



**86th Legislature - March 2020
House District 1**

**Bowie, Franklin, Lamar & Red River counties
District & Capitol Report**

Message to my friends and constituents: As my staff and I thought about what to put in this month's e-newsletter, we realized that it would be different than my normal monthly e-newsletters because the times are now different than what they were just a month ago. So much has changed in such a drastically short period of time. With these changes and the uncertainty accompanying the challenges of a worldwide pandemic, I wanted this e-newsletter to focus on and provide you information and links to the resources you need to continue keeping your family safe and how to transition to a "new normal." Everything in our daily lives are affected by COVID-19, and information changes hourly if not more frequently.

As of March 26, the number of confirmed COVID-19 cases in Texas was 1,656 with 22 deaths in 92 counties. Most of the state's large urban counties, or at least the largest cities in those counties, have issued shelter-in-place orders for up to three weeks to try to stem the spread of the coronavirus.

The number of people who filed for unemployment benefits last week increased 860 percent from the week before. State Comptroller Glenn Hegar stated in an interview with the *Texas Standard* on March 24, that the state's unemployment rate for March could rise to nine percent from a 3.4 percent unemployment rate at the end of 2019. Comptroller Hegar expects the rate to continue rising to the "low double digits." He went on to say that the state's revenue will decline by several billion dollars as the state's two revenue workhorses, sales taxes and taxes on oil and gas, are taking tremendous blows. One-third of the state's revenue comes from federal sources, and of the remaining two-thirds, 58 percent come from the sales tax so contractions in consumer spending naturally has a big impact on local and state revenues. Unfortunately, at this point, no one know where the bottom is or how much longer the current situation will exist.

Mr. Dale Craymer, the executive director of the Texas Taxpayers and Research Association (TTARA), was quoted recently in the Texas Tribune¹ that for every dollar decrease in the price of a barrel of oil, the state loses \$85 million in revenue each year. In the 2019 legislative session, the comptroller pegged the price of a barrel of oil at \$55 a barrel for the 2020-21 biennium, which started on September 1, 2019 and ends August 31, 2021. On March 27, the price of a barrel of oil was \$21.52.

Responding to this pandemic challenge will require perseverance, dedication and sacrifice. The race to overcome this situation will be a marathon and not a sprint. All levels of government are having to write the rulebook as the game is being played, and I cannot thank everyone enough for their hard work and dedication. An especially big thank you and recognition must be given to all of our health care providers for their dedication and professionalism in taking care of all of us while coping with real shortages of personal protective equipment (PPEs) they need to keep themselves safe.

Please know that my staff and I are here, as always, to help you however we can. Though my staff are working remotely, please continue to call the District office at 903-628-0361 or the Capitol office at 512-463-0692.

Presidential disaster declaration. On March 23, Governor Greg Abbott requested that the president issue a major disaster declaration for the state of Texas. President Donald Trump approved the disaster declaration request two days later on March 25, which will provide financial assistance to all 254 counties. It is not yet clear how much funding the state will receive. The governor's request stressed that the state needed additional financial assistance to respond to the COVID-19 pandemic "to save lives, to protect property, public health, and safety, and to lessen or avert the threat of a larger disaster."

Coronavirus Aid, Relief, and Economic Security (CARES) Act. I want to thank House Speaker Dennis Bonnen and his staff for providing the following information almost as soon as the U.S. House of Representatives approved this coronavirus relief act:

"Following the U.S. Senate's passage earlier this week, moments ago, the U.S. House of Representatives issued their final stamp of approval on the estimated \$2 trillion stimulus package to battle the adverse effects of the COVID-19 pandemic on the nation. Highlights of the Coronavirus Aid, Relief, and Economic Security (CARES) Act include:

- \$150 billion for a Coronavirus Relief Fund for state, local and tribal governments, allocated by population proportions.
- o According to estimates, **the State of Texas will receive approximately \$11.2 billion in total.**
- o The minimum share for the state to receive is 55% of the total allocation, which is roughly \$6.2 billion.

o Local governments with populations of at least 500,000 may request a direct payment from the treasury secretary. State allotments are reduced by the local payment, but the portion of a state's allotment that can be provided directly to local governments is capped at 45%. That cap amounts to \$5.06 billion of Texas' total share.

- \$30 billion for an Education Stabilization Fund for states, school districts and higher ed costs related to COVID-19.
- \$45 billion for the Disaster Relief Fund for the immediate response and recovery needs of state and local governments.
- Expands unemployment insurance from three to four months, and provides temporary unemployment compensation of \$600 per week, which is in addition to and the same time as regular state and federal UI benefits. This extra payment will be excluded when determining eligibility for Medicaid and CHIP.
- \$500 billion lending fund for businesses, cities and states, including \$29 billion for loans to U.S. airlines and related businesses. Stock buybacks and executive compensation would be restricted.
- \$349 billion in low-interest small business loans that could be partially forgiven.
- Direct payments of up to \$1,200 for individual taxpayers and \$500 for each dependent child under 17, phased out when incomes exceed \$75,000 for individuals and \$150,000 for couples filing jointly. Anyone making over \$99,000 would not get a payment (\$198,000 for couples). Money is expected to go out by April 6th.
- \$1.4 billion for deployments of up to 20,000 members of the National Guard, under the direction of the governors of each state, for the next six months.
- \$4.3 billion in additional CDC funding to support federal, state and local public health agencies in their response.
- Extends Real ID deadline for full implementation by states from Oct. 1, 2020, to Sept. 30, 2021.
- \$25 billion for transit systems.
- \$400 million in election security grants to prevent, prepare for, and respond to coronavirus in the 2020 federal election cycle.

"Stimulus Oversight. To prevent fraud, waste and mismanagement of funds, the CARES Act creates an Office of the Special Inspector General for Pandemic Recovery to audit and investigate the treasury department's loans, transactions and activities under the bill. A committee of inspectors general from relevant departments will also be put together to oversee loans and other funds provided to nonfederal entities. Additionally, the Treasury Department will be required to publish real-time information and reports on its loans and financial statements. We have linked to a number of more detailed summaries on the CARES Act and its provisions below:

- National Conference of State Legislatures (NCSL): <https://bit.ly/2UzdLrC>
- Federal Funds Information for States (FFIS): <https://bit.ly/2WNNd95>"

DSHS coronavirus information. The state Department of State Health Services (DSHS) is one of the state's two lead agencies for issues relating to the coronavirus and its spread of COVID-19

across the state. Here is a link to their dedicated website for up-to-date information:

<https://www.dshs.state.tx.us/coronavirus/>.

TDEM information. The other state agency with lead responsibility for responding to the current pandemic is the Texas Department of Emergency Management (TDEM). The agency works closely with local jurisdictions, other state agencies and the federal government to respond to, cope with and recover from disasters. Here is a link to their website: <https://tdem.texas.gov/>, which has links to request public assistance and updates on the spread of the virus.

DPS Update to Services Provided in Light of Covid-19 Closures. The Texas Department of Public Services (DPS) sent out the following information relating to changes to its operations:

Driver License Services: Last week, DPS was directed to [extend the expiration date](#) of Texas identification cards (ID), driver licenses (DL), commercial DLs (CDL) and election identification certificates (EIC), as well as [close DL offices](#). **The temporary closure does not impact those seeking an initial CDL.** [Contact](#) the DL team for CDL appointment information.

With regard to the extension, this means that if your Texas DL/CDL/ID/EIC card expires on or after March 13, 2020, it falls under the period that encompasses the State of Disaster Declaration related to COVID-19 and will remain valid for 60 days after which time DPS issues public notice that the extension period for this disaster declaration has been lifted. Many Texans are eligible to conduct their DL transactions online. We encourage you to [check your eligibility](#) today. For more information about DL services and possible impacts related to COVID-19, click [here](#).

OAG & price gouging. The Texas Office of Attorney General (OAG) reminds all Texans that price gouging is illegal and those found guilty of inflating their prices during the pandemic are subject to enhanced penalties under the Texas Deceptive Trade Practices Act. Price gougers may be liable for civil penalties up to the \$10,000 per violation with an additional penalty of up to \$250,000 if the affected consumers are elderly. Suspected price gouging should be reported to the OAG's toll-free complaint line at 800-621-0508.

Other resources. I also want to thank Speaker Bonnen's office that provided some of the following resources to all House members to help us keep our constituents informed. You may find some of the following resources helpful as you, your families and businesses work to respond to our current challenges thrown at us with this pandemic:

Texas Workforce Commission (TWC). TWC is providing guidance for employers, job seekers, and child care facilities that participate in their subsidized child care program during the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic. This information can be found by visiting <https://www.twc.texas.gov/> and clicking on the red banner at the top of the webpage.

The following information was provided by TWC for members to share with their constituents and help guide them through unemployment benefit claims and other services.

To access local Workforce Solutions Boards, visit: <https://twc.texas.gov/partners/workforce-development-boards-websites#texasWorkforceDevelopmentBoardWebsites>.

Resources for Employers: Legal Options & Work-From-Home Policies: Call TWC at 1-800-832-9394 or email: employerinfo@twx.state.tx.us

Unemployment Benefit Claim Self-Service for Employers. TWC can help businesses affected by COVID-19 with managing layoffs and unemployment benefit claims. Claims can be managed online at any time by using TWC's online unemployment portal, Employer Benefits Services, or by calling TWC's Tele-Center employers' line at 866-274-1722 from 8AM - 6PM CT Monday through Friday.

Texas Unemployment Insurance (UI). TWC will be waiving work search requirements for all claimants and the waiting week for those claimants affected by COVID-19. Extended Benefits (EB) and Disaster Unemployment Assistance (DUA) are NOT available at this time. The Texas Unemployment Insurance (UI) program pays benefits to those individuals who lost their jobs through no fault of their own. TWC determines benefit eligibility based on past wages, why someone lost their job, and ongoing eligibility requirements.

Mass Claims & Shared Work Programs. The Mass Claims program streamlines the unemployment benefit claims process for employers faced with either temporary or permanent layoffs. Employers can submit basic worker information on behalf of their employees to initiate claims for unemployment benefits and submit a mass claim request on Employer Benefits Services. If business has slowed down due to the pandemic and an employer needs to reduce employee working hours, they may be able to avoid laying off employees by submitting a shared work plan. The Shared Work program provides Texas employers with an alternative to layoffs. TWC developed this voluntary program to help Texas employers and employees withstand a slowdown in business. Shared Work allows employers to:

- Supplement their employees' wages lost because of reduced work hours with partial unemployment benefits.
- Reduce normal weekly work hours for employees in an affected unit by at least 10 percent but not more than 40 percent; the reduction must affect at least 10 percent of the employees in that unit.

Shared Work unemployment benefits are payable to employees who qualify for and participate in an approved Shared Work Plan. Workers may choose not to participate. Employees who qualify will receive both wages and Shared Work unemployment benefits. For more information, see TWC's Shared Work web page.

Online Tax Services & Resources: Employers may visit TWC's Unemployment Tax

Services to submit their state unemployment tax reports, make payments, change an on-file mailing address, close their account, adjust previous reports, and more.

Unemployment Benefits & Resources for Jobseekers: Unemployment Benefit Claims & Employment Insurance: Call 1-800-832-2829. If an individual's employment has been affected by COVID-19, they can apply for benefits either online at any time using Unemployment Benefits Services or by calling TWC's Tele-Center at 800-939-6631 from 8AM - 6PM CT Monday through Friday.

Resources for Child Care Services: Many families and child care programs that participate in the Texas Workforce Commission's (TWC) subsidized child care program have been affected by the COVID-19 pandemic. On Tuesday, March 17, 2020, TWC's three-member Commission approved the following actions to mitigate the impact:

- Effective March 1, 2020, children may accrue absences without impacting ongoing eligibility for services or provider reimbursements. TWC will continue to monitor the COVID-19 situation and make a future determination on when this absence policy will conclude. Providers will continue to be paid, if children are absent, or if the provider is temporarily closed due to COVID-19.
- Workforce development boards are authorized to make supplemental payments to child care programs to cover lost parent share of cost payments. TWC will issue further guidance on calculating supplemental payments. TWC will be issuing additional guidance to local Workforce Solutions staff shortly to address the following issues:
 - Interruptions in parents' ongoing participation in work, education, or training;
 - Child care eligibility redeterminations;
 - Continued payments to child care programs; and
 - Texas Rising Star processes.

COVID-19 Essential Workers Child Care Category. TWC created a new child care eligibility category that covers those deemed "essential" workers (i.e. pharmacists, doctors, nurses and other healthcare workers, first responders, critical infrastructure, mail and delivery workers, nursing home and other direct-care workers, grocery and gas station employees, bank employees, employees of restaurants with drive-thru services, and military personnel).

TWC is in the process of rolling out the application system online and is seeking waivers from the federal government so that they can limit the program to only the duration of the COVID-19 public health emergency.

COVID-19 and the Workplace. I also want to thank Robbin Bass in Congressman John Ratcliffe's Texarkana office for sharing the following information from the U.S. Department of Labor. The Wage and Hour Division provided the following links to information on common

issues employers and employees face when responding to COVID-19, and its effects on wages and hours worked under the Fair Labor Standards Act and job-protected leave under the Family and Medical Leave Act:

- [Families First Coronavirus Response Act: Questions and Answers](#)
- [Families First Coronavirus Response Act: Employee Paid Leave Rights](#)
- [Families First Coronavirus Response Act: Employer Paid Leave Requirements](#)
- [COVID-19 and the Fair Labor Standards Act: Questions and Answers](#)
- [COVID-19 and the Family and Medical Leave Act: Questions and Answers](#)
- [WHD Response to COVID-19](#)
- DOL Dialogue on Compliance Materials Needed for FFCRA: <https://ffcra.ideascale.com/a/ideas/recent/campaigns/53788>

Grant to provide meals to the elderly. The governor announced on March 25, that Texas received a \$16.2 million grant from the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services (HHS) Administration for Community Living to help communities provide meals for older adults. The governor’s press release stated that “older adults who need assistance can contact the Eldercare Locator to find services available in their community. The Eldercare Locator can be reached at 1-800-677-1116 or <https://eldercare.acl.gov/>.”

Texas Education Agency (TEA). TEA has a dedicated resource page relating to the operation of public education during the pandemic. Information is updated several times a day and can be found at: <https://tea.texas.gov/texas-schools/health-safety-discipline/coronavirus-covid-19-support-and-guidance>.

The governor’s executive order (GA-08) issued March 19, called for schools to close temporarily at least through April 3, 2020; however, many schools are planning for alternative methods of delivery for an even longer period of time. For specific information about what your particular school district is doing to continue providing students with instruction either via the internet or through homework packets, please contact your child’s school directly. Each district has the authority to choose how it plans to continue providing an educational program through the end of the school year and going forward.

Many students rely on their school nutrition program for breakfast and lunch during the school year. Now that schools are at least temporarily closed, TEA and the Texas Department of Agriculture (TDA) announced the Rural School Meal Delivery Support Program with the following information:

In partnership with the Baylor Collaborative on Hunger and Poverty, TDA will be working to support meal deliver to nearly 1,000,000 meals to students. The meals are targeted to rural schools that are closed due to COVID-19. The Meals-to-You program will provide shelf-stable, easily prepared, kid-friendly meals to students during unexpected school closures lasting four weeks or longer to eligible families at no cost. Rural school districts in Texas can utilize the resources provided by Baylor Collaborative

on Hunger and Poverty to connect with a meal delivery vendor and verify family eligibility for meal service. This delivery method will be implemented on a first come first serve basis.

Districts that wish to participate should meet the following criteria:

- Be a school food authority in good standing with the Texas Department of Agriculture
- Be located in a rural county within Texas
- Have announced a school closure lasting four weeks or longer.

Districts interested in applying should visit: <https://mealstoyou.org/>. TEA also has a resource to help ensure that students do not go hungry during this crisis and launched its MealFinder program so that parents know how to find a free meal while their schools are closed. Here is a link: <https://txschools.gov/>.

Fraudulent COVID-19 test kits. Speaker Bonnen also sent information to all House members to share with our constituents to let them know that the U.S. Food & Drug Administration (FDA) issued a warning regarding unauthorized fraudulent coronavirus tests being marketed to consumers for at-home use. The FDA wants everyone to know that it has not authorized any COVID-19 home testing kits.

The FDA is taking appropriate actions to protect consumers from bad actors who are capitalizing on this crisis by issuing warning letters, seizures or injunctions to those found to be selling and promoting fraudulent items. Additionally, the FDA is stepping up enforcement at ports of entry, including International Mail Facilities, to ensure fraudulent products originating outside the country are unable to enter our borders. Here is a link to the FDA's press release:

<https://www.fda.gov/news-events/press-announcements/coronavirus-covid-19-update-fda-alerts-consumers-about-unauthorized-fraudulent-covid-19-test-kits>

SWEPCO. Southwest Electric Power Co. (SWEPCO) has been approved in Arkansas, Louisiana and Texas as an “essential service” so its employees can work to keep the lights on during these unsettling and uncertain times. The last thing you need now is to have your lights go out and power go down. Information provided by SWEPCO warns its customers to be particularly vigilant against scammers. Earlier this week, SWEPCO provided an update that says it’s continually monitoring for and working to heighten awareness of scams, and said they never demand immediate payment for a customer to avoid disconnection and would never ask customers to use pre-paid debit cards for payment. Additionally, the company warned that scammers’ tactics also include:

- Threatening to shut off power unless an immediate payment is made;
- Going door-to-door and negotiating total bill amounts if an immediate payment is made;
- Telling customers they need a new meter, but a payment must be made before the new meter is installed;

- Offering a discount on their SWEPCO bill if they sign up for auto-pay; and
- Demanding a deposit be paid immediately.

Scams attempts should be reported to SWEPCO at 1-888-216-3523.

In closing. I want you to know that I am just as confused and unsettled as I imagine each of you are and want to do all that I can to keep my family safe during these very unsettled and uncertain times. I wish each of you the best in your efforts to take care of your families and yourselves. Though I don't think any of us know exactly how and when all of this uncertainty will end, I know that as Texans we will work hard to take care of our families, homes and communities. We must all pull together. Good luck!

ⁱ <https://www.texastribune.org/2020/03/09/how-will-oil-price-collapse-impact-texas/> - March 9, 2020.