States eye new investments, programs and statutory changes that could improve connectivity in Midwest

by Tim Anderson (tanderson@csg.org)

Across the Midwest, state legislators have heard stories about the promise of high-speed broadband, and the problems of having inadequate or no connections at all.

In her home state, Sen. Jennifer Shilling says, family-owned dairies in rural Wisconsin have been able to expand product sales well beyond state and even national borders — thanks to having a strong Internet presence.

But at the same time, she has talked to emergency responders in rural parts of her district who couldn’t find a nearby Internet connection reliable enough to simply complete a state-mandated certification course.

Minnesota Democratic Sen. Matt Schmit sees the potential of high-speed broadband to do everything from improving K-12 instruction to helping keep seniors in their homes years longer with advances in telehealth.

But on a tour late last year of different communities in rural Minnesota, he heard stories about the lack of connectivity in rural health clinics and the inability of students to complete schoolwork at home due to a lack of Internet access.

“We’ve spent a lot of time talking about the needs and identifying the problem,” Schmit says, “now it’s time to do something.”

The timing may indeed be right for states to take on a greater role on issues surrounding broadband deployment and access.

For one, federal broadband dollars in the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act have largely been allocated and spent. Second, many states are now on more sound financial footing. Third, some lawmakers are increasingly viewing broadband access as an economic and quality-of-life imperative.

“Generally, when we talk about investments in infrastructure, we think about roads and bridges, water and sewer,” says Shilling, a Democrat. “But broadband should be on the list of infrastructure that we view as critical.”

Iowa Republican Gov. Terry Branstad echoed similar sentiments about the critical need for broadband access this past fall, when he unveiled his Connect Every Iowan project. To compete nationally and internationally, he says, Iowa must deliver to its communities what he calls the “great equalizer” — high-speed connectivity.

The governor’s goal is to move Iowa from near the bottom of Midwestern states on TechNet’s “State Broadband Index” to the top (see map on this page for the state rankings).

“That’s the needle that we have to move,” says Amy Kuhlers, program manager for Connect Iowa.

As a starting point, Kuhlers and other members of an Iowa committee have proposed six recommendations for legislative consideration in 2014. Their ideas include new state tax incentives, loans, grants and regulatory reforms to promote a build-out of broadband by providers. The committee also says the state should provide support for new programs that promote digital literacy and greater broadband adoption.

Iowa is not alone. Broadband policy is being discussed in many other states as well, with policymakers looking to remove the obstacles standing in the way of broader access and adoption.

‘Better than a lot of people think’

On some measures, states and the nation as a whole have made significant strides on broadband deployment. Kansas Republican Sen. Pat Apple credits improved access in his state in part to the proliferation of wireless technology. Meanwhile, even in some of Kansas’ sparsely populated areas, fiber-to-home projects have been completed, he says.

Nationwide, a vast majority of Americans (96.3 percent) now have access to wired broadband, and U.S. adoption of 4G LTE mobile broadband is greater than in any other country in the world.

“We’re actually doing better than a lot of people think,” says Robert Atkinson, president of the Information Technology & Innovation Foundation and co-author of a February 2013 study that compared the state of U.S. broadband with the rest of the world.

“Broadband speeds are improving, he adds, and the cost for consumers compares favorably with that of most other countries. Four years ago, the Minnesota Legislature set a goal of having universal broadband by 2015, with every business and household
Health & Human Services

Midwest’s states, poor families having to make due with lower levels of federal food benefits

Beneficiaries and state officials alike are adjusting to recent changes in how much financial assistance low-income families receive to purchase food. The Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program, formerly known as food stamps, provides nutritional aid to about 47 million—or one in seven—Americans. Under the 2009 federal stimulus bill, monthly benefits were increased by 13.6 percent to boost state economies and help families affected by the recession.

But that temporary increase expired Oct. 31, and Congress did not take action to prevent a return to the pre-stimulus levels of benefits.

SNAP is a major source of support for families and individuals in poverty, and its supporters warn that the cuts will cause hunger among already-struggling families and prevent children from getting nutrition they need to stay healthy and succeed in school. Criticisms of the program include that it does not encourage recipients to work and that rising costs (due in large part to more recipients) contribute to the federal deficit.

The cuts are impacting all recipients—those generally must earn less than 130 percent of the federal poverty level to qualify, though states have discretion under federal law to expand eligibility—and are a historic drop in the amount low-income families receive to buy food.

Prior to the cuts, a qualifying family of four could receive up to $608 per month in nutritional assistance. As of Nov. 1, though, that amount dropped $36. (SNAP benefits now average about $1.40 per person, per meal.)

“[That might seem like] a very small decrease to you or me, but for people who depend on this, it’s critical,” says Jamiea Smith, a spokeswoman for the Illinois Department of Human Services.

In addition to the impact on low-income individuals and families (including 22 million children), the changes have put a strain on states, which administer SNAP with federal dollars.

In the Midwest, states will receive anywhere from $220 million less (in Illinois) to $6 million less (in North Dakota) in program funding, according to the Center on Budget and Policy Priorities.

Meanwhile, states were tasked with notifying beneficiaries about the change, and many state officials are reporting increased levels of inquiries about benefits.

Smith says mailing each of the 2 million beneficiaries in Illinois would have cost about half a million dollars. Instead, her department issued a press release and has relied on media coverage and online updates to help spread word about the cuts. Despite these efforts, she says, the state has received a flood of inquiries.

Brief written by Kate Tormey, staff liaison to the Midwestern Legislative Conference Health & Human Services Committee. She can be reached at ktormey@csg.org. The committee’s co-chairs are Iowa Rep. Joel Fry and Minnesota Sen. Kathy Sheran.

Economic Development

States in region investing more in apprenticeship programs

Apprenticeships—in which an individual is paid to learn a set of skills through on-the-job training—help meet labor demands of businesses, while offering workers higher wages and better employment outcomes.

A December report by the Center for American Progress analyzed the effectiveness and return on investment for apprenticeships. These programs, the study found, not only generate a high level of satisfaction among employers, but also have the potential to increase lifetime earnings for workers—as much as $300,000.

The apprenticeship model, however, is not widely used in the United States. According to the Society for Human Resource Management, less than 5 percent of U.S. secondary-school students take part in apprenticeships.

But the model has begun to attract the attention of more state lawmakers.

In late 2013, the Wisconsin Legislature approved two bills that have since been signed into law. One expands the state’s existing apprenticeship program, while the second creates a new tuition-reimbursement program.

With passage of these proposals, Wisconsin joins a growing number of states expanding apprenticeship programs, according to the Center for American Progress.

SB 336 increases funding for the Wisconsin Youth Apprenticeship Program by $500,000 annually. The program provides on-the-job training and classroom instruction at local high schools. In 2012, the program trained nearly 1,900 apprentices under the guidance of 1,300 employers; 81 percent of the graduates received job offers from the participating employers. Under SB 331, students or employers can receive par-


tial reimbursement (25 percent of tuition, up to $1,000 per apprentice) of costs related to an apprenticeship program that offers on-the-job training and classroom instruction to meet worker and employer needs.

“Apprenticeship programs have long proven to be successful in providing hands-on skills training in a work environment and have been model programs for other states,” says Wisconsin Sen. Sheila Harsdorf, a primary sponsor of the legislation.

In 2014, too, Nebraska, North Dakota and Minnesota took steps to expand internship programs. (According to the National Association of Colleges and Employers, almost six of 10 internships lead to a job offer.)

Minnesota lawmakers approved $2 million for a new tax credit (part of HF 677) for student internships in rural regions of the state. Companies that hire college interns are now eligible for a tax credit of up to 40 percent of the intern’s salary, capped at $2,000 per internship.

North Dakota expanded its Operation Intern program with an additional appropriation of $1.5 million. Nebraska’s LB 746 opened up the Intern Nebraska grant program to all businesses in the state, including nonprofits. It also loosened requirements regarding work hours and the length of internship programs.

Brief written by Laura Tomaka, CSG staff liaison to the Midwestern Legislative Conference Economic Development Committee. She can be reached at ltomaka@csg.org. The committee’s co-chairs are Michigan Rep. Eileen Kowall and Nebraska Sen. Heath Mello.

Impact of SNAP benefit cuts in Midwestern states

Comparison of apprenticeship use, policies in U.S. and Europe

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Feature</th>
<th>United States</th>
<th>Europe</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Average age participants start</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Average length</td>
<td>4 years</td>
<td>6 years</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Primary industries</td>
<td>Manufacturing, construction</td>
<td>All industries, both white- and blue-collar</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Participation</td>
<td>Less than 5% of secondary students</td>
<td>50% to 70% of secondary students</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Government financial involvement</td>
<td>Minimal: Some states provide tax credits or incentives</td>
<td>Heavy: Government subsidizes smaller employers’ programs</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Society for Human Resource Management

Businesses engaging in apprenticeship programs, according to the Center for American Progress.

The DHS has been working to help beneficiaries find other ways to make ends meet, such as providing tips for shopping more frugally and checking local food banks.

Policy experts have raised concerns, too, about the economic impact of the cuts. According to the U.S. Department of Agriculture, every $1 in SNAP benefits generates $1.79 in total economic activity.


Issue Briefs cover topics of interest to the various groups and policy committees of CSG Midwest, which include the Midwestern Legislative Conference, Great Lakes Legislative Caucus, Midwest Interstate Passenger Rail Commission and Midwestern Radioactive Materials Transportation Committee.

Brief written by Kate Tormey, staff liaison to the Midwestern Legislative Conference Health & Human Services Committee. She can be reached at ktormey@csg.org. The committee’s co-chairs are Iowa Rep. Joel Fry and Minnesota Sen. Kathy Sheran.

Brief written by Laura Tomaka, CSG staff liaison to the Midwestern Legislative Conference Economic Development Committee. She can be reached at ltomaka@csg.org. The committee’s co-chairs are Michigan Rep. Eileen Kowall and Nebraska Sen. Heath Mello.
Midwest-Canada Relations

Spice in rail shipments of crude oil, recent derailments prompt push to improve safety standards

E nergy production in North Dakota and Alberta continues to grow, and producers are counting on railroads to help them get crude oil to market. Much of this oil comes to or through the Midwest. While pipelines are widely used and the least expensive way to move oil, there is not enough capacity to keep up with production, and in some areas, there aren't any pipelines at all. The resulting steady increase in rail shipments might have quietly continued, but for some major accidents involving trains carrying crude oil.

The dangers of shipping oil by rail were most recently demonstrated when two trains collided near Fargo, N.D., on Dec. 30, leading to a derailment. Explosions and fire in at least 10 oil-carrying cars followed, and the town of Casselton had to be evacuated.

Over the summer, another high-profile disaster occurred in Lac-Mégantic, Quebec, where a freight train carrying oil derailed and crashed into the town, with the subsequent explosions killing 47 people and leveling much of the downtown area. This accident and another derailment and explosion in Alabama this fall have led U.S. and Canadian regulators to take a closer look at tanker car safety.

With its thousands of miles of freight rail lines, and a number of facilities for processing crude oil, the Midwest has a major stake in a well-functioning rail system. This safety review comes at a time when rail

Agriculture & Natural Resources

FDA pledges ‘significant changes’ to food-safety rules in response to producers’ concerns

W hile grain producers across the Midwest have been anxiously awaiting a new farm bill, produce farmers are just as anxious about the U.S. Food and Drug Administration’s Food Safety Modernization Act — the largest reform of the nation’s food safety laws in 70 years.

The act itself was signed into law in 2011, but exactly how it will impact the Midwest’s producers won’t be known until final FDA rules are approved. New safety rules proposed by the federal agency in 2013 are now being revised, as the result of backlash from the nation’s farmers and widespread concerns that the rules would burden small producers and even put some out of business. Michael Taylor, the deputy commissioner of foods for the FDA, has promised that “significant changes” in the rules will now be made. The revisions will be released in June 2014. The FDA must have new food-safety rules in place by June 2015.

The difficulty in developing new rules is not surprising given the balance that the FDA has been asked to strike, notes John Dillard of OFW Law, a firm that specializes in federal agriculture law. The agency must develop regulations that have enough teeth to ensure safe

Brief written by Ilene Grossman, staff liaison to the Midwestern Legislative Conference Midwest-Canada Relations Committee. She can be reached at igrossman@mlc.org. The committee’s co-chairs are Kansas House Speaker Ray Merrick and Saskatchewan MLA Wayne Elhard.

Source: Association of American Railroads, June 2013

Brief written by Carolyn Orr, staff liaison to the Midwestern Legislative Conference Agriculture & Natural Resources Committee. She can be reached at corss @sarll.us. The committee’s co-chairs are Indiana Rep. Bill Friend and Minnesota Rep. Rick Hansen.

The committee’s co-chairs are Kansas House Speaker Ray Merrick and Saskatchewan MLA Wayne Elhard.

Agriculture’s voluntary Good Agricultural Practices and Good Handling Practices program, under which fruit and vegetable producers are expected to follow best practices such as sanitation, water testing, compost use, control of wild animals, traceability and record keeping. Food and crops that are not safe for human consumption are to be destroyed, not shipped out.

The Food Safety Modernization Act, which is the focus of the debate, is the first major reform of the nation’s food safety laws in 70 years. The act signed into law in 2011, but how it will impact the Midwest’s producers won’t be known until final FDA rules are approved. New food-safety rules proposed by the federal agency in 2013 are now being revised, as the result of backlash from the nation’s farmers and widespread concerns that the rules would burden small producers and even put some out of business.

Agriculture producers have raised concerns about the cost of complying with the new food-safety rules. They worry that some of the rules will be too burdensome for small producers and will force them out of business. The rules will also affect producers of other commodities, such as beef and pork, which are not as heavily regulated as fruits and vegetables.

The new food-safety rules will require producers to implement a number of practices, including the use of traceability systems, record-keeping requirements, and the development of emergency response plans. Producers will also be required to develop a food safety plan, which will outline how they will prevent foodborne illnesses and respond to any outbreaks.

The U.S. Department of Agriculture has estimated that the new food-safety rules will cost producers $1 billion annually. Producers are concerned that these costs will be too burdensome and will force them out of business. However, the FDA has said that the new rules are necessary to protect public health and the food supply.

The new food-safety rules will also affect consumers. The FDA has estimated that the rules will save 2,000 lives and prevent 72,000 illnesses annually. Consumers are concerned about the cost of the new rules and the potential impact on food prices.

Proponents of the new food-safety rules argue that they are necessary to ensure the safety of the food supply and protect public health. They say that the new rules will prevent foodborne illnesses and save lives. Consumers are also concerned about the safety of the food supply and support the new rules.

The debate over the new food-safety rules is likely to continue as the rules are implemented and producers and consumers adjust to the new regulations.
Midwest states vary widely on rates of population growth

The Midwest’s least-populated state continues to grow at the fastest rate in the nation. Between 2012 and 2013 alone, North Dakota’s population increased by more than 3 percent, new U.S. Census Bureau figures show. That is double the growth of nearly every other U.S. state.

Over the past two years, Minnesota and South Dakota are the only other Midwestern states where population increased at a rate higher than the United States as a whole. Illinois, Michigan and Ohio continue to have among the slowest growth rates in the nation, and one consequence of that trend is the likely loss of congressional seats and Electoral College votes after the 2020 reapportionment.

Using the Census Bureau’s 2013 population estimates, the national research service POLIDATA predicts that those three states will lose one seat/vote each. A fourth Midwestern state, Minnesota, is also at risk of such a loss. In 2010, the Midwest lost five seats/votes due to reapportionment — one each in Iowa, Illinois and Michigan and two in Ohio. Demographers have long pointed to economic factors such as employment and housing as a key role in population trends; North Dakota’s gross domestic product has been growing at a faster rate than any other U.S. state.

Population estimates and trends in Midwest

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>State</th>
<th>Population in 2013</th>
<th>Increase from 2012 (U.S. rank)</th>
<th>Increase from 2010 Census (U.S. rank)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Illinois</td>
<td>12,882,315</td>
<td>0.13% (44)</td>
<td>0.40% (46)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Indiana</td>
<td>6,756,902</td>
<td>0.53% (24)</td>
<td>1.3% (33)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Iowa</td>
<td>3,090,416</td>
<td>0.50% (30)</td>
<td>1.4% (30)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kansas</td>
<td>2,813,957</td>
<td>0.30% (38)</td>
<td>1.4% (31)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Michigan</td>
<td>9,895,529</td>
<td>0.13% (43)</td>
<td>1.3% (47)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Minnesota</td>
<td>5,420,380</td>
<td>0.76% (22)</td>
<td>2.3% (27)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nebraska</td>
<td>1,866,516</td>
<td>0.71% (25)</td>
<td>2.3% (25)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>North Dakota</td>
<td>723,393</td>
<td>3.1% (1)</td>
<td>7.6% (1)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ohio</td>
<td>11,570,808</td>
<td>0.15% (41)</td>
<td>0.39% (45)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>South Dakota</td>
<td>844,877</td>
<td>1.3% (8)</td>
<td>3.8% (6)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Wisconsin</td>
<td>5,742,713</td>
<td>0.32% (37)</td>
<td>0.9% (38)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>United States</td>
<td>316,128,839</td>
<td>0.72%</td>
<td>2.40% (24)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Sources: U.S. Census Bureau

Estimated change in congressional seats, votes in Electoral College as result of 2020 reapportionment

- No change
- Loss of 1 seat/vote
- Using different scenarios, no change or loss of 1 seat/vote

Source: POLIDATA

Higher-ed funding, college costs once again policy priorities in 2014

During the first half of 2013, state legislators crafted and passed budgets under much improved fiscal conditions. Later in the year, college students and their parents got a bit of relief of their own: The average cost of tuition and fees at the nation’s public four-year schools had risen by the lowest rate (2.9 percent) in more than 30 years, according to the College Board’s “Trends in College Pricing 2013.” It is a pattern seen time and again: Increases in state higher-education spending (the result, in many cases, of improved fiscal conditions) lead to smaller, or even no, hikes in tuition.

“State appropriations for public education are cyclical,” the report’s authors note, “and tuition increases show similar cycles.”

In the Midwest, for example, tuition was frozen at public universities in states such as Iowa, Minnesota and Nebraska as the result of state budgets that increased funding for these schools. In Nebraska, the agreement between the governor and leaders of the university system was dubbed the “Affordability Compact”. A two-year freeze on tuition in exchange for an annual average increase in state appropriations of at least 4.2 percent.

Purdue University and The Ohio State University are among the other big schools in the region where tuition did not increase, and in Wisconsin, the Legislature’s current two-year budget requires its universities to freeze resident tuition.

New proposals for year ahead

This trend may continue in 2014. In advance of the start of Iowa’s legislative session, the state’s Board of Regents approved a tuition freeze for the 2014-15 school year; it is contingent on a 4 percent increase in state appropriations. In South Dakota, the new state budget unveiled by Gov. Dennis Daugaard calls for more funding for the state’s postsecondary schools and a year of no tuition increases for the state’s college students.

State higher-ed spending: 2012-13

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>State</th>
<th>Percent in state personal income</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
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<td>$6.18</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Indiana</td>
<td>$6.44</td>
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<td>$6.06</td>
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<td>Michigan</td>
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Sources: Illinois State University, Grapevine; and College Board, “Trends in College Pricing”

Although South Dakota institutions are less expensive than most in the rest of the country, we should still strive to keep higher education affordable,” Daugaard wrote in a column explaining his proposal. As Daugaard notes in that same column, national rises in tuition and fees have consistently outpaced inflation for the past two decades. Even for this current school year, the increases — though lower than in previous years — rose at a higher rate than inflation (the inflation-adjusted increase was 0.9 percent).

At the height of the recent state budget crisis, college costs rose by nearly 10 percent in a single year. And as the map below shows, in-state tuition and fees have increased by at least 15 percent over the past five years in nearly every Midwestern state (not adjusted for inflation).

Another factor in affordability is the declining level of federal grant aid; it decreased 9 percent between 2010-11 and 2012-13, according to the College Board. Will states fill some of the gap left by this loss of federal grant aid? Some new policy ideas were already emerging late in 2013.

In Wisconsin, lawmakers unveiled a proposal to allow individuals to deduct student loan payments from their income taxes. Under the same plan, individuals could also refinance their loan debt, at a lower interest rate, through a newly created Wisconsin Student Loan Refinancing Authority. “It will put money back in Wisconsin residents’ pockets, and back into our economy,” says Wisconsin Rep. Cory Mason, a sponsor of AB 498/SB 376.

Michigan lawmakers have been working on plans to boost state funding for the universities, and to tie the increase to performance-based metrics — including measures of how well the schools are holding down costs.

“Under our state Constitution, the universities are completely autonomous,” notes Rep. John Walsh, Michigan House speaker pro tempore. “The Legislature can choose to give them money or not. It really is that stark. So these metrics are an entitlement.”

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Sources: College Board, “Trends in College Pricing”

Average in-state tuition, fees at public 4-year universities, 2013-14 (U.S. rank)

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Sources: College Board, “Trends in College Pricing”

Increase in in-state tuition, fees at 4-year public universities, 2008-09 to 2013-14

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Sources: College Board, “Trends in College Pricing”
Human trafficking involves the detention of people against their will, who are then forced to work — in factories or local businesses, for example, or as domestic workers in homes. One of the more common forms of trafficking involves coercing individuals to work in the commercial sex trade.

According to the Polaris Project, a national organization working to prevent human trafficking, certain groups of people are most vulnerable to trafficking, including undocumented immigrants and homeless/runaway youths.

The U.S. Trafficking Victims Protection Act was passed in 2000 to protect against human trafficking, and many states have since used it as a model to enact their own measures. (Because trafficking is often discovered by local authorities, state legislation supplements, and sometimes strengthens, federal law.)

In an August 2013 report, the Polaris Project suggests a number of statutory provisions to prevent human trafficking. The first is having a law on the books that criminalizes sex trafficking. All but two U.S. states (and every state in the Midwest) have such laws, but the penalties vary by state.

Some states have made trafficking in minors a standalone offense. In Illinois, this is the case for trafficking anyone under 18, but in some states, trafficking minors is a distinct offense only if the minor is 16 or younger. Other states’ statutes make trafficking in minors an aggravating factor that affects sentencing, but do not make it a distinctive offense, according to the Polaris Project.

All 50 states have adopted penalties for labor trafficking. Most legislation defines this type of trafficking as exploiting someone’s labor or services by use of threats, violence or coercion. The Polaris Project holds up the example of Colorado, where the definition of involuntary servitude has been expanded. In that state, people who receive compensation for their work are also considered trafficking victims if their work is coerced.

Other Polaris Project recommendations include:

- Seizing the assets of human traffickers (Illinois, Iowa, Kansas, and Ohio) allow courts to seize the proceeds and the assets of traffickers; Indiana, Michigan, and Minnesota allow only the proceeds of human trafficking to be seized.

- Providing law enforcement with additional tools,

- Making a person’s tablet compatible with any device.

- Offering safe harbor for sexually exploited minors and offering child protective services instead of prosecution (Illinois, Kansas, Michigan, Minnesota, Nebraska and South Dakota include trafficking in their racketeering statutes);

- Instituting a reduced burden of proof for sex trafficking of minors. (All states in the Midwest have a reduced burden, except for Ohio and South Dakota);

- Assisting victims with securing housing, food, education and employment, and immigration services (Illinois, Indiana, Iowa, Kansas, Minnesota, Nebraska, and South Dakota); and

- Volunteering prostitution convictions for victims of sex trafficking. (Illinois is the only state in the region that legislates this, but Ohio law allows for expunging, rather than vacating, convictions.)

The Polaris Project also recommends special training for law enforcement to identify and respond to human trafficking, the creation of a state human trafficking commission, and the establishment of a hot line to respond to reports of trafficking.

**Question of the Month** highlights an inquiry received by CSG Midwest. She can be reached at igrossman@csg.org. Question of the Month focuses on the Midwest region. Article written by Ilene Grossman, assistant director for CSG Midwest. She can be reached at igrossman@csg.org.
Despite progress, states have long way to go on broadband access and adoption

As part of a larger state economic development program, Illinois is awarding up to $4 million in prize funding for the most-promising ultra-high-speed broadband deployment projects. Launched in 2012, the Gigabit Community Challenge is open to public and private organizations; each project must connect at least 1,000 end users to gigabit broadband speeds.

Need for more speed: A look at notable broadband advances and policy innovations in the Midwest

The northern Indiana town of Fort Wayne was one of the first communities in the Midwest to have citywide fiber-optic broadband service. How did Fort Wayne do it? As Robert Atkinson, president of the Information & Technology Foundation, explains it, the city’s mayor (Graham Richard at the time) made it as smooth as possible for private telecommunications provider Verizon to move ahead with the $1 million investment. “He said, ‘We will help you get it done.’” Atkinson explains. That meant everything from ensuring an easy permitting and regulatory process to informing the public about the need to dig up city streets.

According to the Iowa Association of Municipal Utilities, its state has more municipal broadband providers (28 cities) than any other state in the nation. The idea of communities building their own fiber-optic networks is spreading across the country, says Christopher Mitchell of the Institute for Self Reliance. “We are seeing a dramatic upsurge, but it’s starting from a small base,” he notes. The estimated cost of building such a communitywide network? About $1,000 per person, Mitchell says.

Early in 2011, the Kansas town of Kansas City got news that it would become Google’s first “fiberhood.” More than 1,100 U.S. cities had sought to become the first place where Google brought fiber-optic connections to an entire community — with Internet speeds of 1 gigabit per second, 100 times faster than what most Americans have today in their homes. The project has since expanded to Kansas City, Mo. A Bistate Innovations Team was then created to ensure that the entire metropolitan area makes the most of this unique opportunity.

In 2012, the Michigan county of Chippewa became the nation’s first “connected community,” a program run by Connected Nation, a nonprofit group that works in states to expand broadband access and use. To receive the “connected county” designation, a community technology plan must be adopted that includes strategies to expand digital literacy and awareness about the benefits of broadband, assist businesses with websites, and improve the online presence of local governments. These types of strategies can help ensure broadband demand is sufficient to warrant infrastructure investments. At least five other Michigan communities have since been certified as “connected,” thanks in part to the assistance of the state’s Connected Nation.

Seconds later, the student asked the question.

“That story could not occur in 70 percent to 80 percent of the classrooms in the United States,” Levin says, “because they lack sufficient broadband.” And as a result, the potential for delivering personalized instruction with world-class, remote educational resources is simply out of reach.

Twenty years from now, K-12 education and health care are going to be significantly transformed by the broadband platform,” he says. “The sooner you accelerate that process, the better off your state will be.”

In search of ‘widespread adoption’

Four years ago, Minnesota lawmakers adopted an ambitious broadband goal. By 2015, every household and business in the state should have access to high-speed broadband, with a download speed of at least 10 megabits per second and upload speed of at least 5 megabits. The state will likely not reach universal access by 2015, but that decision in 2010 has helped keep policymakers focused on the need for “border-to-border service,” says Margaret Anderson Kelliher, who was speaker of the House at the time and is now the governor’s point person on broadband policy.

In 2013, Nebraska became one of the first states in the nation to use money from its universal service program to fund broadband deployment in un served and underserved areas. Most states have universal service funds, which are designed to bring telecommunications service to high-cost areas. Less is the specific use of these funds — which came from a fee charged to telecommunications providers — for broadband deployment.

A public-private partnership in south central Missouri led to what has been called “the largest fiber-to-home connection in North America, and possibly the world.” All homes and businesses in the 10,000-square-mile region now have access to a fiber-optic connection. The upgrades were made by the area’s two independent telecommunications cooperatives, which received $55 million in federal rural-development loans.

According to TechNet’s “State Broadband Index,” Ohio has long been a national leader in broadband policy, serving as a model for other states and even the federal government. That leadership role has ranged from working with providers (regulatory changes in exchange for pledges from the providers to expand broadband), to helping develop local technology plans, to mapping broadband availability. More recently, the state invested $31.1 million to dramatically increase the speed of a fiber-optic network (from 10 gigabits a second to 100 gigabits) that connects Ohio’s universities and research institutions.

In its most recent report to the U.S. Congress on broadband technology, the U.S. Department of Commerce highlights the ongoing work of South Dakota’s Bureau of Information and Telecommunications. The state agency travels across the state to help local schools, libraries, health care facilities, local governments and others adopt technology plans. Grant funding is also made available to help “these community anchor institutions” achieve their technology and broadband objectives.

In 2013, Wisconsin legislators established a new grant program to expand broadband to underserved areas of the state. Under the plan, $4.3 million can be allocated over the next 10 years. The new grant program will provide dollars for public-private partnerships to expand broadband access, as well as expansion projects undertaken by private telecommunications providers.

Broadband adoption, computer ownership in Midwest’s households (2011)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>State</th>
<th>% that have adopted broadband</th>
<th>% that own computer</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Illinois</td>
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<tr>
<td>Indiana</td>
<td>64.6%</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Iowa</td>
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</tr>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>United States</td>
<td>69.0%</td>
<td>76.0%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: “Exploring the Digital Nation: America’s Emerging Online Experience” (June 2013)

Facts such as costs and the lack of digital literacy

As of January 2014, Minnesota’s access rate (to fixed or wired broadband, not wireless) has jumped from 57.4 percent to 74.5 percent.

That’s good, but what we tell the governor and legislators is that natural growth — meaning without policy intervention — is probably not going to get us to 100 percent,” says Margaret Anderson Kelliher, the former Minnesota speaker of the House who now serves as chair of the Governor’s Task Force on Broadband.

And Sen. Schmit adds that much has changed since that state-level goal was set, and he believes lawmakers should now be viewing the adequacy of broadband access through a different lens.

“Rather than focus on upload and download speeds, I’m most concerned about end user experiences with real applications, whether you’re talking about applications for telehealth or business needs for file sharing,” he says.

For those types of users, the minimum speeds set in Minnesota statute are insufficient.

That need for more speed — in critical public institutions such as K-12 schools, hospitals and universities — should be driving state broadband policy, says Blair Levin, a fellow at the Aspen Institute and former executive director of the Federal Communications Commission’s Broadband Initiative.

To underscore the point, Levin recounts the story he learned of a school in Peru, where every student received individualized instruction by working through the website of the Kahn Academy — the nonprofit educational service whose mission is to provide a world-class education for “anyone, anywhere.”

A Kahn Academy executive visited the school and watched as the teacher — by viewing on her own computer how the students were progressing — could anticipate and then deliver the precise instructional needs of each student.

“That student is about to ask me a question about negative numbers,” the teacher told the executive, looking at her computer screen.
Policy ideas, options for states

States are in a position to at least play a role in addressing many of the issues surrounding broadband speed, access and adoption.

In Minnesota, the Governor’s Task Force on Broadband has issued a new set of recommendations for legislative consideration in 2014.

They include eliminating a tax on telecommunications equipment (to promote more investments by providers) and providing direct loans, loan guarantees or other financial incentives to expand broadband access. Such state intervention is needed, the task force says, to “help bridge the gap between what is financially feasible and the actual costs of providing broadband” in some of the state’s sparsely populated areas.

On the adoption/user side, the task force proposes creation of a state fund that would help pay for connectivity services for low-income populations.

“Our argument is that these are short-term investments that can make a big impact economically and in the quality of life of Minnesotans,” Anderson Kelliher says.

Sen. Schmit, too, hopes the Minnesota Legislature will begin considering broadband as part of future bonding plans, included alongside the state’s other public infrastructure priorities such as roads and bridges.

He adds that the state needs to revisit some of its antiquated telecommunications laws; near the top of that list is the removal of a decades-old statute that requires a local referendum and approval by 65 percent of local voters for a city to provide municipal phone service. This law has led to confusion about whether it applies to publicly owned broadband.

More and more municipalities around the country are, in fact, considering or moving ahead with plans to build their own communitywide fiber optic networks, says Christopher Mitchell of the Institute for Self Reliance.

“They don’t see the cable and DSL networks as capable of supporting the job growth that the region is trying to foster,” Mitchell says in explaining the trend.

“We’re getting to the point where having fiber in a large part of the community goes from being a first-mover advantage, like where Kansas City is [due to Google Fiber; see bottom of page 6], to it being a matter of needing fiber just to tread water [in the global economy].

“We’re not there yet, but we’re moving in that direction.”

According to Mitchell, 19 states — including Michigan, Minnesota, Nebraska, Nevada and Wisconsin in the Midwest — have some barriers to municipal-owned fiber networks.

Levin urges states to remove those barriers.

“My view is you don’t want to take anything off the table,” he says.

“It is the rare case when cities want to build their own networks. But they can lay a lot of the infrastructure that lowers the cost of deploying fiber, which is good. And cities should have the right to do what’s in their interest, especially when we know there are cases where the market stalls out.”

But Atkinson believes publicly owned networks should be far from the first option pursued by municipalities or encouraged by states. The first steps, he says, should instead be removing regulatory hurdles for private providers and trying to establish public-private partnerships to improve broadband deployment and speeds.

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<thead>
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<th>% in rural areas</th>
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<td>United States</td>
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<td>76.0%</td>
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</tbody>
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Wisconsin Rep. Peter Barca
Minority leader is serving second stint in Legislature after term in Congress and traveling globe to promote job training

by Kate Tormey (ktormey@xce.org)

Q: Why has job training been a top policy focus for you?

A: I care a great deal about education — and employment and training are the issues I focus on. That affects so many elements of our society. Young people need to have quality education and job training, and people need the opportunity to work and use their God-given talents. If you don't have quality education and training, you are not going to start companies and you are not going to grow your economy, and that is when you run into all kinds of social problems and social issues.

Q: Why has transferability of credits been such a focus for you, and how did you achieve this policy change without passing a state law?

A: Many people can't afford a university right away, or some go to technical college first and then they find they want to further their education. [But] to go for four years, especially as you get older and as you become a parent, becomes a real challenge. …

We introduced legislation, and once we had a majority [of votes], there was a memorandum of understanding signed between the university system and the technical colleges. Over the last 10 years, the difficulty has been in the details in terms of what classes they're going to accept under what circumstances. … But the institutional leaders have come to recognize how important this is, and it has become even more important than when we first started this 15 years ago.

Q: Can you talk about your experience serving in Congress and in the federal government?

A: I enjoyed my tenure working in Congress and in the Clinton administration. Congress is much more slow-moving, and you end up having to specialize in your committee work to effect much change. I certainly found it fascinating. I got to interact with some of the top experts in the world on various policies, so that part was very stimulating. …

I was on the Science, Space and Technology Committee and also the Transportation Committee. Of course, infrastructure is vital to economic development — and I was on the economic development subcommittee, so we worked on things like enterprise zones at the time.

Q: You have said that promoting civility is one of the reasons you returned to the Wisconsin Legislature. What are some of your strategies?

A: First of all, try to set a good example in the way in which you conduct yourself with your counterparts. In caucus, we have detailed discussions about how to approach people on the other side of the aisle and find ways to work together on things we can — and find ways to vigorously object to things we think are not helpful to the people of the state or the Wisconsin economy.

You try to engage in a lot of dialogue and model the behavior you don't see. …

We are trying to help to maintain Wisconsin's historic reputation of clean, open and transparent government. That is a core value that I have and one of the reasons why I agreed to come back [to the Legislature], because there had been so many problems in that regard. That is something that is so vital to our interests, because it affects everything else we do.
A new path to school reform

Michigan task force’s goal: Replace state takeovers of struggling districts with locally tailored, expert plans to help them improve

by Michigan Rep. Ellen Cogen Lipton

Earlier this fall, a legislative task force comprised of 12 legislators in the Michigan House culminated several months of public research and testimony by releasing a report with substantive findings and recommendations to help struggling schools in the state.

I was honored to serve as co-chair of the task force along with Rep. Brandon Dillon, and believe the task force’s work on 15 schools now run by the authority could be transformative for K-12 schools and improving how our state works with them.

What set the content of our final report apart from the work of previous task forces is the process used to prepare its findings: We chose to focus on expertise and transparency in order to arrive at our recommendations.

### Budget cuts trigger downward spiral

Over the past two years, Michigan’s schools have faced approximately $2 billion in state budget cuts. As a result, hundreds of school buildings around our state have closed, and thousands of teachers have been laid off. The size of classrooms swelled as our state’s children have crowded into fewer remaining buildings.

One school district, in fact, could no longer afford to keep its high school open, and two other districts were declared insolvent and then dissolved.

To make matters worse, the Michigan Legislature has also enacted many laws that favor charter and cyber schools over neighborhood public schools. For example, the state recently removed its cap on charter schools. Unlike in other states, a large portion of Michigan’s charter schools are run by for-profit corporations, and the removal of the charter-school cap was little more than a giveaway to the companies that manage them.

Worst of all from my perspective, the Legislature allowed for the takeover of financially stressed public schools by the Education Achievement Authority, a state board that operates in near secrecy with little local input from parents or community members.

Despite this, Michigan has always had strong public schools. Such historical commitment to public education was reflected in the goal of the task force: to provide a constructive response to efforts to expand the unproven EAA across the state, even though those efforts are under fire by the authority and by the public.

As we set out to develop our plan for conducting the task force, we decided to seek the widest array of expert input that could help legislators best understand what it takes to properly educate students.

We did not have to look far to find some of the best minds in education to guide our work.

Our task force met between May and August, gathering information from educators and experts on programs and ideas that could provide constructive solutions. We first worked with Dr. Rossi Ray-Taylor (an education consultant and former local school superintendent in Michigan) on framing the issues and examining the elements of an excellent school. At subsequent meetings, we heard and learned from many current school superintendents and state education experts on a vast range of subjects, such as:

- external pressures facing our schools and the current research-guiding school-improvement tools;
- the history of education reform efforts in Michigan and the problems resulting from the creation of competing school systems;
- special education services, public school finance and program evaluation; and
- the impact of state education policy on rural and isolated school districts.

Finally, with the help of Dr. David Arson — a professor of K-12 administration at Michigan State University — we turned this information into a plan of action for school reform.

During the course of holding task force meetings, all of which were conducted publicly, it became clear that previous legislative undertakings had failed to focus on creating great schools.

### A better alternative: input from experts

There are, in fact, better alternatives to taking over schools and throwing them into an EAA, especially since this state authority had been created without any input from experts who are in the trenches every day — those people in our state who not only teach our students, but also our teachers.

The research of the task force led to recommendations in three different focus areas:

- adopting review and action plans specific to local school districts,
- studying what it really costs to educate students in order to provide proper funding, and
- leveling the playing field for all schools.

As an alternative to the EAA, and to avoid a takeover or dissolution of a school or school district, we proposed that schools and districts in crisis go through a comprehensive review, under the authority of the state Department of Education.

The state would guide local school leaders through a careful examination of everything from finances to leadership and curriculum. State and local leaders would work together to determine the unique challenges occurring in the school or district.

This review would be followed by a detailed action plan to put the school or district on track to improve.

The experts we heard from in our meetings all emphasized that Michigan cannot approach school reform with a “one size fits all” plan.

To this end, our recommendations called on the Michigan Department of Education to conduct a comprehensive study on what it actually costs to educate Michigan students.

This study would give legislators and policymakers a better understanding of the investment needed to educate students, because only then could we all see how much it costs to provide services such as transportation, special education, and programs to help our youngest children begin school ready to learn.

Understanding these costs would allow legislators to better understand the specific needs of each school district — based on the population and needs of its students — and provide proper funding.

There are more educational choices available to Michigan students than ever before. Students can choose a nearby public school, a charter school or even a virtual school, and schools compete for these students — creating, in effect, parallel school systems.

If we are to achieve effective school reform, we need to ensure that all these competing publicly funded schools operate under the same requirements and are held to the same standards of accountability and transparency.

We propose, for example, that all schools — public, charter or virtual — have school boards that comply with our state’s Open Meetings Act. We also propose requiring disclosure of the amount of taxpayer dollars actually spent on classroom instruction, including the cost to provide instruction in a virtual school over the Internet.

The process undertaken by the task force, as well as the report’s findings and recommendations, are an important step in defining our state’s role in assisting struggling schools, and we remain committed to ensuring that every child has the opportunity to receive an excellent education in our state.

Rep. Ellen Cogen Lipton, a Democrat, was first elected to the Michigan House of Representatives in 2008.

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 630.925.1923 or tenderson@cscl.org.
MLC Annual Meeting in Omaha to feature renowned historian Doris Kearns Goodwin

Four-day event is tailored to meet needs of Midwest's state, provincial legislators

This summer, state legislators from around the Midwest will gather in Omaha, Neb., to share ideas with one another while hearing and learning from some of the nation’s foremost policy experts. Registration is now open for the Midwestern Legislative Conference Annual Meeting at www.csomidwest.org. The meeting will be held July 13-16.

The conference is a family-friendly event designed to meet the needs and interests of state and provincial legislators from this region. Held in a different Midwestern city every year, the four-day event features policy sessions on issues of critical importance to this region and its legislators. In addition, various activities are planned for the spouses, adult guests and children of meeting attendees.

Nebraska Sen. Beau McCoy, the 2014 chair of the MLC, is leading the host state’s efforts. Hundreds of legislators from the Midwest have come to rely on the MLC Annual Meeting as a place to learn from each other and from leading national policy experts in a nonpartisan environment. The event always includes high-quality keynote speakers and ample opportunities to work with legislative colleagues from the Midwest.

Nebraska unicameral. A former Nebraska state senator, David Landis, will speak in character as U.S. Sen. George Norris, who was instrumental in convincing Nebraskans to move to a unicameral, nonpartisan system of state government.

Landis’ presentation will explore Nebraska’s history of populism and the move to the only unicameral state legislature in the nation.

Policy sessions at the MLC Annual Meeting will explore a wide variety of issues of importance to state officials, including education, health care, economic development and agriculture.

Attendees are encouraged to bring their families, and daytime activities will be available for guests of all ages.

Events for attendees and their guests will include an opening-night reception at the Durham Museum, a series of webinars on Great Lakes-related issues, and various activities planned for the spouses, adult guests and children of meeting attendees.

Limited travel scholarships will once again be available. The meeting is open to legislators and their spouses, but advance registration is required. To register or for more information, visit www.greatlakeslegislators.org.

Officers of the Great Lakes Legislative Caucus

The December edition of Stateline Midwest listed three states in the region — Illinois, Iowa and Minnesota — as having laws allowing same-sex marriage. The Illinois and Minnesota laws are the result of legislative actions taken in 2013. In Iowa, same-sex marriage was established as the result of a state Supreme Court decision.

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, innovations 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.
Legislators from across the Midwest traveled to Oklahoma in early January for a unique three-day event that focuses on policies impacting the nation’s agriculture sector and rural communities.

The 2014 Legislative Agriculture Chairs Summit was held over three days. It featured sessions on key federal issues — including the farm bill, energy policy and new food-safety rules being developed by the U.S. Food and Drug Administration — along with workshops on state issues ranging from water quality and animal traceability, to farm liability and taxation.

The Council of State Governments is a co-sponsor of the AgChairs Summit, which is held annually. In all, lawmakers from 44 states and seven Canadian provinces took part in this year’s meeting.

The summit is part of the work done by State Ag and Rural Leaders (SARL), a nonprofit group of state and provincial legislators formed in 2006.

Over the next two years, South Dakota Sen. Larry Rhoden will serve as SARL president. He was elected by his legislative peers at the AgChairs Summit. Iowa Sen. David Johnson is a past president of the group. Other SARL officers from the Midwest include North Dakota Rep. Wes Belter, treasurer, and Manitoba MLA Ralph Eichler, secretary.

Iowa Sen. Tim Kapucian serves on the six-member Legislative Board.

SARL’s executive director is Carolyn Orr, who also serves as CSG Midwest staff liaison to the Midwestern Legislative Conference Agriculture & Natural Resources Committee. The co-chairs of that committee are Indiana Rep. Bill Friend and Minnesota Rep. Rick Hansen.

For information on how to get involved with SARL, please contact Carolyn at corr@sarl.us. The group’s 2015 AgChairs Summit will be held Jan. 2-4 in Clearwater, Fla.

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**Midwest’s leaders of State Ag and Rural Leaders**

- **South Dakota Sen. Larry Rhoden**, president
- **Manitoba MLA Ralph Eichler**, secretary
- **North Dakota Rep. Wes Belter**, treasurer
- **Iowa Sen. Tim Kapucian**, Legislative Board

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**BILLD marks 20th year of training legislators**

Applications are now available for the region’s premier leadership training program for legislators.

Since its inception in 1995, the Bowhay Institute for Legislative Leadership Development has trained more than 650 newer legislators from the Midwest — including some who have gone on to hold top positions in leadership and others who are now serving in the U.S. Congress.

The BILLD program is for legislators from the Midwest who are in their first four years of service. CSG Midwest conducts the institute in conjunction with the 2014 University of Wisconsin’s LaFollette School of Public Affairs. This year’s program will be held Aug. 8-12 in Madison, Wis.

BILLD includes a mix of sessions on public policy and leadership development.

The deadline to apply for a 2014 BILLD fellowship is April 7.

For more information, and for a full listing of the program’s alumni, please visit www.csgmidwest.org. The BILLD program is overseen by a steering committee of state legislators led by Ohio Sen. Cliff Hite and Indiana Rep. Ed Clere.
Change in Kansas law now allows legislators to carry guns in Capitol

Kansas legislators can carry concealed weapons inside the Capitol this year as a result of a 2013 law, the Lawrence Journal-World reports. Under the measure (HB 2052), the operators of a government or public building must screen all visitors for weapons if they want to prohibit concealed-carry permit holders from bringing a gun inside the building.

Separate provisions, however, were established for gun policy at the Capitol, where metal detectors are currently used. (A 2013 CSG Midwest survey found that four states in the region have metal detectors at their capitol entrances: Illinois, Indiana, Iowa and Kansas.) As a result of these provisions, the general public is barred from carrying weapons into the Kansas Capitol until at least July 1, when legislative leaders will determine if “adequate security measures” are in place (as defined in HB 2052) — a requirement for the ban to continue. Legislative leaders were told in December, though, that under the new law, this general prohibition does not extend to legislators.

A 2013 CSG Midwest survey of capitol police found that three states in the region — Michigan, Minnesota and Wisconsin — allow concealed-carry permit holders to bring guns into some or all parts of state capitol buildings. In Minnesota, individuals must notify security in advance.

Minimum-wage hike takes effect in Ohio, on South Dakota ballot

Ohio’s minimum wage increased at the start of 2014, the result of an automatic inflationary increase that has been part of the state’s Constitution since voters approved the measure in 2005. This built-in cost-of-living increase is the only minimum-wage law of its kind in the 11-state Midwest. A similar proposal will be decided by South Dakota voters in November. It calls for an increase from $7.25 an hour to $8.50 with annual cost-of-living increases. The minimum hourly wage for tipped employees would be half that for non-tipped workers. (Ohio has the same provision.)

As of now, South Dakota is one of seven Midwestern states with a minimum wage equal to the federal requirement — $7.25 an hour. Minnesota is one of four U.S. states with a wage requirement lower than the federal rate. Ohio’s minimum wage is now $7.95 per hour, up 10 cents from 2013. The Cleveland Plain Dealer reports. Illinois ($8.25 per hour) and Michigan ($7.40 per hour) also have a wage requirement that exceeds the federal government’s. The state of Washington has the nation’s highest minimum wage ($9.32 per hour). Various proposals have been introduced in the Midwest to raise the rate in different states (usually in the range of between $9 and $10 an hour) and to establish automatic inflationary increases.

Protecting, enhancing state Capitol goals of new Michigan law

Michigan legislators have added the state Capitol building and its grounds in Lansing to the list of designated state historic sites.

The same legislative package (SB 665, SB 666, HB 5134 and HB 5135) also creates a new state commission that will be responsible for operating, restoring and improving the site. The bills received unanimous legislative approval and were signed into law in December by Gov. Rick Snyder, who said the legislative actions “will give the treasured building the protection and preservation that it and future generations of Michiganders deserve.”

The newly formed six-member commission will include the Senate secretary, House clerk and a gubernatorial appointee. The other three members must have experience in historic preservation and the maintenance and operation of historic structures. One of the commission’s tasks is to make recommendations to the governor and Legislature on funding for the site. The recently enacted legislative package creates a Michigan State Capitol Historic-Site Fund, but as the Detroit Free Press notes, an ongoing funding source has not yet been designated.

The 135-year-old Michigan Capitol is already a designated National Historic Landmark. The state capitol buildings in Nebraska and Wisconsin also have this designation.

Legalized medical marijuana spreads to second Midwest state

The start of the new year marked the beginning of a four-year pilot project in Illinois that permits the use of marijuana for medical purposes.

Illinois is the second state in the Midwest with such a law and the first in the region where it was initiated by the legislature. Medical marijuana was legalized in Michigan six years ago via a ballot proposal.

Under Illinois HB 1, 22 regulated “cultivation centers” and up to 68 licensed dispensaries can now open in the state. Unlike some states, including Michigan, Illinois will not allow patients or their caregivers to grow marijuana.

As of late last year, Michigan law did not specifically authorize medical marijuana dispensaries. And in early 2013, the Michigan Supreme Court ruled that local prosecutors could use the state’s public nuisance law to shut these operations down.

A bill approved late in 2013 by the Michigan House (HB 4271) would allow local governments to decide whether or not to permit the opening of “provisioning centers.” These centers are needed to dispense the drug, legislative supporters say, because the number of medical marijuana patients far exceeds the number of caregivers able to provide for them.