

# LEGISLATIVE UPDATE



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## A Session Unlike Any Other

Like every aspect of life since the advent of COVID-19, the work of the Illinois General Assembly screeched to a halt in early March. The last “normal” day of session was March 5, with the legislature scheduled to take a one-week break before the general primary election on March 17. The break became open-ended, with the House and Senate cancelling week after week of regularly scheduled session and moving back committee and third reading deadlines as the coronavirus pandemic escalated.

Governor JB Pritzker issued multiple executive orders related to COVID-19, but he made it clear that his authority would not be extended to crafting a state budget without legislative input. Legislative leaders issued a special session proclamation on May 13, 2020, calling members back to Springfield on May 20 for a four-day session focused on a limited number of issues, including a fiscal year 2021 spending plan.

To protect the health and safety of lawmakers, a number of safeguards were taken, including holding House session in the Bank of Springfield convention center. The alternate venue allowed for social distancing of the chamber’s 118 members. Members and staff were required to be tested for the virus before convening and prior to session one legislator tested positive for coronavirus, and another was quarantined due to exposure to a positive individual.

The special session was focused on a narrow range of topics in order to limit the time that legislators would

be in a group setting. Those topics included actions related to the COVID-19 pandemic, the state budget and budget implementation, economic recovery and capital projects, laws and authority scheduled for repeal prior to June 1, 2021, the hospital assessment program and legislative action needed to put the question of a graduated income tax on the November ballot.

Prior to the abbreviated session, legislators in both chambers organized working groups in order to gather stakeholder input on a range of topics. These working groups became the primary conduit for organizations to weigh in on the state’s COVID-19 response and ensure their voices were heard. In a joint letter with the Illinois Association of Fire Chiefs and the Northern Alliance of Fire Protection Districts, IAFPD urged the working groups to adequately fund the Office of the State Fire Marshal and the Illinois Department of Public Health Emergency Services division, to provide personal protective equipment for fire departments and to prioritize first responders in the distribution of federal CARES funds.

IAFPD also contacted the working groups independently to highlight the potential impact of the pandemic on property tax revenues that fund fire protection districts, and request that special districts be eligible for federal stimulus funds. The legislation that was enacted to address the distribution of CARES funding to local governments did include a small set-aside for units of government other than counties and

townships that can be used to reimburse expenses allowed under the CARES Act, such as personal protective equipment.

Changes to the state’s workers’ compensation laws were also closely monitored by the association during the special session. Lawmakers ultimately approved a plan to create a temporary rebuttable presumption for first responders and front-line workers who contract coronavirus from March 9, 2020 through the end of the year but allows employers to challenge claims under certain circumstances.

Due to the condensed timeframe of the special session and the many factors that could impact the delicately balanced state budget, the upcoming fall Veto Session may see many of these measures revisited. Legislators will reconvene for the veto session November 17, 18, and 19 and December 1, 2, and 3<sup>rd</sup>. As always, IAFPD will follow developments on issues related to local governments and first responders for impact on our members. ■