New era in corrections

In states such as Michigan, Ohio and South Dakota, recent reforms aim to cut costs, improve public safety

by Kate Tormey (ktormey@csg.org)

In 1977, South Dakota’s state prisons held just 550 inmates. Over the next 35 years, however, that population would multiply six times — and, in the process, drive costs through the roof.

By 2011, the state’s corrections budget was more than $100 million and had quadrupled in 20 years. And the prison population was projected to grow by another 25 percent in 10 years, with costs increasing to the tune of $224 million.

During the 2013 legislative session, the legislature, governor and judicial branch worked together to shape a bill to slow this skyrocketing growth in prison inmates and costs. What resulted was a landmark package of about 25 reforms that was signed into law by the governor in February 2013.

South Dakota is not alone in its effort to stem the rising cost of corrections. One in 14 state general-fund dollars is spent on corrections in the United States, with total state expenditures estimated to be $52 billion in 2011.

“A lot of states have taken a fresh look at corrections issues because they are spending a lot, but not getting a sufficient return in terms of public safety,” says Jake Horowitz, state policy director for the Pew Charitable Trust’s Public Safety Performance Project.

“The keys are in their hands — the drivers of the prison population are policies, enacted by states, that determine who goes to prison and for how long. States control their destiny in this area.”

South Dakota’s major reforms

South Dakota’s Public Safety Improvement Act addressed one key source of the state’s tremendous prison growth: decades of policies that imposed broader and tougher penalties for crimes.

“As with many states, and probably the federal government, both parties across South Dakota had a ‘tough on crime’ mentality,” says Jim Seward, general counsel for Gov. Dennis Daugaard.

“Decisions were made on what would appear to be more emotion than evidence. We thought we had to keep increasing the penalties to bring down our crime rate.”

But as South Dakota policymakers closely examined strategies across the country, they found states that were not only bringing down imprisonment rates, but cutting crime rates as well. The 2013 legislation focuses on dedicating prison space to violent and repeat offenders.

For example, it increased penalties for the most serious drug dealers and producers but reduced them for simple possession and other low-level crimes.

The bill also strengthens offender supervision through alternative courts and sentencing, such as drug and DUI courts that handle offenders who may benefit from treatment. Parolees can earn time off the end of their sentences for complying with the conditions of their release.

“If someone is going to recidivate, experts tell us it’s most likely to be in the first couple of years,” Seward says.

“The goal is to shorten the parole terms for compliant people, so parole agents have fewer people to supervise and can focus on people who are at high risk of reoffending.”

In the first six months, 91 percent of parolees eligible for the program were compliant; more than 1,100 years were shaved off the end of sentences.

Implementation of these reforms in South Dakota is being overseen by a multi-branch oversight council, which will measure performance of the different initiatives over the next five years.

And as part of the 2013 reforms, policymakers are working on a program unique to South Dakota, home to a large Native American population.

The Tribal Parole Pilot Program was developed to address the fact that 47 percent of the state’s parole violations in 2012 were committed by Native Americans. The initiative is aimed at improving these outcomes.

For example, when parolees leave the corrections system, they are often living in the state’s largest city, Sioux Falls — where they have no family or connections.
Midwest-Canada Relations

Work on reducing economically harmful regulatory conflicts moves ahead, though slowly

February 2014 marks the three-year anniver-
sary of a joint U.S.-Canada effort to reduce
unnecessary regulatory differences that raise
the cost of doing business across the border — and
can raise prices for consumers as well.

President Barack Obama and Prime Minister Stephen
Harper created the U.S.-Canada Regulatory Cooperation
Council to guide bilateral work to streamline and
harmonize regulations. The council works toward mutual
acceptance of each other’s standards when harmonization
is not possible, and seeks other ways to simplify the cross-
border regulatory process, such as recognizing common
testing procedures and enforcement.

Despite sometimes slow progress, the council has
moved ahead with several projects. For example:
• The two countries have launched a number of
  pilot projects (one already completed) to jointly
  review veterinary health products.
• Joint observational inspections of pharmaceutical
  manufacturing sites in the U.S. and Canada are being
  made, a step toward increasing mutual reliance on each
  country’s routine oversight of manufacturing practices.
• The U.S. Food and Drug Administration and sev-
eral Canadian regulatory agencies are working toward
recognition of each other’s food safety processes. Both
countries are reviewing accreditation criteria for labs
that test for food safety, leading toward the development
of a permanent system to mutually recognize laboratory
certification.

In addition to these and other
planned initiatives, the binational council “has raised awareness about
the unnecessary regulatory differences
between the U.S. and Canada,” says
Adam Schlosser, who directs the U.S.
Chamber of Commerce’s Center for
Global Regulatory Cooperation.

“These differences don’t result
in increased protections of health,
safety or the environment,” he adds,
“and likely arise simply from a lack of
communication between regulators.”

One frequently cited example is
the varying standards for a can of
soup. Vegetable soup in the U.S. is sold
in 16-ounce cans, while the same soup
in Canada must come in 19-ounce cans. This requires
two different production lines and packaging.

A similar size requirement impacted baby food
manufacturers for many years, Schlosser says, but the
Canadian government recently lifted that mandate.
Schlosser notes that each country has separate
and distinct regulatory requirements, which
compel companies to file multiple applications.

“In order to get approval to use an SPF [sun protec-
tion factor] claim on a label, Health
Canada requires about three pages
of paperwork. Meanwhile, the FDA
requires nearly 50 pieces of informa-
tion,” Schlosser says.

In late 2011, the council formally
kicked off its efforts with the creation of
a joint action plan. Working groups
were created to develop common
approaches in areas such as food safety
testing; classification and labeling of
workplace hazardous chemicals; and
rail and motor-vehicle safety standards.

It remains to be seen when states
and provinces will be included in what has, to date, a federal
effort. Schlosser cites a number of areas
where state and provincial governments play
a prominent role (procurement, trans-
portation/trucking standards and business registration)
so it makes sense that they should be represented.

Many organizations believe the council’s work
is going too slowly. The U.S. Chamber of Commerce
recently helped organize a response to both countries’
requests for suggestions to move the process forward.

Iowa-Nebraska regional economic
collaboration seen as start of trend
that could benefit entire Midwest

In January, Nebraska Gov. Dave Heineman
and Iowa Gov. Terry Branstad signed a proclamation
initiating a new regional economic collaboration
between southeast Nebraska and southwest Iowa.

Through the agreement, Advance Southwest Iowa —
a recently established public-private partnership of
Council Bluffs, Iowa, city government, economic-develop-
ers and business groups — formally joined the Greater
Omaha (Nebraska) Economic Development Partnership,
a 20-year-old partnership that works to create jobs, attract
investment and grow the region’s economy.

Both governors are touting the collaboration as
a step to help the region gain national exposure and
attract more business. The eight-county Omaha-
Council Bluffs region has a population of nearly 900,000.

The effort will implement a five-year regional
economic-development plan that includes:
• creating, growing and recruiting businesses and
  jobs;
• developing a recognizable brand and image for
  the cross-state region;
• creating a pro-growth business climate; and
• retaining and recruiting the workforce for
  future growth.

“With a cross-state collaboration on business recruit-
ment and expansion, I believe this regional approach
creates a rising tide that lifts all boats,” Nebraska Sen.
Heath Mello says.

The new cross-state part-
nership, while looking toward areas of future growth, will also
tap into the region’s current strengths and areas of competi-
tive advantage.

“One industry where I be-
lieve we can see significant
growth in collaboration is in data centers,” Mello
says. “With recent additions of Yahoo, Google
and Travelers [Insurance] to the region, I believe
the joint focus on building sites and workforce
development will be enhanced.”

Another opportunity Mello sees emerging from
the collaboration is a new focus on the region’s
workforce needs and how both states are seeking
to meet the growing demand for skilled workers.

The collaboration exemplifies a growing trend
in economic development that recognizes the com-
monalities of regions regardless of governmental
boundaries, as well as the growing recognition that
regional economies are intertwined.

“The closely shared pro-growth economic goals of
the greater Omaha-Council Bluffs metropolitan area provide a new case study in regional economic
collaboration,” Mello says. “This focus on this type of collaboration is one that the Midwestern Legislative Conference’s Economic Development Committee has been exploring for
several years. Mello, current co-chair of that group,
is hopeful that this new effort will further that work.

“The MLCC Economic Development Committee will
be inviting this Nebraska-Iowa initiative to our
upcoming meeting in Omaha in 2014 to walk policy-
makers through the opportunities of expanding this
approach to their states and communities,” Mello says.
Great Lakes

Plenty of options, but no clear answers on next steps to prevent Asian carp invasion

In a January study exploring ways to prevent the movement of invasive species such as Asian carp between the Great Lakes and Mississippi River systems, the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers offers plenty of options, but no definitive answers on what to do next.

Reaction to the much-anticipated report, too, has highlighted continuing divisions in the region over how to attack the Asian carp problem. "Any plan that falls short of permanent ecological separation leaves Michigan's economy and ecology at risk," Michigan Attorney General Bill Schuette said after release of the study.

In contrast, Illinois' two U.S. senators oppose the idea of hydraulic separation, which would be accomplished through the construction of new physical barriers in the Chicago Area Waterway System. The Army Corps estimates that such a project would cost up to $18 billion. The other options are to simply continue current Asian carp prevention efforts, implement new nonstructural control strategies, or move ahead with structural changes that don't completely separate the Great Lakes and Mississippi River (new locks, electric barriers and treatment plants, for example).

"The study has good information and some new ideas, but falls short of giving us a path forward," says Tim Eder, executive director of the Great Lakes Commission. "And that is frustrating, because it is what we've been searching for since 2007."

In its analysis of the different options, the Army Corps rates hydraulic separation as the best way to stop interbasin transfers, but also notes that this alternative is the most expensive, would take 25 years to complete and would essentially close off the Chicago Area Waterway System to commercial navigation.

Changes to this 1,280-mile system of rivers and canals are complicated by the fact that it is used in so many ways — for flood protection, sewage discharges, commercial navigation, recreational boating and power generation. The impact of hydraulic separation on these existing uses is behind much of the opposition to the idea. And it also significantly increases the cost of such an infrastructure project.

For example, if new physical barriers were built along the Lake Michigan front, the Corps says new tunnels and reservoirs would have to be constructed to prevent widespread flooding. Or if such barriers were placed elsewhere, new tunnels and reservoirs would be needed to prevent untreated sewer discharges from flowing into Lake Michigan.

Consensus on hydraulic separation appears unlikely, but Eder is more confident about finding widespread support for new short-term strategies. For example, he says, a retrofitting of the Brandon Road Lock and Dam (part of the Chicago Area Waterway System) could add a significant layer of protection against the spread of Asian carp into the Great Lakes.

Current state and federal strategies to prevent an Asian carp invasion center on the use of electric barriers. A December 2013 federal study concluded that there was "no evidence that Asian carp are bypassing the barriers." However, that same study warned of evidence that shows the use of electric fields in the water don't always stop the movement of fish.

A 2012 binational study found that, if Asian carp were to enter the Great Lakes system, they would likely spread to all five lakes within a decade and have a severe ecological impact. "The region needs to come together on an action plan," Eder says.

Summary of options for controlling spread of Asian carp, other invasive species via Chicago Area Waterway System (CAWS)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Option</th>
<th>Description</th>
<th>Analysis</th>
<th>Source</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>No new actions</td>
<td>Continue current strategies: electric barriers, electrofishing and commercial harvesting of carp</td>
<td>Lowest-cost strategy, but also least effective in controlling interbasin transfer of invasive species</td>
<td>U.S. Army Corps of Engineers, <em>The GLMRIS Report: Great Lakes and Mississippi River Interbasin Study</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>New nonstructural control strategies</td>
<td>Use chemicals in CAWS, employ netting techniques to remove fish, start new boat inspections and education programs</td>
<td>Lower costs ($86 million) and limited impact on other users/uses of waterway system, but limited efficacy</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>New locks, buffer zones, electric barriers and treatment plants</td>
<td>Add new structural controls to prevent interbasin transfers, without hydraulic separation of the Great Lakes and Mississippi River systems</td>
<td>Higher costs ($7.8 billion to $15.5 billion) and longer time frame to complete (18 to 25 years); more effective than nonstructural controls to control interbasin transfers, but less effective than hydraulic separation</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hydraulic separation</td>
<td>Construct physical barriers to separate the Great Lakes and Mississippi River systems</td>
<td>Highest costs ($15.5 billion to $18.3 billion), long time frame to complete (25 years) and high impact on other users/uses of CAWS, but best way to stop interbasin movement of Asian carp and other invasive species</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hybrid approach</td>
<td>Construct physical barriers that hydraulically separate must, but not all, pathways in the CAWS and implement nonstructural control strategies</td>
<td>Higher costs ($8.3 billion to $15.1 billion), long time frame to complete (25 years) and not as effective as total hydraulic separation, but minimizes impact on existing users/uses of CAWS</td>
<td></td>
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</tbody>
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In Wisconsin, availability of ‘4K’ — kindergarten for 4-year-olds — now close to statewide

When it comes to offering 4-year-olds the chance to take part in early-childhood education, few states can boast a program as far-reaching as Wisconsin's.

And the state's 4K program keeps growing, according to new Wisconsin Department of Public Instruction data. This year, 93 percent of the state's public school districts that provide elementary education extended instruction to 4-year-olds. Since 2003, the number of districts taking part in the 4K program has more than doubled.

For decades, Wisconsin has included instruction for 4-year-olds as part of its state-aid formula for local schools (few states make such a funding commitment). Participating school districts must extend this learning option to all 4-year-olds within their jurisdictional borders, but they are then given wide discretion in how that instruction is delivered.

One common method, for example, is what has come to be known in Wisconsin as the "community approach": a partnership forged by local school districts, private child care facilities and local Head Start centers. Services can be delivered in different settings (a local private preschool, for example, or in a public school building), and the partnership also can include at-home support for parents.

Some districts, on the other hand, select a more traditional school-based approach to delivering 4K.

However it is delivered, "4K works for kids," says State Superintendent Tony Evers, citing studies that show links between quality early-education programs and a reduction in the need for special-education services as well as lower grade-retention rates and higher graduation rates.

Wisconsin's commitment to early learning began early in the state's history. Its 1848 Constitution called for schools to be "free and without charge for tuition to all children between the ages of 4 and 20 years."

The reinstatement in 1984 of state aid for 4K helped lay the groundwork for growth in the program. The 4K initiative has also spread due to heightened awareness about the value of early learning and more interest among parents and child care providers.

Brief written by Tim Anderson, who can be reached at tanderson@csg.org. CSG Midwest provides staffing services for the Great Lakes Legislative Caucus, Minnesota Sen. Ann Rest serves as caucus chair. Information is available at www.greatlakeslegislators.org.
Tourism, safety collide in debate over ATV laws

As the popularity of all-terrain vehicles, or ATVs, continues to rise, so does the call for changes in state law that permit the use of these vehicles on more of the Midwest’s roadways.

But the new legislative proposals are also raising concerns about road safety, with Iowa and Wisconsin among the states where the debate over ATV use has played out in recent years.

Last year, a measure (HF 619) allowing ATVs and utility-terrain vehicles (UTVs) on Iowa’s secondary roads passed by a wide margin in the House, but then stalled in the Senate. Legislation is once again being considered this year.

According to the ATV Safety Institute, there are more than 11 million of these vehicles now in the United States, and the number of miles ridden is up 48 percent over the past five years. Most riding is done for recreational purposes — which opens up new tourism possibilities for states.

Wisconsin alone has more than 6,000 miles of ATV trails, and it markets them as a tourist destination.

“Providing visitors a way to easily get back and forth from hotels to trails would boost ... this sector of the economy,” state Rep. Keith Ripp says.

His plan, as envisioned in AB 527, is to give local municipalities the authority to open up portions of highways or roadways within their borders for use by ATVs or UTVs. Access would be limited to the shortest distance between a residence, lodging establishment or filling station and an ATV trail.

As of now, ATV use on public roadways in Iowa and Wisconsin is largely prohibited, though exceptions are made for agricultural activity. The same is true in states such as Illinois, Iowa, Michigan and Nebraska.

In contrast, South Dakota has the least restrictive law, allowing for more general use on state highways if the vehicles include appropriate equipment. Kansas and North Dakota also permit use on certain roads.

The Consumer Product Safety Commission, which regulates the design and manufacture of ATVs, cautions against expanding access. ATVs and UTVs lack the necessary safety equipment for regular road use, the commission says, and their handling on paved roads is unpredictable.

The Specialty Vehicle Institute of America also opposes on-highway use of ATVs; it cites the rate of injuries and deaths associated with their use.

Between 1982 and 2011, 2,354 people died while operating an ATV; an estimated 30 percent to 50 percent of these deaths occurred on roadways.

Article written by Carolyn Drv, who serves as staff liaison to the Midwest Legislative Conference Agriculture & Natural Resources Committee. She can be reached at corr@sarl.us.

What the governors want: State of the State addresses focus on tax cuts, worker training and early learning

In State of the State addresses reflecting improved fiscal conditions in much of the Midwest, the region’s governors opened the 2014 legislative year with proposals to cut taxes and invest more in worker training and early-childhood education.

Eight of the region’s governors gave State of the State speeches in January. Over the coming weeks and months, the region’s legislators will decide the fate of the governors’ agendas for 2014. But these speeches provide a sneak peek at some of the priority issues for the Midwest’s political leaders in the year ahead.

Here’s a look at some of the recurring themes in this year’s addresses.

Time for tax cuts?

Most of the January speeches included calls for tax relief of some kind, with the governors citing factors such as strong budget reserves and more-stable economic conditions.

Michigan Gov. Rick Snyder made a general pitch to “ease “the burden on low- and middle-income families.” Two other governors — Wisconsin Gov. Scott Walker and Nebraska Gov. Dave Heineman — were more specific in their State of the State tax proposals.

Walker’s plan, in part, is to cut the state’s lowest income-bracket from 4.4 percent to 4.0 percent. Most of his proposed tax relief, though, centers on two other changes: a reduction in the withholding tax for state income taxes and a cut in property taxes.

In all, he told legislators, the plan amounts to $800 million in relief.

In Nebraska, the value of agricultural land has skyrocketed, with one effect being a rise in property taxes. To reduce this tax burden, Heineman told lawmakers, the state should make only 65 percent of the market value of agricultural land taxable; the rate is currently 75 percent.

He also wants a cut in Nebraska’s income tax rates, which he says are “higher than all of our neighboring states.”

Other governors, too, cited regional competitiveness as a reason for supporting their more-targeted tax-cutting plans. For example:

• Indiana Gov. Mike Pence wants to phase out the personal property business tax, which he says discourages investment and makes Indiana uncompetitive with neighboring states like Illinois and Ohio that don’t have such a tax.

• Iowa Gov. Terry Branstad wants to fully exempt military pensions from the income tax, which is already done in most other Midwestern states.

• Illinois Gov. Pat Quinn said his state should strive for a lowest in the nation Limited Liability Company fee in order to encourage business start-ups. He also called on lawmakers to double the state’s Earned Income Tax Credit.

Professor Larry Sabato’s “Crystal Ball” projections of 2014 governors’ races

State	Projection
Illinois	Toss-up
Iowa	Likely win for Republicans
Kansas	Safe Republican race
Minnesota	Likely win for Democrats
Montana	Likely win for Republicans
Ohio	Likely win for Republicans
South Dakota	Safe Republican race
Wisconsin	Likely win for Republicans

Source: University of Virginia Center for Politics

Plans for worker training, early learning

One commonality in many of the governors’ speeches was an emphasis on career training.

As part of his plan to better equip young people with job skills, South Dakota Gov. Dennis Daugaard has proposed more state aid to help high school students take dual-credit courses and allow local schools to expand their career and technical-education programs. In addition, he called for $1.5 million in scholarships for students who attend South Dakota’s technical institutes and, upon graduation, agree to stay in the state and work in a high-need area.

Branstad, meanwhile, wants to triple Iowa’s investment in “earn while they learn” apprenticeship programs, which he says allows young people to reduce their student debt while receiving hands-on career training.

Walker’s new budget proposes an additional $35 million for Wisconsin Fast Forward — the state’s new worker-training program. In particular, Walker said more state resources should go to local technical colleges and dual-enrollment programs that target skills training in high-demand jobs.

In Illinois, Quinn called for an expansion of the Youth and Young Adult Conservation Corps — a program that employs teenagers and adults in state parks and provides grants to local governments and not-for-profit groups that employ or train young people.

Quinn also unveiled a new Birth to Five Initiative, which would focus on connecting expectant mothers to prenatal care as well as increase support and training for the parents of preschool-age children.

Other governors, too, unveiled new early-learning proposals.

Kansas Gov. Sam Brownback, for example, has proposed statewide funding of all-day kindergar- ten, and Pence wants Indiana to begin providing vouchers for parents to send their children to preschool. Indiana’s pre-K program should be voluntary, Pence said, and would be targeted toward low-income families.
QUESTION OF THE MONTH

QUESTION: Can states require photo ID on the electronic benefit transfer (EBT) cards used by individuals who receive food stamps?

Under federal law, states can require that EBT cards for the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) include photos of the beneficiaries or that customers show photo ID to use the cards.

Massachusetts is the only state that currently has such a law.

SNAP is federally funded, but administrative costs are shared by states and the federal government. The photo ID requirement on SNAP cards aims to stop “trafficking” — trading food benefits to others for cash. According to the U.S. Department of Agriculture, the rate of trafficked benefits is about 1.3 percent, which would equal about $970 million in fiscal year 2012. The rate of trafficking, the USDA says, is down from 4 percent roughly 15 years ago. That’s in part because modern electronic cards and personal identification numbers offer increased security and allow purchases to be more closely monitored.

A 2012 study in Pennsylvania estimated the cost of putting photos on SNAP cards at $8 per card (versus 23 cents for cards without photos). Missouri stopped such a program in 2001 due to a lack of significant cost savings. Massachusetts had abandoned the use of photos on EBT cards in 2004, citing high administrative costs in relation to success in deterring fraud. But under a law passed last year, the state has 12 months to replace EBT cards with versions that include photos.

When a state passes legislation requiring photo ID to use SNAP benefit cards, it must then comply with several federal requirements.

One such rule is that relatives must be able to use the SNAP card to purchase groceries on behalf of a beneficiary. Therefore, if states require photos on EBT cards, they must have procedures in place for eligible members of the household to use the card. Critics point out that this process could be unwieldy, and they have raised concerns that it would be difficult and costly — if not impossible — to keep track of this information.

Under federal rules, too, SNAP beneficiaries cannot be treated differently than other shoppers; so, in states that implement the photo ID provision, SNAP retailers must ask all customers for photo identification. These requirements, some say, would place an undue burden on retailers, discouraging them from participating in SNAP. Federal rules also stipulate that state-issued SNAP cards be usable in other states.

Critics of the photo ID requirement say that most “trafficking” requires participation by a dishonest retailer, and that a photo ID would not curb this type of fraud. Such a requirement could also compel beneficiaries to visit a state office and get a photo taken.

Bills to add photos to SNAP cards have been introduced in at least three Midwestern states (Illinois, Michigan and Minnesota) over the past three years. Last year, separate bills in Illinois would have required photos on all EBT cards (HB 1235) or on all new cards (SB 1531).

Average # of people receiving food stamps in fiscal year 2012 (monthly average); % change since FY 2008*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>State</th>
<th>Average #</th>
<th>% Change</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Illinois</td>
<td>1,256,572</td>
<td>+4.5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Michigan</td>
<td>1,493,313</td>
<td>+4.8%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Minnesota</td>
<td>1,807,913</td>
<td>+4.5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Missouri</td>
<td>58,794</td>
<td>-21.4%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nebraska</td>
<td>103,846</td>
<td>+65.0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>North Dakota</td>
<td>526,869</td>
<td>+43.9%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>South Dakota</td>
<td>408,050</td>
<td>+62.5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Wisconsin</td>
<td>304,719</td>
<td>+62.5%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

* U.S. total in 2012 was 46.6 million, a 7.2 percent increase since 2008.

Source: U.S. Department of Agriculture

* U.S. total in 2012 was 46.6 million, a 7.2 percent increase since 2008.

FURTHER READING


“Food Stamps,” The Heritage Foundation

“Food Stamps,” The Cato Institute

Article written by Kate Tormey (ktormey@csg.org), staff liaison to the Midwestern Legislative Conference Health & Human Services Committee. Deb Miller (dmiller@csg.org), director of health policy for CSG, contributed to this article. Question of the Month highlights an inquiry received by CSG Midwest; to request assistance, please contact us at csgm@csg.org or 630.925.1922.
Policies focus on preventing parole violations, recidivism in high-risk populations

As chair of the corrections and judiciary appropriations subcommittees, Sen. John Proos wondered, too, if there were a better way to handle nonviolent offenders than simply sending them to prison.

“What if we spent one-quarter of that cost at the front door instead?”

One of the answers to that question has been Michigan’s Swift and Sure Sanctions program, an initiative that provides immediate repercussions for probationers and parolees who violate the terms of their agreement with the courts.

The voluntary program gives judges the ability to set individual requirements for each offender, as well as the sanctions he or she will face for breaking the rules.

For example, Proos relays a recent example from his home county, Berrien, where a probationer arrived at a state facility for his court mandated drug test. The test came back positive — and the parolee went directly to jail.

“This is not delayed justice. It is immediate, and there is a correlation between one’s behavior and the consequences,” Proos says.

**Prison health care spending on the rise: State options for reining in cost of care for inmates**

One driver of state corrections spending is the cost of providing medical care to inmates. In a recent study of 44 U.S. states, The Pew Charitable Trusts found that health care spending totaled $6.5 billion in 2008 — about 18 percent of total corrections budgets. Over the seven years studied (2001 through 2008), health care spending increased in 42 of the 44 states, with an average growth of 49 percent.

Tougher sentencing laws in the past few decades have caused inmates to be in prison longer; these prisoners, in turn, require more health care as they age. In 2012, one in nine prisoners was serving a life sentence, and 122,000 prisoners were age 55 or older. A report by the Michigan Senate Fiscal Agency found that the annual cost of medical care for an inmate age 55 to 59 was $11,000 — four times that of an offender between the ages of 20 and 24.

Many prisoners enter prison with existing chronic conditions, substance-abuse issues and mental illnesses. And delivering health care in prisons can often present logistical challenges, such as transportation to and from hospitals, which are often far away.

States have options for reining in health care costs in their prison systems, and some of these approaches were highlighted by Pew in its 2013 report “Managing Prison Health Care Spending.”

**Telehealth**

States can use electronic communications to avoid the cost of transferring inmates to outside medical facilities. The use of telehealth services allows inmates to consult with outside physicians and specialists via video conferencing. And on-site equipment that monitors vital signs remotely can help physicians determine whether a trip to the hospital is necessary.

In 2010, 26 of 44 states surveyed by the American Correctional Association were using telehealth to deliver medical services to inmates. In 2012, Pew says, the state of Georgia saved a total of $9 million, or about $500 per telehealth encounter.

**Outsourcing care**

Some states have partnered with state university medical centers to provide care outside of prisons when inmates need it.

Other states have hired private companies to provide correctional health care at a fixed rate — providing predictability in spending. In Kansas, for example, some inmate health care is provided by an outside contractor. The state has quality standards and monitors care to ensure prisoners receive adequate treatment.

**Federal matching funds**

Prisoners who meet certain eligibility requirements can receive health insurance through Medicaid. If inmates are enrolled in this state-federal program, states can seek federal matching funds for health services provided outside prison (such as when a prisoner is hospitalized).

In states that expand Medicaid under the Affordable Care Act, low-income childless adults will be newly eligible for the program, allowing states to receive enhanced matching funds for their outside care.

Only a handful of states have used Medicaid financing for inmate medical care. A 2013 study by The Ohio State University estimated that the state correctional system could save $273 million between fiscal years 2014 and 2022 by adopting this strategy.

**Medical parole**

Some states are adopting measures to release certain offenders who are terminally ill or severely disabled. State laws typically exempt certain kinds of offenders (such as sex offenders) and require that inmates pose little or no threat to public safety.

Geriatric parole was included in Ohio’s 2011 criminal justice reforms, which required the state Department of Corrections to review the cases of all parole-eligible inmates 65 and older; however, none of the 347 cases was recommended for an early-release hearing. Last year, the federal government announced that it will expand the use of “compassionate release” for people who committed nonviolent crimes and have served a significant portion of their sentences.
The hope is to modify negative behavior before it leads to a more serious offense — and a prison sentence. "States don’t need severe repercussions to deter crime, but the offender has to know that all actions will be met with a swift and certain response," Horowitz says.

Michigan’s Swift and Sure program began as a pilot initiative in 2012 and is now available to all Michigan counties that wish to participate. Right now, 12 counties are taking part, Proos says, and six more are expected to join soon. He adds that the program is funded through savings in Michigan’s corrections budget.

In fiscal years 2012 and 2013, there were 399 participants in Swift and Sure. Among those, 95 percent were not rearrested during their time in the program. Proos says the program is a good first step in slowing the spiraling cost of corrections.

"This is a smart investment to decrease the number of people entering the front door of our prisons," he says.

"It begins to change patterns of behavior instead of waiting to fix problems once [offenders] are in the system, costing our taxpayers far too much money."

Ohio offers new prison alternatives

The cost of corrections is driven not only by how many people go to prison, but also how long they stay there — and whether they return.

Some states have worked to shift decision-making to judges in an effort to ensure that offenders receive a punishment that fits the crime but also aims to get them back into society as soon as possible.

In 2011, Ohio lawmakers passed a sentencing-reform bill that provides alternatives to incarceration for nonviolent, first-time offenders; increases the amount of time inmates can reduce their sentences for participating in certain programs; and emphasizes the use of community-based facilities (such as halfway houses) instead of prisons. Rep. Tracy Maxwell Heard was a lead sponsor of HB 86.

"This is giving discretion back to judges so they wouldn’t have their hands tied by mandatory sentencing," she says.

"In cases where [the judge] sees there should be treatment, or community-based facility versus prison, he has the opportunity to implement that where he feels appropriate."

Ohio received assistance from The Council of State Governments’ Justice Center, whose Justice Reinvestment initiative helps states adopt evidence-based reforms that increase public safety and reduce corrections costs.

Heard also emphasizes the importance of making sure offenders are successful when they return to society. Ohio legislation passed in 2012 (SB 337), for example, makes it easier for certain offenders to get driver’s licenses when they leave prison. (Heard points out that a driver’s license is a key to getting and keeping a job.)

The bill also lifts other "collateral sanctions" — rules that prevent offenders from certain activities, such as receiving occupational licenses. Under the law, offenders can receive permission to work in areas unrelated to their crimes.

"If [the work] has nothing to do with the crime they have committed, why should they be excluded?" Heard says. "We need to make sure we have legitimate avenues for people to reintegrate into society."

Heard is proud of the reforms, but she says the work isn’t done yet. Looking ahead, she’d like to take a more "holistic approach" to reducing Ohio’s prison population — in particular, getting to the root of why people turn to crime.

"People generally don’t fall into criminal activity all of a sudden," she says. "There are circumstances that lead up to that, such as lack of employment.

"Maybe Mom and Dad aren’t working and the kids are dealing drugs trying to feed the family. Some things are circumstantial, and where we can avoid those, we should."

She points out, for example, that the public education system is a tool for ensuring that children have the opportunity for a good job, which is a key factor in preventing them from turning to crime.

She adds that job training for adults is important, but that she’d like to see the state better match the skills of workers to the jobs available. "As legislators, the bottom line is about our budget," Heard says.

"Let’s look at how many low-level offenders are going to prison, and how many recidivate and how much that is costing us. Let’s look at how much more effective it is to give people treatment instead of going to prison."

Successful programs in Illinois, Ohio reflect national trend in state juvenile justice systems

One of the more dramatic trends in state criminal justice systems has been the decade-long drop in the rate of young people in juvenile confinement, due in part to policy changes made across the country.

Jake Horowitz, state policy director for the Pew Charitable Trusts’ Public Safety Performance Project, says those changes reflect concerns about both the high cost of locking up young offenders (estimated to be as much as $100,000 per year) and the ineffectiveness of confinement.

As a 2013 Pew report notes: "Many policymak- ers believe that expense would be justified if it improved public safety, but research has demonstrated that residential placements generally fail to produce better outcomes than alternative sanctions. The cost much more, and actually increase reoffending for certain youth."

Between 1997 and 2013, the study found, U.S. juvenile confinement rates fell by 48 percent.

Meanwhile, states such as Ohio and Illinois have reported success in implementing alternatives to incarceration.

RECLAIM Ohio, first launched in 1994, helps steer youth offenders to community-based alternatives to lockup by providing local governments with an incentive to supervise youth in communities.

"Usually the public safety and fiscal goals of states and counties are not particularly well aligned," Horowitz says. "If a county does a great job [in managing a youth], they don’t get additional dollars from the state. But if they send kids to the state system, it is free to the counties."

But with RECLAIM, the state offers Ohio counties funding for managing youth cases locally (exceptions are made for youths charged with certain serious offenses). Between 1994 and 2013, counties received more than $500 million from the state to support community-based services.

"What has led to is a very big reduction in the number of kids who spend time in residential facilities, and it’s saved the state a lot of money," Horowitz says. "Juvenile crime has plummeted."

Illinois adopted a program similar to RECLAIM Ohio in 2005. Under Redeploy Illinois, counties that agree to adhere to a 25 percent reduction in commitments to state facilities receive a financial incentive. Illinois youths who are diverted to community programs receive services such as counseling, substance-abuse and mental-health treatment, and skills training.

According to a 2010 analysis, eight Redeploy sites achieved a 53 percent diversion rate from state lockup to locally based programs, accounting for a savings of $9 million for Illinois.

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**Midwestern states that have received support from CSG’s Justice Center on justice reinvestment**

**State** | **Cities in state prisons (FY 2010)** | **Total annual taxpayer costs**
---|---|---
Illinois | 45,551 | $1.7 billion
Indiana | 36,417 | $560 million
Iowa | 8,384 | $276 million
Kansas | 8,098 | $181 million
Michigan | 45,096 | $1.3 billion
Minnesota | 9,557 | $395 million
Nebraska | 4,542 | $163 million
North Dakota | 1,479 | $58 million
Ohio | 50,960 | $1.3 billion
South Dakota | Not available | Not available
Wisconsin | 21,015 | $674 million

I never need of a reminder of why she serves in the Nebraska unicameral Legislative. Sen. Kate Sullivan can peer into her garden — home to one of the most gratifying gifts she has ever received. It is a rose given to her by a family appreciative of what Sullivan had done very early in her legislative career. At that time, a regional family for people with developmental disabilities was downsizing, and the family’s loved one faced the loss of services — and a home — as a result. Sullivan intervened, advocated on behalf of the family and helped keep their loved one at the regional center. “It has been one of the most remarkable things about being here,” Sullivan says about the opportunity as one of the state’s 49 senators to help constituents. “You get hundreds of e-mails, and you hear from people with legitimate concerns. You want to help them all you can, and in some cases, it doesn’t take a change in public policy. It takes having a great [legislative] staff and having a good working relationship with the state agencies and others.”

Sen. Sullivan was first elected in 2008, and her six years in the unicameral have allowed her to continue a longtime commitment to being an active member of her community and state. She previously served 12 years as a school board member in Cedar Rapids, a small town in Nebraska. Her roots in rural Nebraska run deep. She and her husband, Mike, have lived in Cedar Rapids for 30 plus years where they raised their two daughters and continue to operate the local community bank. She is also involved in a farm operation that has been in her family for more than 100 years. After her daughters had grown up, Sullivan says, it was time to take on a new challenge — running for a seat in the state’s unique unicameral legislature. Public leadership had long interested Sullivan.

As a child, she recalls her father — a charter member of a local public power district — going from farmstead to farmstead, trying to convince neighbors to sign up for rural electricity. “He instilled in me the importance of public service,” Sullivan says. “He was a farmer, but also had a vision for his community.”

Much of Sullivan’s vision for Nebraska now centers on what she calls “the great equalizer,” schools and the opportunities they provide people. As chair of the unicameral Education Committee, which oversees both K-12 and postsecondary education policy, she is in a unique position to turn that vision into reality. Earlier this year, CSG Midwest spoke to Sen. Sullivan about her priorities as chair of the Education Committee and her reflections on serving in the nation’s only nonpartisan, one-house state legislature. Here are excerpts from that interview.

Q: What do you see as the value of the Legislature investing more time and energy into long-term planning for the state?

A: One of things I’ve become more and more cognizant of because of term limits is the importance of things like legislative planning and visioning. For example, we now have a legislative committee devoted to planning for the future.

Each year, we look at issues that are of concern to the state. We research them and we produce policy briefs on how to address them. When our legislative planning committee first started, there was some anxiousness on the part of the chairs of the standing committees that we were taking away some of their responsibilities. But that couldn’t be further from the truth. So many times, the chairs of standing committees are almost in a situation of having to react, but these planning efforts now allow them to be more proactive.

Q: You’re now in your sixth year of serving in the nation’s only nonpartisan, one-house legislature. What are some of the things that stand out to you about how the process works?

A: People find out very early on, even if they start out being quite partisan, that you are going to be much more effective as a policymaker if you are true to a system that is meant to be nonpartisan. That in and of itself is a reason the system works.

The other hallmark of our unicameral, and one that I try to mention to my constituents every time I talk about it, is the openness of the system. We have 461 [introduced] bills this year, and every single one of them receives a public hearing. That is so valuable.

Overall, too, there is such accessibility and transparency. I don’t see how anyone in the state can say they are not privy to what is going on in the Legislature, because we really are out there and take it as a point of pride to be a citizen’s legislature.

Women in leadership: A review of committee chairs in state legislatures

Nebraska Sen. Kate Sullivan is one of eight women serving as the chair of an education policy committee in the 11-state Midwest. In all, 86 women lead one of the region’s 451 standing legislative committees — amounting to a rate of 19 percent. (Close to 40 percent of the Midwest’s education committee chairs are women.)

The percentage of committee-chairs positions held by women varies widely among states in the Midwest — from a high of 36 percent in Illinois to a low of 7 percent in Indiana, a CSG Midwest analysis shows.

A nationwide study done by Rutgers University’s Center for American Women and Politics also showed wide variances — 77 percent of the legislative committee chairs in Colorado were women in 2013, while no women held such positions in South Carolina. Overall, the study found, women accounted for 19 percent of the committee chairs in U.S. state legislatures. About 24 percent of the nation’s state legislators are women.

Bio-sketch: Sen. Sullivan

✓ member of Nebraska unicameral legislature since 2009
✓ chair of Education Committee
✓ 2010 graduate of CSG Midwest’s Bouhag Institute for Legislative Leadership Development (BILLD) and vice chair of Midwestern Legislative Conference’s BILLD Steering Committee
✓ serves on board of directors for Cedar Rapids State Bank and as president of Kokes Corp. family farm
✓ former 12-year member of Cedar Rapids School Board

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Taking back the streets
Ohio initiative combines law enforcement, rehabilitation and community approaches to battle violent neighborhood crime

by Ohio Attorney General Mike DeWine

The announcement in Akron last year introducing our Ohio Attorney General’s Office “Safe Neighborhoods Initiative” took place against a sobering backdrop. In that city during the early months of 2013, an intruder broke into a home and killed a 16-year-old girl with a single gunshot to her head. She was four months pregnant. During another incident, four people were senselessly gunned down at a local housing project. And later in the same month, a developmentally disabled young man was shot to death at the fast-food restaurant where he was simply trying to earn a living.

The initiative in Akron in part because of a study my office commissioned on gun violence found that Summit County (where Akron is the county seat) had the third-largest number of high-rate violent offender convictions in the entire state. That means offenders who, despite having two violent felony convictions, go on to commit a third, a fourth or even more violent offenses.

This is simply not acceptable. That’s why we’re working directly with communities and local law enforcement to help them retrace the streets from those who are carelessly committing repeated crimes. The goal of the “Safe Neighborhoods Initiative” is to help steer violent criminals on a path toward a more productive life and, in the process, improve the lives of everyone living around them.

Here’s an overview of our approach.

Putting focus on core offenders

In 2011, we gathered statewide experts to examine the gun violence problem in the state. As part of the study done by Dr. Deanna Wilkinson of The Ohio State University, we found that less than 1 percent of the people in Ohio had two or more violent felony offenses but are responsible for 57 percent of Ohio’s violent felony convictions.

As a result of that study, we worked with the state legislature to craft a proposal that imposes a mandatory prison sentence on those who have been convicted of two separate violent offenses, get out of prison, and then are caught possessing a gun. It also doubles the time that can be added to a sentence for a gun specification (meaning the offender had a firearm while committing the offense and displayed it, brandished it, used it to facilitate the offense or indicated that he or she possessed the firearm).

The bill is working its way through the legislative process, and we hope it will soon be passed. Next, we put in place the “Safe Neighborhoods Initiative,” a group-violence-reduction strategy similar to what was sometimes called Operation Ceasefire in Boston’s original pilot program. Here’s how it works:

To start, high-crime neighborhoods are identified and the most violent neighborhood is targeted first. Then, the most-violent offenders and/or gang leaders are identified. Of those offenders, those who are on parole and probation are ordered to appear for a “call-in.”

At the call-in, law enforcement tells the offenders about the prison sentences they’ll face if they continue committing violent crime. A doctor describes the consequences of gunshot wounds. A friend or relative of a victim relays how violence devastates families. And a member of the clergy pleads for an end to the violence.

The offenders have the chance to walk away from the violence and make sure they want to stop committing violent crimes, work on a GED, find employment and Robert Drug Treatment.

This approach works because it confronts, head-on, what propels violence in the streets.

First, it tells the offenders that the community wants the violence to stop; it tells them they’re valued, and that the community wants them to succeed.

Second, it offers help to offenders who want it.

Third, it creates certain and credible consequences for homicides and shootings that are directed at gangs and violent groups, as a whole.

Similar programs have been effective in limiting gun-related violence in cities such as Boston, Chicago, Indianapolis and Minneapolis.

In Baltimore’s Cherry Hill neighborhood, its program was associated with a 56 percent reduction in homicides involving a gun and a 34 percent decline in nonfatal shootings.

In Ohio, Canton, Cincinnati, Cleveland, Dayton, Middletown and Toledo have also undertaken versions of this program.

Initial successes in two cities

The “Safe Neighborhoods Initiative” is currently underway in Akron and Warren, where individuals who have gone through this program have, so far, not been arrested for any new violent crimes. In addition, Lima had its first call-in on Jan. 24 of this year, and Steubenville’s first was scheduled for Feb. 21.

We’ve added provisions to the initiative to make our efforts more holistic. For example, we’ve committed grant funds for Boys and Girls Clubs to expand their sites so that kids in violent neighborhoods have opportunities to thrive and have alternatives to violence.

We’ve also made our office’s Bureau of Criminal Investigation resources available for, and focused some of the Ohio Peace Officer Training course work on, gang-related activities. And we’ve used funds from the National Mortgage Settlement reached by the nation’s attorneys general to enable the demolition of abandoned properties around the state that otherwise would have attracted crime and continued to blight neighborhoods.

Protecting families is the core function of government — nothing matters more.

With our “Safe Neighborhoods Initiative,” we want to shield the kids who are growing up in every one of Ohio’s most violent neighborhoods. They’re trying to avoid the ever-present violence in their midst; they’re dodging gunfire; they’re trying simply to survive.

We must give these kids their childhood back. And we must do all we can to prevent more young mothers-to-be, housing project residents, and workers who are just starting out from needlessly losing their lives to violence.

Ohio Attorney General Mike DeWine was elected in 2010 after having served for 30 years as a state senator, U.S. representative and senator, and Ohio’s lieutenant governor.

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.
Applications now available to apply for region’s top legislative-leadership program

Each summer, a select group of Midwestern legislators gathers in Madison, Wis., to take part in the Toll Fellowship Program designed exclusively for the region’s newer lawmakers: the Bowhay Institute for Legislative Leadership Development. Applications are now available for the 2014 Bowhay Institute, which will be held Aug. 8-12.

The Toll Fellowship Program offers a multistate approach to explore key policy issues in state government. In addition, the institute offers participants a non-partisan environment in which to discuss the meaning of leadership and strategies for more effective policymaking. “I came away feeling I learned something that I could apply to what I’m doing in the legislature,” says Indiana Rep. Rebecca Kubacki, a graduate of the 2012 Bowhay Institute. “I grew as a legislator from the experience.”

More than 650 regional lawmakers have completed BILLD since its inception in 1995. Many of the graduates have gone on to hold key leadership positions in their legislatures; others are now serving in the U.S. Congress and in other state government positions.

Toll Fellows program offers professional development for mid-career policymakers

Applications are also now available for The Council of State Governments’ Leadership Development Program for mid-career legislators. The Toll Fellowship Program, named for CSG’s founder Henry Wolcott Toll, is one of the nation’s premier professional-development programs for state government officials.

Each year, the Toll program brings 48 of the nation’s top state government officials together for an intensive six-day “intellectual boot camp.” It targets emerging leaders from all three branches of government. This year’s program will be held Sept. 5-10 in Lexington, Ky.

The program’s agenda includes a lineup of dynamic speakers and sessions designed to stimulate personal assessment and growth while networking and relationship-building opportunities. While each year’s program is unique, previous programs have included sessions on leadership personality assessment, media training, crisis management, appreciative inquiry, adaptive leadership and much more.

Past graduates have gone on to serve as governors, secretaries of state, chief justices, leaders of state houses and senates, and members of the U.S. Congress. At present, Toll’s alumni include four current governors, four lieutenant governors, 10 secretaries of state, five chief justices, six members of Congress and the U.S. secretary of labor.

Toll Fellows are chosen by a panel of program alumni in a bipartisan competitive selection process; 12 applicants are chosen from each of CSG’s four regions.

Applications are due May 2 and are available online at www.csg.org/leadershipcenter.

Export-promotion program up for continued funding

A federal program that provides grants to states for export promotion — and was established with the assistance of CSG — could continue for a third year under a bill being considered in the U.S. Congress.

Under the State Trade and Export Program, created in 2010, the U.S. Small Business Administration provides states with matching grants to offer small businesses incentives to export goods. STEP was created with strong support from the State International Development Organizations, a CSG affiliate, which reports that states have seen up to a 40-to-1 return on investments in export promotion through the program.

An appropriations bill being considered at the federal level would provide $8 million for STEP this year. More information about the program is available at www.sdadamerica.org.

Jay Emler — a former Midwestern Legislative Conference chair and national CSG chair — was appointed last month to the Kansas Corporation Commission. As a member of the commission, Emler will help regulate public utilities, common carriers, motor carriers, and oil and gas production.

Emler served in the Kansas Senate for 13 years and was elected majority leader in 2011. During his time as a legislator, he also served as chairman of the Utilities and Ways and Means committees.

In 2009, Emler became chair of the MLC and presided over its annual meeting in Overland Park, Kan. He went on to become CSG’s national chair in 2012.

Emler and his wife, Lorraine, live in Kansas’ McPherson County, where they operate a family farm. CSG Midwest would like to thank Emler for his service to the MLC and congratulate him on his new role in state government.

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Emler named to Kansas utility commission

The highly interactive curriculum is designed for legislators in their first four years of service. It includes a series of leadership training courses, policy seminars and professional-development workshops.

Another important aspect of BILLD is the opportunity it affords participants to meet and work with lawmakers from across the region. “The relationships developed through the BILLD experience are invaluable,” says Ohio Sen. Cliff Hite, co-chair of the BILLD Steering Committee, which oversees the program.

CSG’s Midwestern Legislative Conference conducts the annual program in partnership with The Robert M. La Follette School of Public Affairs at the University of Wisconsin-Madison. Applications for this summer’s program are due April 7. They are available at www.csgmidwest.org.

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MLC Annual Meeting to feature historian Doris Kearns Goodwin, top policy experts

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.csgmidwest.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, 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 network with legislative colleagues from the Midwest.

Policy sessions will cover key issues of interest to state lawmakers

The 2014 meeting in Omaha will include a talk by Pulitzer Prize-winning historian Doris Kearns Goodwin, whose latest book is “The Bully Pulpit: Theodore Roosevelt, William Howard Taft, and the Golden Age of Journalism.” Her book “Team of Rivals” was a New York Times best seller and the basis for the Academy Award-winning “Lincoln.”

Attendees will also have the chance to hear from Joel Kotkin, an internationally recognized authority on economic and political trends. Kotkin will examine the future of Midwestern states, the unique challenges and opportunities that lie ahead for this region in the global economy, and the policy options available to lawmakers.

This year’s conference will also include a session on the past, present and future of Midwestern legislatures. Gary Moncrief, a professor of political science at Boise State University and a leading expert on American politics, will take a historical look at Midwestern legislatures.

Moncrief recently co-wrote “Why States Matter,” a book that explains why states have once again emerged as policy forces in U.S. government and politics. Moncrief’s presentation will draw on his extensive knowledge of state legislatures and will explore how states have filled the policy gaps left by continuing gridlock at the federal level.

Another session will take a closer look at one unique state legislature in the Midwest: the 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; daytime activities will be available for guests of all ages.

Evening events will include the Opening Night Reception at The Durham Museum (located at Omaha’s historic Union Station), Family Night at Omaha’s Henry Doorly Zoo & Aquarium (home of the Desert Dome, the largest indoor desert in the world), and the MLC Annual Meeting’s traditional State Dinner.

Spouse, guest and youth day trips include trips to the Old Market Business District, the Omaha Children’s Museum and Lauritzen Gardens.

Agenda highlights: MLC Annual Meeting in Omaha

The conference will include a mix of renowned speakers, policy sessions and opportunities for professional development. Highlights include:

✓ A presentation by Pulitzer Prize-winning historian Doris Kearns Goodwin;
✓ A keynote session led by Joel Kotkin, an internationally recognized authority on economic and political trends;
✓ A session led by Gary Moncrief, a leading national scholar on state governments;
✓ Policy sessions on education, health care, agriculture, economic development, Midwest-Canada relations and state fiscal conditions;
✓ A preview of the 2014 elections;
✓ A look back at the origins of the Nebraska unicameral; and
✓ A professional development workshop titled “Mental Toughness for Legislators.”

More information about the agenda and registration are available at www.csgmidwest.org.
Ohio plans on more borrowing, more aid for local infrastructure

A nearly 30-year-old initiative that provides state dollars for local infrastructure projects has bipartisan support inside the Ohio Capitol. But for the state to continue issuing these infrastructure bonds, voters will have to give the OK when they go to the polls in May. Since first becoming part of the Ohio Constitution in 1987, the State Capital Improvement Program has been renewed twice, with 62 percent of voters approving it in 1995 and 54 percent in 2005. The plan proposed by legislators (SRJ 6) would boost funding over the next decade, with annual spending of $175 million in the first five years and $200 million in the last five. Current funding is set at $150 million per year, The Columbus Dispatch reports. Proceeds from the state-issued bonds help pay for roads, sewers and other local projects. Through the work of 19 different public-works districts, local leaders decide the projects they want funded. According to the National Association of State Budget Officers, bonds accounted for an estimated 2.0 percent of total spending by Ohio in fiscal year 2013. Nationwide, they accounted for 2.9 percent of state expenditures. Bonds made up close to 3 percent of state expenditures in Illinois and Kansas (highest totals in the Midwest), NASBO says. Indiana, Nebraska and Wisconsin reported no bonds-related spending.

North Dakota, South Dakota join forces to help disabled children

Through a partnership with the federal government, and with each other in some cases, three states in the Midwest have launched initiatives to improve the educational and employment outcomes of young people with disabilities. These programs will establish new interventions for youths receiving Supplemental Security Income, or SSI. North Dakota and South Dakota are part of a six-state consortium that received a U.S. Department of Education grant of $32.5 million. Those six states will enroll 2,000 low-income individuals between the ages of 14 and 16. Recruitment efforts will focus in part on rural and tribal areas. Enrollees will receive benefits counseling, financial training, work-based learning experiences and other intervention services. Wisconsin has received a stand-alone federal grant of $32.5 million. One goal of these new programs is to reduce recipients’ long-term reliance on SSI. In the Midwest, SSI beneficiaries with disabilities account for between 2.5 percent of the state population (in Michigan, highest rate in the region) and 1.1 percent (North Dakota, lowest rate in the Midwest). The U.S. average is 2.2 percent, according to the Kaiser Family Foundation. With the exception of Michigan and Ohio, states in the region fall below the U.S. rate.

In Nebraska, winner doesn’t always take all in presidential election

As early as the late 18th century, political leaders such as Thomas Jefferson were pondering a political question left open to each state: How should our Electoral College votes be awarded? Fast-forward to this year, and Nebraska legislators were debating the same question. Right now, the Cornhusker State is one of two U.S. states without a winner-take-all system, in which all of the electors go to the presidential candidate who wins the statewide vote. Since 1992, Nebraska has instead awarded electors partly by congressional district. In 2008, Barack Obama won one Nebraska district and was awarded one of the state’s five Electoral College votes. LB 382 would make Nebraska a winner-take-all system, a move that supporters say would help prevent partisan gerrymandering and consolidate Nebraska’s limited power in presidential elections. The bill’s opponents, however, point to the 2008 election as an example of the current system’s merits. Because a part of Nebraska was electorally “undecided,” they say, campaign spending and political interest in Nebraska rose. At one time, states used varying ways of awarding electors. But by 1836, Jefferson and others had decided on a winner-take-all system — in part because of a desire among states to maximize their voting influence in the Electoral College.

Wisconsin OKs package of bills to strengthen mental health system

Wisconsin legislators agreed in January to invest $4 million over the next two years on a plan to improve the state’s mental health system, the Milwaukee Journal Sentinel reports. Passage of the multi-bill package culminated months of legislative work that began in early 2013 with formation of the Speaker’s Task Force on Mental Health. The new measures will: • create crisis-intervention teams made up of law enforcement officers who have undergone specialized mental health training; • offer new incentives for physicians and psychiatrists (up to $60,000) to serve in underserved areas of Wisconsin; • establish a hotline that connects mental health professionals with children who need help and live in underserved areas; and • invest in job training for people with severe mental illness and in-home treatment for children. Also in January, Michigan legislators and other state leaders issued a set of recommendations calling for improvements to their state’s mental health system. They focus on three areas: independent living for people with mental illnesses; better access to high-quality, coordinated care; and new metrics that evaluate the effectiveness of different mental health services.