific about dental services for children — they are required both under states’ Medicaid programs and the Children’s Health Insurance Program (CHIP).

The Affordable Care Act deems dental coverage an essential health benefit for children age 18 and younger, meaning insurance policies must cover it, but not an essential benefit for adults.

Stand-alone dental insurance plans are not eligible for ACA subsidies, however. Nor can people purchase such a plan from the federal or most states’ ACA exchanges on its own, whether first having, or buying, full health care coverage. Colorado, Connecticut, Maryland and Vermont are currently the only exceptions to that restriction on stand-alone dental plans.

Required Medicaid services for individuals under the age of 21 are collectively known as the “Early and Periodic Screening, Diagnostic and Treatment” (EPSDT) benefit. According to the U.S. Centers for Medicare & Medicaid Services, that means “at a minimum, dental services include relief of pain and infections, restoration of teeth, and maintenance of dental health. Dental services may not be limited to emergency services.”

Under federal rules, all “medically necessary” services must be covered. States, however, determine medical necessity. But if a condition requiring treatment is discovered during a Medicaid-covered screening, the state must provide the necessary services to treat that condition, whether services are included in a state’s Medicaid plan or not.

States are also required to develop dental periodicity schedules — lists of which procedures should be done at specific ages — in consultation with recognized dental organizations involved in child health. According to the American Academy of Pediatric Dentistry, all Midwestern states, save Ohio, use its dental periodicity schedule.

Under CHIP, states can cover children either via Medicaid or other programs apart from Medicaid. CHIP coverage follows those rules; non-Medicaid programs must include services “necessary to prevent disease and promote oral health, restore oral structures to health and function, and treat emergency conditions.”

**States with non-Medicaid CHIP programs have two options for providing dental coverage: a package of dental benefits that meets the CHIP requirements, or a “benchmark” dental benefit package that must be substantially equal to the most popular federal employee dental plan for dependents; the most popular plan selected for dependents in the state’s employee dental plan; or dental coverage offered through the most popular commercial insurer in the state.**

States must also post a listing of all participating Medicaid and CHIP dental providers and benefit packages at the website InsureKidsNow.gov.
North Dakota Rep. Chet Pollert
Veteran of North Dakota House enters 20th year with new leadership position and duties, but with same views on legislating to guide him

by Laura Tomaka (ltomaka@csg.org)

Chet Pollert has come to expect the unexpected as a 20-year member of the North Dakota House. When he first joined the Legislature, in his ranking of top interests for serving on a policy committee, Pollert placed human services at the bottom of the list. But he got appointed to the committee anyway. The end result? Pollert ultimately became a legislative leader on human services issues and an important advocate for the state’s developmentally disabled.

“My least desirable choice was what I ended up chairing for many sessions,” Pollert says, noting his role as chair of House appropriations for the Human Resources Division. “And I have to say, I did enjoy it and working with the Department of Human Services, which has the largest budget in the state.”

His most recent leadership ascension may have surprised a younger Pollert even more: He is the state’s new House majority leader, after colleagues chose him for the position in late 2018.

“I look back at [my start in the Legislature], and I would have never thought that I would be doing this,” Pollert says. “I was always kind of a quiet person. I do my work and I move on.”

Quiet, but clearly well-respected by fellow House members.

Pollert describes himself as a “straightforward, handshake kind of person”— traits that he expects to mark his style as the legislative leader of a Republican House caucus that holds 79 of the 94 seats in North Dakota’s lower legislative chamber.

“We’ve got some ultra-conservative, conservative and moderate [members],” Pollert says. “It’s a very diverse group of Republicans, and I have to get them to come together in a unified manner. I wouldn’t say it’s a struggle, but it’s a challenge.”

Prior to running for a House seat in 1998, Pollert had no background in politics, but he was a respected business leader — for his work as the general manager at a grain elevator, as past chairman of the North Dakota Grain Dealers Association, and, finally, as the owner and operator of his own business, G & R Grain and Feed.

That work led others to approach him about a run for office. It was an idea that Pollert had first thought about himself as a young man growing up in the North Dakota town of Pingree.

When he was a senior in high school, Pollert earned a Constitution Award. Dave Nething, a well-known state legislator at the time, presented it to him.

“He handed that award to me,” Pollert recalls, “and I thought, ‘Man, that’s pretty awesome. Maybe someday I’ll get a chance to do that.’”

Pollert got that chance, and he’s making the most of it. In a recent interview with CSG Midwest, he talked about his new role in leadership, legislative priorities for 2019, and some of his policy accomplishments of the past. Here are excerpts.
New state investment paves way for broadband connectivity in rural areas

Indiana law from 2018 is providing mix of grants, technical assistance

by Indiana Sen. Erin Houchin (Senator.Houchin@iga.in.gov)

Shortly after being elected to the Indiana State Senate in 2014, I was invited to speak with a group of students at a local school. When I mentioned that one of my top priorities was expanding broadband access in unserved areas of Indiana, I asked the group if they knew where broadband access was lacking most in our state. One student raised his hand and said, “My backyard?” He wasn’t wrong.

Over the past two decades, access to the internet has become a necessity for people across the country. Many companies, organizations and schools have gone paperless or are well on their way. Without reliable access to high-speed internet, our friends and neighbors in rural America are being left behind.

While terrestrial broadband infrastructure has increased in Indiana in recent years, some areas are still completely unserved, affecting hundreds of thousands of Indiana residents — many of whom live in southern Indiana, which I represent.

It is nearly impossible to participate in today’s technology-driven society and economy without high-speed internet, and lack of access denies many people of what are now considered basic functions. For example, children don’t have the ability to enjoy an equal education, and the elderly and those experiencing health care issues are denied the ability to connect to home health care technology.

This lack of access is also a major threat to small businesses and farm operations, both of which are crucial to my home state’s economy. According to the Federal Communications Commission, as of 2016, more than 40 percent of rural Hoosiers lacked access to broadband with speeds at 25 megabits per second. In contrast, less than 3 percent of urban residents in Indiana lack access to those same speeds. This puts our rural communities at a disadvantage, keeping them from succeeding in the realms of business, education, health care, agriculture and more.

Getting a broadband bill to finish line

Expanding broadband access seems like common-sense, but there is little incentive for providers to spend their time, money and capital investing in rural communities — even though the residents in these areas are in clear need of internet access. In many conversations with stakeholders, I was told the return on investment simply was not there for broadband expansion in rural areas, yet no one at that time was interested in supporting public dollars being used for broadband projects.

To bring various parties to the negotiating table, I authored SB 356, which ultimately passed as HEA 1065 during the 2018 legislative session. Under this new law, we created a matching grant program for qualifying broadband deployment projects in unserved areas of the state. The enacted measure also defines upload and download speeds for “qualified broadband service” as specified by the FCC.

I was please that many stakeholders — including those who had opposed previous efforts — ultimately helped craft and support the final bill. Although only a handful of other states had programs similar to this before our legislation, I knew this innovative idea would improve Indiana by helping to fund and incentivize rural broadband deployment.

Unfortunately, the process of coming to an agreement on this legislation in the Indiana General Assembly proved difficult and time-consuming. While high-speed internet is not a problem for all areas of our state, it certainly is for southern Indiana and other regions. It may not be a priority for all legislators, but it is for my constituents, and that is why I have worked to author broadband legislation each year I have served in the General Assembly.

SB 356 passed out of committee in the Senate, but did not receive a hearing in the House. HB 1065, which was written by the chairman of the House Committee on Utilities, Energy and Telecommunications, was subsequently stripped, with the language from SB 356 being amended into HB 1065.

Once amended, the bill was sent to a conference committee, where we continued negotiations on several different versions well into the night on the last day of the 2018 legislative session.

After an enormous amount of negotiation with stakeholders and legislators, an acceptable committee report for HB 1065 was passed by both chambers less than two hours from midnight, at which point the bill would have died if a consensus had not been reached.

Delivering grants to rural communities

Following the passage of HB 1065, Indiana’s Office of Community and Rural Affairs awarded the first Broadband Readiness Pilot Grant to five communities in September.

These communities (one of which is located in the Senate district that I represent) will receive grants of $50,000 and be provided with technical assistance from the Purdue Center for Regional Development.

These measures are a critical step toward Indiana reaching our goal of having broadband internet access available to all Hoosier communities, no matter how rural they may be. With reliable access, families, students, farmers, entrepreneurs and businesses alike will be able to utilize the internet and take advantage of the real-life connections and opportunities it provides.

Before HEA 1065, we had no way of ensuring federal broadband funding would be prioritized for unserved communities, thus leaving the possibility that communities that already have terrestrial broadband would get the money instead. This legislation provides the needed framework to prioritize federal funding for unserved areas as well as matching grants and technical assistance to help deploy high-speed broadband internet.

In 2019, high-speed internet is critical for all Americans, and this technology is often taken for granted in urban areas where access is easily available. This legislation brought my vision to life: a public-private partnership where communities, providers and the state all contribute to bringing access to unserved communities. It remains a priority of mine to ensure Hoosiers have access to this vital service, and I will continue working with my colleagues around the state to bridge the digital divide between urban and rural Indiana.

Indiana Sen. Erin Houchin was first elected to the Indiana Senate in 2014. She is a 2018 graduate of CSG Midwest’s Bowhay Institute for Legislative Leadership Development (BILLD).

Submissions welcome

This page is designed to be a forum for legislators and constitutional officers. The opinions expressed on this page do not reflect those of The Council of State Governments or the Midwestern Legislative Conference. Responses to any FirstPerson article are welcome, as are pieces written on other topics. For more information, contact Tim Anderson at 630.925.1922 or tanderson@csg.org.
Midwest’s state, provincial legislators will meet July 21-24 in Chicago

Registration for nonpartisan, family-friendly MLC Annual Meeting has begun; a discount for attendees is available through May 10

Registration for the premier event for the Midwest’s state and provincial legislators is now open and can be completed at csgmidwest.org.

The Midwestern Legislative Conference Annual Meeting will be held July 21-24 in Chicago. The nonpartisan, family-friendly event — held every year since 1945 — annually attracts hundreds of legislators.

Speakers already confirmed for this year’s meeting include:

- Bryan Stevenson, executive director of the Equal Justice Initiative and author of “Just Mercy,” who will give a keynote presentation on criminal justice policy and reform.

Special evening events at premier Chicago venues, including the Adler Planetarium and the Shedd Aquarium, will be held for all attendees, and separate daytime programming will be available for the adult and youth guests of attendees. This year’s host hotel is the Chicago Marriott Downtown Magnificent Mile.

The meeting will feature a mix of sessions on public policy, presentations by featured speakers and leading policy experts, and professional development workshops. One of those sessions will focus on state strategies to encourage civic engagement — the subject of the 2019 MLC Chair’s Initiative of Illinois Sen. Elgie Sims.

A discount on meeting registration is available through May 10.

Caucus to hold series of meetings on water policy for Great Lakes legislators

In the months ahead, the binational, nonpartisan Great Lakes Legislative Caucus is planning to hold a series of events to help the region’s legislators make informed, science-based decisions on water policy.

The group’s free, web-based meetings are open to all legislators, legislative staff and interested others. They begin on March 1 with a focus on effective measures to reduce lead in drinking water. Other web meetings of the caucus have been scheduled for June 7, Sept. 6 and Dec. 6.

Registration information is available at the online Events Calendar of CSG Midwest (csgmidwest.org), which provides staff support to the caucus. Recordings of these web-based meetings also will be available.

The GLLC Annual Meeting will be held Sept. 13-14 in Chicago. Registration opens later in the year. In addition, the caucus is set to launch the inaugural Patricia Berkholtz Institute for Great Lakes-St. Lawrence Policy. This event, to be held later this year in Michigan, will focus on reducing nutrient pollution.

Caucus membership is free and open to any legislator representing a Great Lakes state or province. More information is available at greatlakeslegislators.org.

The caucus is led by a committee of legislators from each of the 10 jurisdictions in the Great Lakes region. Indiana Sen. Ed Charbonneau serves as chair, and Illinois Rep. Robyn Gabel is the vice chair.

The Council of State Governments was founded in 1933 as a national, nonpartisan organization to assist and advance state government. The headquarters office, in Lexington, Ky., is responsible for a variety of national programs and services, including research, reference publications, innovation transfer, suggested state legislation and interstate consulting services. The Midwestern Office supports several groups of state officials, including the Midwestern Legislative Conference, an association of all legislators in 11 states: Illinois, Indiana, Iowa, Kansas, Michigan, Minnesota, Nebraska, North Dakota, Ohio, South Dakota and Wisconsin. The Canadian provinces of Alberta, Manitoba, Ontario and Saskatchewan are MLC affiliate members.

74TH ANNUAL MEETING OF THE MIDWESTERN LEGISLATIVE CONFERENCE

Event details
• Premier meeting for the Midwest’s state and provincial legislators
• Mix of sessions on public policy and professional development, as well as renowned speakers
• Family-friendly event with activities for spouses, adult guests and children of attendees

Visit csgmidwest.org or call CSG Midwest at 600.925.1922 for more information

25TH ANNUAL BOWHAY INSTITUTE FOR LEGISLATIVE LEADERSHIP DEVELOPMENT (BILLD)
August 9-13, 2019 — Minneapolis, Minnesota

Application deadline: April 10

Event details
• Program designed for legislators in their first four years of service
• Includes legislator-focused training on leadership, professional development and public policy
• BILLD Fellows chosen through competitive application process
• Applications available at csgmidwest.org

Visit csgmidwest.org or call CSG Midwest senior program manager Laura Tomaka at 600.925.1922 for more information

CSG HENRY TOLL FELLOWSHIP PROGRAM
August 23-28, 2019 — Lexington, Kentucky

Event details
• One of nation’s premier leadership programs for state government officials
• Designed to stimulate personal assessment and growth, while providing priceless networking and relationship-building opportunities
• Toll Fellows chosen through competitive application process

Visit csg.org for more information

GREAT LAKES-ST. LAWRENCE LEGISLATIVE CAUCUS ANNUAL MEETING
September 13-14, 2019 — Chicago, Illinois

Event details
• Meeting for state and provincial legislators that focuses on protecting, restoring Great Lakes
• Visit greatlakeslegislators.org or contact Lisa Janairo at gllc@csg.org for more information
6 ‘keepsakes’ for working with the media — your conduit to neighbors and constituents

When I walked into the conference room, there was a collective “hrmph!” from the hundreds gathered.

Such is the life when you’re a political reporter entering a conference of county board members who feel they’re constantly misquoted, misunderstood and, overall, mistreated by their local media. People tired of reading about how a tax cut was called a tax credit or seeing the expiration of part-time and fixed-term jobs called “layoffs.”

Dealing with the media is not as difficult as you might think. We are your neighbors. We are your constituents. The biggest difference being, we share your information to large numbers of your neighbors and your constituents, and it’s extremely important you make sure we get it right.

Here are a few easy tips to remember in dealing with the media.

1. Keep it simple

This is the fundamental rule you learned in high school English, except there was one more “S” word attached at the end of the sentence. Chances are most people don’t understand what a TIF district is or that FTE stands for full-time employee. We all have professional lingo we use in our own worlds that outsiders would need a translator to decipher. Use common language you’d use with friends or family, not colleagues.

2. Keep it personal

My goal was to cover the capital outside of the capital: Find the people, places and things impacted by proposed legislation and you have compelling, real-life stories. Your stories are more likely to make sure your stories are released either before or as they’re happening. If it’s not new, it’s likely not going to be covered.

3. Keep it timely

The root of the word “news” is “new.” Don’t call a reporter with stories that happened a week ago. There’s a competitive edge to being first, and journalists and their bosses like to win. We like to feel as if we’re on the cutting edge of what’s going on in our communities. Humor us by being timely. It’s to your benefit to make sure your stories are released either before or as they’re happening. If it’s not new, it’s likely not going to be covered.

4. Keep it friendly

I like it when government folks call to tell me what they’re working on or see how I’m doing. We all understand how the game is played. It’s a relationship game. Find individual reporters whose work you like and develop relationships with them. It’s much easier to get a story done by饥饿 a reporter whom you know and with whom you’ve worked in the past, than it is to blindly send it to five people in a newsroom with whom you have no relationship.

5. Keep it truthful

Please don’t tell me something that’s misleading or flat-out untrue. It does a disservice to you and to our relationship. Nothing steams reporters more than when they feel they’ve been lied to. If you can’t tell me something, be up-front and just say that. That’s much better than lying.

6. Keep it up

My high school basketball coach always used to tell me, “You can’t score if you don’t shoot.” Media members’ phones, social media feeds and emails are open to your story ideas. Please don’t assume a reporter knows about a story. I can’t tell you how many times I’ve heard from bureaucrats saying, “Why didn’t you cover (fill in the blank)?” The No. 1 reason is that I didn’t know about it.

Apply now for 2019 BILLD

Applications for the 25th annual Bowhay Institute for Legislative Leadership Development (BILLD) are due April 16. State lawmakers from the Midwest in their first four years of service are encouraged to apply to compete for one of the 37 fellowships that will be awarded through a competitive process. The program will take place Aug. 9-13 in Minneapolis. Fellowships cover the cost of tuition, lodging and meals, as well as a partial travel stipend to take part in the five-day, interactive program. Visit csgmidwest.org for the application and more information.

Become a BILLD sponsor

BILLD is made possible by funding from corporate and foundation sponsors who believe in the importance of providing legislators with the tools necessary to improve their leadership and policymaking skills. The institute is an excellent opportunity for the private sector to support the premier educational endeavor for newer legislators in the Midwest. BILLD offers a range of sponsorship levels and widely recognizes its partners during the five-day institute and through a variety of BILLD publications. Visit csgmidwest.org for sponsorship information.
Two Midwest states have two very different new laws on guns

Within weeks of being sworn into office, two of the Midwest’s newly elected governors took action on gun legislation, though the two measures have very different aims.

South Dakota’s SB 47 was the first bill signed into law by Gov. Kristi Noem. It allows individuals to carry a concealed handgun without a permit. South Dakota joins two other Midwestern states (Kansas and North Dakota are the others) with so-called “constitutional carry” laws, according to the National Rifle Association. South Dakota still has restrictions on who can carry a concealed weapon, the (Sioux Falls) Argus Leader reports, and individuals may still want a permit for reciprocity with other states.

One of the first actions taken by Illinois’ new governor, J.B. Pritzker, was the signing of SB 137, which allows the state to regulate gun dealers and to gather information on private sales and illegal gun transfers. With the new law in place, gun dealers must be certified by Illinois State Police and provide annual training to employees. Gun store also must have a video surveillance system. The cost of certification is up to $100 for sellers without a retail location and up to $1,500 for retailers, the Chicago Tribune reports. According to the Giffords Law Center to Prevent Violence, Indiana and Wisconsin also require gun dealers to obtain state licenses.

Iowa mulls changing Constitution to restore voting rights of felons

The only state in the Midwest that does not automatically restore the voting rights of people with criminal felony convictions is considering a change in this policy, via an amendment to its Constitution.

Iowa Gov. Kim Reynolds proposed the idea in her Condition of the State address, and it has since been the subject of legislative committee hearings. According to the Des Moines Register, Iowa and Kentucky are currently the only two U.S. states where a felon is permanently disenfranchised, minus an action taken by the governor or president. One question for Iowa lawmakers is whether to make the restoration of voting rights contingent on individuals repaying all court-ordered restitution.

In its 50-state list of laws that govern the right of people with criminal convictions to vote, the Brennan Center for Justice places the other 10 Midwestern states into one of two categories:

• Voting rights restored upon completion of sentence, including prison, parole and probation — Kansas, Minnesota, Nebraska (with a two-year waiting period after completion of sentence), South Dakota and Wisconsin.

• Voting rights restored automatically after release from prison — Illinois, Indiana, Michigan, North Dakota and Ohio.

At least three Midwest states to lose seats in next reapportionment

The Midwest is expected to lose three congressional seats and electoral college votes — and maybe more — during the nation’s next reapportionment, the political consulting firm Election Data Services notes in its most recent analysis of population trends. The firm’s findings are based on U.S. Census Bureau estimates from December. That data show Illinois, Michigan and Minnesota losing one seat each. Ohio also loses one when trends are projected to 2020 — the year when populations are calculated to determine each state’s number of U.S. House seats. These numbers also impact the distribution of federal funds to states and local communities.

Minnesota’s population grew at a faster rate than the nation’s between 2017 and 2018; if this trend continues, its seat number could be unchanged in the next reapportionment. On the flip side, Illinois appears close to losing two seats.

The Midwest and Northeast have been losing congressional seats and electoral college votes for decades. In 1972, for example, this 11-state region held 133 Electoral College votes; that has since been the subject of legislative committee hearings. According to the Des Moines Register, Iowa and Kentucky are currently the only two U.S. states where a felon is permanently disenfranchised, minus an action taken by the governor or president. One question for Iowa lawmakers is whether to make the restoration of voting rights contingent on individuals repaying all court-ordered restitution.

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Ohio intensifies efforts to help rising number of children in foster care

The opioid crisis in Ohio has made the need for foster care families greater than ever, and the state launched a new website and public awareness campaign in January to get more children placed in safe, loving homes.

Ohio has nearly 16,000 children in the custody of county children services agencies. Since 2013, the number of children entering the state’s foster care system has risen 24 percent. Many of these individuals are quite young — 17 percent of the foster care population is under 12 months of age and 35 percent is 3 years old and younger.

Two years ago, with passage of HB 49, Ohio legislators created a Foster Care Advisory Group. That group, in turn, recommended the new statewide awareness campaign and website. Its other ideas include establishing formal rights for foster caregivers (in state statute or administrative code), providing bonuses to families with years of proven service, and increasing mentoring and training opportunities.

Nationwide, substance abuse-related problems have caused a spike in foster care caseloads — a rise of 10 percent between 2012 and 2016. During this time period, foster care populations rose by more than 50 percent in six U.S. states, including Indiana and Minnesota, according to the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services.