

July 9, 2021

Legislative Press Bureau at (401) 528-1743

## **THIS YEAR AT THE GENERAL ASSEMBLY**

STATE HOUSE — Here are the highlights from news and events that took place in the General Assembly this year. For more information on any of these items visit <http://www.rilegislature.gov/pressrelease>



### **HOUSING**

- The Assembly established the state's first [permanent funding stream for affordable housing](#) to help address the state's critical housing shortage.
- A new law [prohibits housing discrimination](#) against those who receive government assistance to pay their rent.
- Lawmakers launched [a five-year pilot program](#) to create permanent supportive housing for 125 chronically homeless Rhode Islanders.
- Legislators authorized the designation of a "[housing czar](#)" to oversee housing initiatives and develop housing plans for the state.
- The General Assembly made [tax exemptions for properties that are under construction](#) permanent.

### **CHILD PROTECTION**

- Legislators added [\\$10 million to the Department of Children Youth and Families' budget](#) to hire 91 new employees and help to address ongoing quality issues.
- A bill passed by the Assembly will prohibit anyone, with certain exceptions, from [bringing a firearm onto school property](#).
- Lawmakers voted to require all public school districts to adopt [suicide prevention policies](#) and train all personnel in suicide awareness and prevention annually.
- The legislature passed a law that [bans child marriages](#) in Rhode Island by eliminating language in state law that allows individuals under the age of 18 to obtain a marriage license with parental consent.
- The state budget raises [reimbursement rates for subsidized child care providers](#).

More...

- Lawmakers voted to require the Department of Children, Youth and Families to [report all suspected cases of childhood sexual abuse](#) to the Children’s Advocacy Center.
- Lawmakers changed a state law so children will be allowed to possess and reapply [sunscreen at school](#).
- The General Assembly passed legislation to update the definition of “dating violence” in the law that [requires school districts to have policies on reporting](#) and responding on dating violence when they learn of it.
- Legislators directed superintendents to create an annual report on the [academic progress of foster care youth](#).

## ENVIRONMENT

- The 2021 [Act on Climate](#) will make the state’s climate goals outlined in the Resilient Rhode Island Act of 2014 more ambitious and updated with current science, achieving net-zero emissions across all sectors by 2050.
- The General Assembly approved legislation to [cut down on disposable plastic straw use](#) in Rhode Island.
- Legislation will protect the environment and wildlife by [prohibiting the intentional release of large groups of balloons](#).
- Lawmakers called for the development of a plan for [statewide electric vehicle charging station infrastructure](#).
- Lawmakers [prohibited new medical waste incinerators](#) near residential neighborhoods, schools, nursing facilities and delicate environmental areas.
- The Assembly passed a bill to phase in significantly higher percentages of [cleaner-burning biodiesel in home heating oil](#) sold in the state.
- The General Assembly established the [Ocean State Climate Adaptation and Resilience Fund](#).
- The General Assembly simplified the process for cities and towns to preserve open space by [creating municipal parks](#).
- The General Assembly [extended the air quality monitoring program](#) at Rhode Island T.F. Green International Airport.
- Legislators created a [forest conservation commission](#) to seek new funding and identify incentives for landowners to maintain their land as forest.

## HEALTH

- Legislators [limited insured patients’ copays for insulin](#) used to treat diabetes to \$40 for a 30-day supply.
- The General Assembly passed a law to require health insurers to cover in-network preventive [colorectal cancer screenings](#).
- The General Assembly approved legislation to expand Rhode Islanders’ [access to telemedicine coverage](#).
- The legislature enacted a law that [excludes chronic intractable pain](#) from the definition of “acute pain management” for the purposes of prescribing opioid medication.
- The General Assembly [improved over-the-phone CPR instructions](#) by requiring the 911 system to certify and staff individuals trained in telecommunicator CPR.
- The legislature passed a law to better protect patients’ health by making the [electronic sharing of health records](#) more effective.

- The General Assembly approved legislation to make [doula services eligible for reimbursement](#) through private insurance plans.
- Legislators [prohibited gag clauses sometimes found in pharmacy contracts](#) that prevent a pharmacist from talking to a customer about more affordable options.

## HIGHER EDUCATION

- The Assembly made permanent the [Rhode Island Promise program](#), which provides up to two years of free tuition for eligible Rhode Islanders at Community College of Rhode Island.
- Lawmakers budgeted [an additional \\$5.9 million to assist Rhode Island College](#) with financial difficulties.
- The General Assembly granted [in-state tuition rates to all Rhode Islanders](#), regardless of immigration status, for the state's public colleges and universities.

## ELEMENTARY/SECONDARY EDUCATION

- The General Assembly required all public schools [to provide feminine hygiene products](#) at no cost.
- The General Assembly allowed streamlining of the English as a second language and/or English language learner [teaching certification process](#).
- The General Assembly passed legislation that would [require statewide standards in consumer education](#).
- A new law requires all new school buildings, or those undergoing major renovations, [to include water bottle filling stations](#) for students and staff.
- Lawmakers passed a bill to incorporate [African heritage history education](#) in all Rhode Island elementary and secondary schools.
- The General Assembly passed legislation to require students to demonstrate [proficiency in civics education](#) before high school graduation.
- Legislators passed a bill so all students who wish to pursue a career and technical education [will have access to high quality programs](#) both within and outside of their community of residence.
- The General Assembly passed legislation to allow school committees to budget [funding for school field trips](#).
- The General Assembly created a permanent commission to promote and continually [improve genocide and Holocaust education](#) in schools

## JUSTICE

- The General Assembly approved legislation establishing a statewide program for [police body cameras](#).
- The Assembly prohibited the purchase of a firearm on behalf of, or selling or transferring a [firearm to someone who is legally prohibited](#) from possessing one.
- The legislature passed a law to [downgrade possession of certain controlled substances](#) from a felony to a misdemeanor.
- The Assembly allowed more people [to have their arrests records sealed](#) when they've been acquitted or exonerated, and waiving the \$100 fee for it.
- A new law [gives compensation to innocent people](#) who have spent time behind bars but later released when new evidence shows they were not guilty.

- A new law requires the office of the attorney general to issue a report containing the total [number of cases with respect to charges involving a firearm](#) in all Rhode Island courts.

## CIVIL RIGHTS

- Lawmakers made the state's law [prohibiting housing discrimination](#) more inclusive by updating the definition of sexual orientation to eliminate antiquated and offensive terms, and eliminating an exemption that effectively allows discrimination based on gender identity or expression in owner-occupied buildings of three units or less.
- The General Assembly banned the [practice of gender discrimination](#) in charging premiums for health insurance.
- The Assembly approved legislation to make [single-user restrooms in public places](#) non-gender specific.
- The General Assembly passed legislation that [precludes the disability of a parent](#) from serving as a basis for denial or restriction in matters involving a child's welfare, foster care, family law, guardianship and adoption.
- The Assembly voted to [remove the spousal exemption](#) from the state's rape law.
- Lawmakers [prohibited discrimination against a potential organ transplant recipient](#) based solely on a physical or mental disability.

## COVID-19

- Lawmakers imposed [a moratorium on the enforcement of any municipal ordinance](#) or zoning requirement that would penalize owners of food service establishments and bars for any modifications or alternations to their premises, such as the addition of outdoor dining, in response to a declaration of emergency.
- The Assembly approved legislation to allow any Class B liquor license holders and brewpubs to continue [to sell certain amounts of beer, wine and mixed drinks](#) with a take-out food order through March 1, 2022.
- The General Assembly prohibited health insurance companies from charging copays [for COVID-related treatments](#).
- The General Assembly passed legislation to prohibit the waiving of rules and [regulations relating to minority-owned businesses](#) involved with state contracts during periods such as a declared state of emergency.
- Lawmakers adopted legislation that would [allow Alcoholics Anonymous and Narcotics Anonymous to continue meeting](#) during states of emergency.

## ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT

- The General Assembly [strengthened the agreement](#) between the State of Rhode Island, IGT and Bally's Corporation.
- The General Assembly renamed the state airport in Warwick "[Rhode Island T.F. Green International Airport](#)."
- Legislators allowed for the [direct dockside sale of fish](#).to help an industry hit hard economically by the pandemic.

## LABOR

- A new law will [gradually raise the minimum wage](#) in Rhode Island from \$11.50 to \$15 an hour over the next four years.

- The General Assembly approved legislation [to ensure pay equity for all employees](#), regardless of gender or ethnicity.
- The General Assembly passed legislation to [increase temporary caregiver benefits](#) over the next two years.
- The General Assembly enacted a law [making changes to unemployment benefits](#) to ensure an incentivized workforce that can help Rhode Island's economic recovery.
- Lawmakers passed legislation to help ensure that [workers in the construction industry](#) have access to paid sick time.
- The legislature prohibited employers from [reporting or threatening to report an employee's immigration status](#) for whistle-blowing.

## OPIOID CRISIS

- The General Assembly passed legislation to authorize a two-year pilot program to prevent drug overdoses through the [establishment of harm reduction centers](#), which are a community-based resource for health screening, disease prevention and recovery assistance where persons may safely consume pre-obtained substances.
- The General Assembly passed legislation to [exclude the possession of buprenorphine](#) from those controlled substances that can result in criminal penalties.
- Legislators empowered licensing bodies to issue new penalties [for irresponsible prescription practices](#).
- A new law will permanently require the state to [analyze overdose deaths](#) to help identify ways to reduce their prevalence.

## SENIORS/VETERANS

- The [Nursing Home Staffing and Quality Care Act](#) establishes a minimum standard of 3.58 hours of resident care per day by Jan. 1, 2022, and 3.81 hours of resident care per day beginning Jan. 1, 2023.
- A bill approved by legislators will allow the families of [nursing home residents to be visited](#) by certain family members or caregivers even during declared emergencies.
- The legislature voted to require financial institutions to [report suspected financial exploitation of seniors](#) to the Office of Healthy Aging, and authorizing them to temporarily hold transactions they suspect as such.
- Legislators enabled municipalities to offer property [tax credits to seniors](#) in exchange for volunteer hours.
- The Assembly passed legislation to extend [property tax exemptions to veterans](#) who served during the Cold War.

## QUALITY OF LIFE

- Legislators budgeted a [30-percent benefits increase for Rhode Island Works](#) recipients, the first such increase in 30 years.
- The state budget [continues the phase-out of the car excise tax](#), set to be fully eliminated after 2023.
- The General Assembly [made it easier for adopted adult children](#) and their birth parents and siblings to find each other through mutual consent.
- The legislature authorized the governor to designate any adult to [solemnize a marriage](#), eliminating the need for couples to go through the General Assembly.
- Legislators provided that [three-wheeled motorcycles be included under the licensing requirements](#) of the R.I. Division of Motor Vehicles.

- The General Assembly codified a provision to allow candidates for office to [use campaign funds for child care](#).

**-30-**

*For an electronic version of this and all press releases published by the Legislative Press and Public Information Bureau, please visit our website at [www.rilegislature.gov/pressrelease](http://www.rilegislature.gov/pressrelease).*