



Monday, October 9, 2006

Exclusive articles on state policy, politics and trends from the staff of Stateline.org

Monday, October 2, 2006

Lame ducks ruffle feathers in 3 statehouses

By John Gramlich, Special to Stateline.org

Some of the hottest issues before the Pennsylvania General Assembly could be decided after Election Day this year – by a record number of lame-duck legislators who will be days away from leaving office.

Because of retirements or primary election losses, at least 49 of Pennsylvania's 253 state legislators won't be returning to the Capitol next year but still will be voting when the General Assembly convenes for a key session between Election Day and Dec. 1, when newcomers will be sworn in.

That abnormally large proportion of departing lawmakers – which could grow if voters were to oust more incumbents in the Nov. 7 election – has led grassroots organizations and some state lawmakers to amplify calls to end or limit the traditional November "sine die" session. Critics say the session, in which legislators this year could consider a tax increase to pay for mass transit improvements, allows outgoing lawmakers to vote on crucial legislation without accountability to voters.

"They're making major decisions that are going to affect us for years to come, and they're not even coming back," Pennsylvania state Rep. Carole Rubley (R) told Stateline.org.

Officials in two other states also have moved recently to curb lame-duck powers. In New Jersey, which holds so-called "lame-duck sessions" in odd-numbered years, a pair of state lawmakers introduced a measure in March that would "prevent shenanigans from happening right before people are going out the door," said Assemblyman Michael J. Doherty (R), one of the bill's sponsors. Meanwhile, Utah legislative leaders this year banned lame ducks from taking trips paid for by taxpayer dollars.

Lame ducks – lawmakers who have lost bids for re-election, are retiring or, in some states, are term-limited – are nothing out of the ordinary.

Nationwide, term limits automatically turned 268 state legislators into lame ducks this year. Ten current governors are lame ducks – because of term limits in Arkansas, Colorado, Florida, Idaho, Nevada, Ohio and by choice in Iowa, Massachusetts and New York. Alaska Gov. Frank Murkowski (R) is the only governor rendered a lame duck by voters, who ousted him in an Aug. 22 primary.

But while lame-duck lawmakers are common, built-in lame-duck state legislative sessions are rare. Most state legislatures finish their work well before Election Day. Twelve states (Idaho, Illinois, Michigan, New Jersey, New York, North Carolina, Ohio, Oregon, Pennsylvania, Rhode Island, Vermont and Wisconsin) do not limit the length of their legislative cycles, according to the National Conference of State Legislatures, which tracks statehouse procedures across the nation. But of those states, very few hold regular sessions as late as November. Congress, however, often reconvenes after Election Day.

In Pennsylvania, this year's post-election session -- known as "sine die," or Latin for "without day" – will include more lame-duck lawmakers than any in decades, according to political analysts in the Keystone State. Opponents say the General Assembly should finish its business before voters go to the polls.

"The most common question I get is, 'What does sine die mean?' I always tell people it's Latin for 'Screw the taxpayers,'" said Lowman Henry, president and chief executive officer of the Lincoln Institute of Public Opinion Research Inc., a conservative Harrisburg, Pa., think tank that opposes November sessions.

An angry electorate led to this year's large flock of lame ducks in Pennsylvania. After state legislators awarded themselves a pay raise during a middle-of-the-night session in July 2005, furious voters ousted 17 lawmakers – including the state Senate's top two leaders – in a May primary. Many other legislators decided to retire rather than face voters.

Reacting to the pay-raise ruckus, grassroots organizations such as Common Cause of Pennsylvania have called for greater transparency and accountability. At the same time, at least 30 members of Pennsylvania's House of Representatives have formed the Jefferson Reform Initiative, a bipartisan group of legislators seeking, among other things, to end or limit the sine die session.

“There is a widespread recognition that we need to do something about the sine die session,” said state Rep. Curt Schroeder (R), a founding member of the Jefferson Reform Initiative.

Not all General Assembly members agree. State Rep. Mark McNaughton (R), who announced his retirement this year, said cutting short the state’s legislative calendar would “limit the Legislature’s ability to do its job.”

Questions about the accountability of outgoing lawmakers are “offensive,” he added.

“Lawmakers are elected to do a job, and they’re going to do that job until they leave office,” McNaughton said.

In neighboring New Jersey, the state’s regular sessions after Election Day are “when all the dirty work is done, including tax increases,” said Doherty, the state legislator who introduced a bill this year along with Assemblyman Richard A. Merkt (R) to amend the state constitution to limit what can be addressed during the late meetings.

The bill, which has not seen any action since its introduction, would prohibit legislators from authorizing tax hikes, pay raises or state borrowing during the lame-duck session. New Jersey, which holds elections in odd-numbered years, swears in new lawmakers in early January.

In Utah, meanwhile, two Republican legislative leaders – House Speaker Greg Curtis and Senate President John Valentine – recently prohibited lame ducks from traveling to out-of-state conferences.

Organizations such as NCSL, the American Legislative Exchange Council and the Council of State Governments regularly host conferences to foster communication among state lawmakers. States usually pay legislators’ travel and accommodation costs.

But Utah legislative leaders decided to ban lame-duck attendance at out-of-state conferences because the knowledge gained would not benefit the state, said Jennifer Lambert, an assistant to Curtis.

“Why are we sending them all over the country and spending money when they’re not returning?” Lambert said.

Despite efforts by state officials and grassroots groups to limit lame-duck powers, those initiatives likely won’t gain traction among much of the general public, according to Chris Mooney, editor of *State Politics and Policy Quarterly*.

“The American public has a very limited attention span for governmental arcana, which can be extremely important,” Mooney said.

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Tuesday, October 3, 2006

Heavy mistrust of elections' honesty -- but where's the groundswell for reform?

By Neal Peirce

Partisanly chosen state election officials, reports Stateline.org, have become “a new flashpoint for bitter partisan struggling over how balloting is run.” It’s as if the rancor engendered by the razor-thin 2000 presidential vote in Florida, when Republican Secretary of State (and Bush campaign cochair) Katherine Harris was accused of raw partisan decisions, has never abated. Indeed, it seems to have spawned a new era of deep distrust in American politics. Polls show Americans’ confidence in the integrity of elections, overseen in 36 states by secretaries of state, has plummeted from pre-2000 levels. In 1996, there were just 108 cases of challenged elections around the U.S.; by 2004, the number had tripled, to 361, according to a survey by election expert Richard Hasen of the Loyola Law School in Los Angeles. The Florida 2000 debacle

and the “Bush v. Gore” court case decided by a partisanly divided U.S. Supreme Court have unleashed a wave of court suits in close elections -- “election law as political strategy,” Hasen suggests. Adding to the perils: more than 80 percent of voters will be using electronic voting machines, a third of precincts for the first time, this autumn. The replacement of outdated voting machines with computer-based equipment, pushed along by federal assistance under the Help America Vote Act of 2002, is good news. But suspicions of manipulation run high and there’s been little time for careful ironing out of computer bugs. In Maryland’s September primary, technological glitches played a role in long lines and delayed vote counts. So extreme are the levels of distrust and suspicions of outright vote tampering that some observers are suggesting delays and court actions might cause a serious backup in deciding what party will control Congress after next month’s elections. And already, secretaries of state from Arkansas to California, Connecticut to Georgia, have come under fire on suspicions ranging from discriminatory purging of voter rolls to using federal money from the 2002 “Help America Vote Act” for partisan political purposes. Twenty secretaries of state are running for office this year, even while serving as their state’s chief election officer. Ohio’s Republican Secretary of State J. Kenneth Blackwell generated so much suspicion over his office’s handling of the 2004 presidential election count that he’s felt obliged, while running for governor this year, to hand some of his election duties off to an aide. But Democrat Chet Culver of Iowa has kept his secretary of state duties even while running for governor. The National Commission on Federal Election Reform, chaired by former President Jimmy Carter and former Secretary of State James Baker, endorses a proposal to remove election responsibilities from partisanly elected secretaries of state. The logical substitute would be a chief elections officer and board appointed by each governor, the officials’ high professional standing and impartiality assured by requiring a supermajority (perhaps 75 percent) vote of confirmation by legislatures. Vast majorities of us would likely approve: polling shows less than 1 percent support the current system of elections governed by a single partisan elected official. Combine that with the idea of a federal elections commission empowered to create minimum standards states must follow to assure honest elections, and there’s a bright opening to develop a professionalized cadre of national and state election officials able to start restoring Americans’ confidence in their election processes. But political bodies rarely welcome their own demise. The nation’s secretaries of state made that clear again last year when their national association recommended killing off the federal government’s advisory Election Assistance Commission created under the Help America Vote Act. Nor are we hearing any groundswell of support for the entirely logical idea of universal voter registration in the U.S. Presently we have what Hasen calls the “hyper-federalization” of American election administration -- 50 states and tens of thousands of little units setting dates, hours, times, conditions for voter registration, purging or not purging voter lists their own way. Instead, the federal government -- possibly the Census Bureau -- could work with states to create a national registry of all American citizens. All would be entitled to vote, but with a fingerprint check each election day to prevent double voting or other fraud. Democrats’ desire to get as many people voting as possible, Hasen believes, would jibe with Republicans’ determination to prevent fraudulent ballots -- thus a breakthrough opportunity for reform. Yet one sighs and wonders -- will real election reform get caught in the political underbrush, and like our long-overdue elimination of the electoral college presidential vote system, remain unsolved because of inertia on the one hand, obfuscation tactics of special interests on the other? Let’s hope not. As this autumn’s elections are likely to illustrate yet again, the moment for radical change to reduce today’s level of virulent mistrust can’t come too soon.

Tuesday, October 3, 2006

Patients key to latest Medicaid reforms

By Daniel C. Vock, Stateline.org Staff Writer

Medicaid reform is arriving with a splash in Jacksonville and Ft. Lauderdale, Fla. It's being plugged in radio commercials, touted on billboards and talked up with church groups. All of the hype aims to prep recipients so that, from the moment they receive a bright lime-green and blue envelope in the mail, they feel they're joining the cause.

The first of about 210,000 people in Duval and Broward counties have begun to take part in Florida's newest Medicaid experiment. The goal is to give patients incentives to make smart choices about their own health care, making them the driving force in keeping costs down for taxpayers.

Florida's two-county pilot program is at the forefront of efforts around the country to give Medicaid beneficiaries more control over their health care. But Idaho, Kentucky and West Virginia all rolled out programs this summer that vary in specifics but adopt the same approach to saving taxpayers' money. South Carolina hopes to follow suit as soon as federal regulators sign off on its plans.

Federal approval is needed because the state and federal governments jointly run – and pay for – Medicaid, an insurance program that covers 59 million poor Americans, including families, the elderly and disabled.

In the two Florida counties, enrollees will choose from one of several health insurance plans. Like their private counterparts, those plans will offer different menus of doctors, covered prescriptions and co-payments.

As in the private marketplace, the plans will compete against each other for customers. The state is offering insurers a set amount of money to cover each patient, and the plans are offering packages based on that price.

"There's more competition in Duval and Broward counties among plans, therefore, what that equates to is a better deal for Medicaid recipients," said Florida Medicaid Director Tom Arnold.

He noted that several of the plans offer full adult dental coverage, including cleanings and fillings, a benefit Florida's Medicaid program never before has covered.

Meanwhile, Medicaid recipients can earn up to \$125 a year to use for medical supplies, such as over-the-counter medicines. They can accrue those benefits by engaging in healthy behaviors, such as showing up for doctor's appointments, undergoing routine screenings, losing weight or quitting smoking.

Rewards for healthy behaviors are a common thread among the states championing consumer-directed health

care.

Healthier beneficiaries are cheaper than sicker ones. A patient who actively manages his diabetes, for example, is less likely to need expensive emergency care.

So West Virginia is now requiring Medicaid recipients in three counties to sign a member agreement that lays out both the member's rights and responsibilities.

Members are automatically signed up for a basic plan that has fewer benefits than the state's normal Medicaid package. But if they sign the agreement and follow its tenets, they can receive extra benefits, such as mental health services and greater prescription drug benefits.

Kentucky plans to offer expanded benefits for patients who faithfully follow disease management programs. So, for example, someone who keeps up with treatment for his asthma or obesity could earn credits toward dental and vision care.

Idaho offers a medical savings account for users. Healthy behavior can earn them money to pay premiums (for the few who have to pay them) or to cover smoking cessation or dieting services.

"Part of our idea here is to try to create a system that is more health-driven instead of sick-driven," said Ross Mason, a spokesman for the Idaho Department of Health and Welfare.

There's also another component that links the state efforts. Each is beginning to treat different types of beneficiaries differently.

Until February, states generally had to offer the same Medicaid benefits to all recipients, including poor children and their parents, low-income seniors, the blind and disabled.

But the Deficit Reduction Act, which President Bush signed in February, allows states to tailor their benefits to different populations.

Florida, which designed its plan before the new federal law took effect, is moving toward a system in which the state will pay private plans more money per patient for the costly populations, such as the elderly and disabled, than for healthier patients.

It is the only state so far to use competition among private insurers as the centerpiece of its Medicaid reform.

Kentucky is splitting its Medicaid program into four pieces. In addition to its current two main programs geared toward children and the general Medicaid population, Kentucky is offering a program with benefits geared for elderly patients who also are covered by Medicare, the federal insurance program for seniors. A proposed

benefits package for the mentally retarded and disabled still needs federal approval.

Idaho is rolling out a similar strategy creating three different categories for coverage instead of four.

Both states hope they can save money by offering different populations the services they're most likely to need, without having to offer them to everyone receiving Medicaid.

There are limits to how much those strategies might save, pointed out Barbara Edwards, a former Ohio Medicaid director and principal in the consulting firm Health Management Associates.

The most expensive Medicaid patients are also its most vulnerable: seniors in nursing homes, and disabled children and adults. For the most part, though, the Deficit Reduction Act protects those patients from benefit cuts, higher co-payments and other money-saving techniques, she said.

"Don't think you're going to see a lot of budgets balanced as a result of being able to slightly modify the benefit package for healthy people, or in the case of Kentucky ... saying healthy adults can't get (mental retardation) benefits, when they weren't getting (mental retardation) benefits in the first place," Edwards told reporters at a Capitolbeat conference in August.

Plus, there is still an ongoing debate over how adept Medicaid recipients will be in taking greater control of their health care choices.

Anne Swerlick, deputy director of Florida Legal Services, said she's concerned that many Medicaid recipients in Duval and Broward counties don't know about the impending changes, despite the state's media campaign.

She also said the process can be confusing for recipients who do try to navigate the coverage choices. The comparison charts provided by the state (available [here](#)) can be confusing and leave out key details, such as which services require preauthorization, she said.

Counselors who are trained to help the beneficiaries often don't have up-to-date information from the plans, she added.

Joe Rogers, a top official for the North Broward Hospital District, a public hospital system that includes 30 health care facilities in the Ft. Lauderdale area, said Medicaid recipients were having a tough time, at least initially, becoming active consumers.

Many show up for treatment not knowing which plan they're covered by, he said. And one patient who left North Broward's coverage to get free diapers under another plan came back when she realized her doctor wasn't covered by the competing plan, Rogers said.

Still, Kentucky Gov. Ernie Fletcher (R), a former physician, told a gathering of health policy experts in Washington last week that Medicaid recipients can make better decisions.

“Having worked with them, some folks felt that maybe they’re not capable of managing their own health care, but believe me, I think that is a myth that needs to be dispelled. An individual with the proper incentives and the proper education can take a very active role in managing (his) health care,” Fletcher said.

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Wednesday, October 4, 2006

Registration drives go down to the wire

By Pamela M. Prah, Stateline.org Staff Writer

As voter registration deadlines edge closer in several states, groups as varied as Rock the Vote, Focus on the Family, MySpace.com and Wal-Mart are stepping up campaigns to encourage more people to go to the polls Nov. 7.

While none of the registration drives promotes specific candidates, many of the states targeted by get-out-the-voter groups have congressional, gubernatorial and statehouse races and a surge of new voters could make a difference.

Click here for Stateline.org’s state-by-state listing of voter registration deadlines, voter identification requirements and polling hours. To see all of Stateline.org’s 2006 election coverage, including an interactive election guide, click here.

Several drives, with an eye toward tech-savvy youngsters, allow would-be voters to use cell phones and text messages to get registration forms. For example, former Virginia Gov. Mark Warner (D) in September kicked off his own drive at a New Hampshire high school using TxtVoter, a service created by Mobile Voter that allows people to request a voter registration form via text message. To pique students’ interest, Warner, who co-founded the company that became Nextel before becoming governor, is staging a contest that will award iPods to those who motivate the most family and friends to register. The contest is being sponsored by Warner’s

political action committee, Forward Together.

MySpace.com, the free online social network popular with young people, is running ads to encourage members to register in partnership with “Declare Yourself,” a nonpartisan organization formed in 2004 to enlist more young people to vote in the presidential election. MySpace.com offers online “I Registered to Vote on MySpace” badges that members can put on their “profile” pages with links making it easier for others to register.

Wal-Mart kicked off its nationwide registration campaign Sept. 29 in Iowa, the state that traditionally hosts the first presidential primary in the nation every four years and this year is the focus of tight governor and statehouse races. The country’s largest employer said it would provide state-specific voter registration forms nationwide to all 1.3 million store, club, and distribution center employees. Wal-Mart also said it also would distribute voting educational materials from the League of Women Voters.

The giant retailer noted when it announced its registration drive that it employs a significant number of workers “in states that play pivotal roles in national elections,” including 94,163 employees in Florida, 49,724 in Ohio, 47,904 in Pennsylvania, 17,273 in Iowa and 7,933 in New Hampshire.

The Colorado-based Focus on the Family has voter registration efforts under way in at least eight states: Maryland, Michigan, Minnesota, Montana, New Jersey, Pennsylvania, Ohio and Tennessee, according to published reports. Nima Reza, a spokesman for the organization, declined to comment. The organization promotes what it calls conservative Christian values, including marriage between a man and a woman and strict anti-abortion policies.

Text messages, hip hop radio stations and birthday greetings to newly eligible-to-vote 18-year-olds are ways a dozen advocacy groups coordinated by Young Voter Strategies said they hope to sign up 350,000 young people and minorities in several key states in time for Election Day. The umbrella group is a project of the Graduate School of Political Management at George Washington University and receives \$3 million from The Pew Charitable Trusts, which also funds Stateline.org.

Here is a sampling of other voter registration campaigns under way:

Allegheny College’s Center for Political Participation is recruiting and training student leaders at 15 community colleges in Ohio and Pennsylvania to register new voters on campus and in their communities.

Black Youth Vote!, a project of the National Coalition on Black Civic Participation, aims to register 18- to 30-year-old African-Americans in Alabama, Florida, Georgia, Louisiana, Maryland, Michigan and Texas.

National Council of La Raza, a civil rights advocacy organization, is working to register young voters in Arizona, California, Colorado, Florida, Indiana, Kansas, North Carolina, Nebraska, New Jersey, New Mexico, Pennsylvania, Tennessee and Wisconsin.

State Public Interest Research Groups, (PIRGs), which says it registered 524,000 young adults in 2004, is

targeting students at colleges and universities in Arizona, California, Colorado, Connecticut, Indiana, Maryland, Massachusetts, New Jersey, New Mexico, Ohio, Oregon, Washington and Wisconsin.

Rock the Vote, the nonprofit that says it registered 1.2 million young voters in the last presidential election, is targeting young people in Arizona, California, Florida, Ohio and Pennsylvania.

Voto Latino, co-founded by actress Rosario Dawson, is trying to sign up new Latino voters in California, Florida, Illinois and New York.

Women's Voices is working to sign up women in Michigan, Ohio, Pennsylvania, and Washington state, including a "Women Votes' Birthday program" that mails birthday cards and voter registration forms to young women when they turn 18 and are legal to vote.

While the technology and techniques for enlisting new voters may be different, some registration drives raise familiar concerns. Voter rights groups, for example, say college students still run into a patchwork of voter registration requirements that can make registration for college students difficult.

College students, who often spend part of the year living on campus and the other with their parents in another city, must meet the same state residency requirements as everyone else. But it's illegal for state or local authorities to require students to provide more information than anyone else, explained Jonah Goldman who works on voting rights projects for the Lawyers Committee for Civil Rights.

The registration drives under way in churches have garnered particular attention from the Internal Revenue Service. In a February report, the IRS found that during the 2004 elections, churches frequently ran afoul of rules limiting churches, charities and other tax-exempt organizations from partisan political activity.

The advocacy group Americans United for Separation of Church and State announced plans Sept. 18 to mail special election-year alerts to 117,000 clergy in 11 states where it claimed conservative religious leaders seek "to build a church-based political machine on behalf of favored Republican candidates." The letters were sent to houses of worship in Maryland, Michigan, Minnesota, Montana, New Jersey, Ohio, Pennsylvania, Tennessee, Texas, Missouri and Virginia.

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Thursday, October 5, 2006

Stem cell debate goes to voters

By Christine Vestal, Stateline.org Staff Writer

Voters are being asked to weigh job creation and potential life-saving cures against moral concerns over the destruction of human embryos in an impassioned battle over a Missouri ballot measure supporting the science. While the Show Me state is the only one with the question on the Nov. 7 ballot, the controversy over embryonic stem cell research is playing prominently in the Wisconsin governor's race and cropping up in state races scattered across the country. A few Republican gubernatorial candidates are breaking ranks with the Bush administration by running on their support for the controversial research.

The outcome of the initiative in Missouri – where embryonic stem cell research also has gotten caught up in a tight U.S. Senate race between State Auditor Claire McCaskill (D) and incumbent Sen. Jim Talent (R) – could influence future federal and state efforts to either block or support the science, political analysts say.

McCaskill has made support for embryonic stem cell research a keystone of her campaign, while Talent steadfastly opposes the science on moral grounds.

“If the initiative wins in a battleground state like Missouri, where both Republicans and Democrats have been elected statewide, it is likely to embolden other states that have an economic interest in supporting the science,” said Michael Werner of the Biotechnology Industry Organization, an advocacy group for the life sciences. Scientists are eager to experiment with stem cells from human embryos because the cells have the capacity to develop into any organ tissue in the body. Non-controversial adult stem cell research also is being pursued, but scientists say adult cells do not hold the same potential for cures and therapies.

While Missouri's proposed constitutional amendment would not commit state funds to the science, it would ensure its legality, unleashing private funding and removing a cloud over the research created by repeated state legislative attempts to criminalize it.

Last year, Missouri Gov. Matt Blunt (R), an anti-abortion conservative, opposed a measure pushed by conservative legislators that would have made involvement in the science a felony. Blunt worked to derail the bill because he feared it would cause scientists and the research money backing them to leave the state.

In a close state race, Wisconsin Gov. Jim Doyle (D) is using his support of embryonic stem cell research to differentiate himself from conservative challenger U.S. Rep. Mark Green (R), who opposes using human embryos for the research.

Doyle wants his state, where scientists at the University of Wisconsin at Madison first discovered stem cell techniques in 1998, to garner at least 10 percent of the more than 100,000 jobs nationwide he and others predict the science will generate. Currently, Wisconsin has a biotechnology workforce of 22,000 that generates nearly \$7 million for the local economy.

Political analysts agree that Doyle's persistent, albeit unsuccessful, calls for the state Legislature to commit funds to the science give him an edge in the governor's race. Green, who is slightly behind in the polls and under attack over campaign finance issues, opposes the destruction of human embryos although he supports research using adult stem cells. Nearby, in job-hungry Michigan, Democratic Gov. Jennifer Granholm is waging a tough re-election bid against anti-abortion Republican Dick DeVos, who has blasted her efforts to overturn laws in the state that restrict the science.

Granholm has argued that removing restrictions on the science would reduce health care costs and allow the state's emerging life-sciences industry to flourish.

“While President Bush is building up walls in Washington to block this life-saving research, we have the opportunity to tear them down in Michigan,” Granholm has written in an appeal to Michiganders to sign a

petition asking state lawmakers to repeal anti-stem cell research laws.

The Midwest is not the only political stage where science is colliding with religion over stem cell research. On both coasts, Republican governors up for re-election in November are touting their record of supporting the science for its medical potential and economic opportunities in a clear break with Bush administration policies that limit the research.

California Gov. Arnold Schwarzenegger, Maryland Gov. Robert Ehrlich and Connecticut Gov. Jodi Rell repeatedly mention their support for the science in campaign ads.

In Massachusetts, home to stem-cell leader Harvard University, both candidates for the open governor's seat have come out in support of the science, even though the Republican candidate, Lt. Gov. Kerry Healey, has played up her association with incumbent Gov. Mitt Romney (R), who last year vetoed a bill that would promote the research.

Democratic candidate Deval Patrick has suggested issuing bonds to support the research, because he says it "provides hope" to those suffering from a host of crippling and deadly diseases.

In the South, Georgia and Kentucky stem cell advocates already are taking steps to get the issue on the ballot in 2008.

Like Missouri, their efforts come in reaction to conservative Republican legislators' attempts to criminalize the science. Both states are considering a Missouri-style initiative that would guarantee the legality of the science and citizens' access to medical treatments derived from stem cell research, but would not commit state funds.

A statewide poll of 600 Georgia voters -- funded by the Georgia Biomedical Partnership, backers of the proposed initiative -- found 63 percent approval for "research on stem cells taken from donated embryos from fertility clinics that would otherwise be discarded." In Kentucky, first-time Democratic statehouse candidate Chris Frost is calling for a constitutional amendment on the ballot in 2008. Not to be outdone, his opponent, state Rep. Bill Farmer (R), says he also supports the science, pointing out that not all Republicans agree on the issue.

In July, right before President George Bush vetoed a bill that would have lifted his 2001 restrictions on federal funding for embryonic stem cell research, Democratic governors from Delaware, Illinois, Iowa, Michigan, New Jersey, New Mexico, Oregon and Wisconsin urged Congress to push for stem cell funding.

Some of those same governors continue to publicize their support for the research in their re-election bids.

The controversial science, which has rocked Congress, the Bush administration and state capitols for the past five years, is considered a wedge issue that could drive voters to the polls and divide the Republican electorate.

Sixty-eight percent of Americans approve of embryonic stem cell research, according to a recent NBC News/Wall Street Journal poll. Supporters include high-profile Republicans, such as Nancy Reagan, with loved

ones who have suffered from debilitating diseases for which the research offers hopes of a cure. Opponents, including the Bush administration and those in the anti-abortion movement, object to the research because it involves the destruction of human embryos. They argue scientists instead should pursue experiments on adult cells.

In Missouri, a recent statewide poll by the St. Louis Post-Dispatch showed 64 percent of voters plan to say "yes" to proposed Amendment 2, which would ensure Missouri patients have access to embryonic stem cell therapies and allow Missouri researchers to conduct "any research permitted under federal law."

The constitutional amendment also would ban human cloning, require public oversight of the research, impose criminal and civil penalties for any violations and prohibit state or local governments from "preventing or discouraging lawful stem cell research, therapies and cures."

The nonpartisan group behind the initiative – The Missouri Coalition for Lifesaving Cures – includes more than 60,000 individual citizens and more than 100 faith, civic, patient and medical groups, making it the largest coalition ever formed in Missouri to support a ballot initiative, said spokesperson Connie Farrow.

If approved, the amendment would unshackle local scientists and could attract other researchers to the state, which is home to stem-cell innovator Washington University.

It also would allow major local donors, Jim and Virginia Stowers, to continue funding studies in Missouri at The Stowers Institute for Medical Research – rather than diverting their money to Harvard University in Massachusetts, a more science-friendly state."

Twenty-seven states have laws on the books restricting embryonic stem cell research, including South Dakota, which has banned the science altogether.

Six states have ensured the legality of the science and committed state money to fill the gap left by the federal government's funding restrictions. So far, California has committed \$3 billion for the research; Connecticut has committed \$20 million; Illinois, \$15 million; New Jersey, \$5.5 million; Maryland, \$15 million; and Massachusetts, \$15 million. Editors Note: A previous version of this article incorrectly stated that Missouri voters would be the first to decide whether to support embryonic stem cell research. California voters were the first to take up the issue when they approved \$3 billion in state funding for the science in 2004.

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Friday, October 6, 2006

Buyer beware of toxic meth-lab homes

By Kavan Peterson, Stateline.org Staff Writer

Health officials in a handful of states are warning home-buyers and renters to check an online database of busted "meth houses" to make sure they don't move into a contaminated former drug lab.

Idaho is the latest state to start listing properties where methamphetamine drug labs have been found in an online database for potential buyers and renters. Seven homes have been listed since the database was launched in April, and similar online registries in neighboring Alaska, Michigan, Montana, Oregon, Tennessee and Washington list hundreds of homes, motel rooms and even automobiles that have been used to cook methamphetamine in recent years.

"We're trying to protect families and children by allowing the public to look on our Web site before they rent or buy a house to see if it's ever been busted as a meth house," said Kara Stevens, manager of Idaho's Environmental Health and Injury Prevention Program, which administers the state's Clandestine Drug Lab Cleanup Program.

Along with bulging prison populations and a marked increase in drug-rehabilitation and child-welfare services caused by the nation's meth problem, states have struggled with the cleanup costs and health hazards of former meth labs. Thousands of clandestine drug laboratories, largely mom-and-pop operations in private dwellings, have been set up all over the country to cook the highly addictive drug, also known as crystal meth, ice, glass and crank.

Known for its high rate of addiction and severe side effects, which include rotten teeth and increased risk of heart, lung and liver disease, meth can easily be made with over-the-counter cold medication, household chemicals and a hot plate or burner. Every pound of meth cooked results in up to five to seven pounds of toxic chemical wastes that pose serious health and environmental hazards, according to the U.S. Drug Enforcement Agency (DEA).

States have taken a lead role in combating domestic meth production. Forty-two states have imposed restrictions on sales of cold medication containing pseudoephedrine, a key meth ingredient, and Congress

imposed similar restrictions nationwide that went into effect Oct. 1. A handful of states, including Illinois, Montana and Tennessee, also have begun listing convicted meth makers on Internet databases, similar to registries that list sexual predators.

The DEA reported seizures of 16,813 methamphetamine laboratories in 2005, up from 9,747 in 2004. There are no federal regulations for cleaning up meth labs, and unknown numbers of families unwittingly move into houses where meth was concocted, state health officials said.

Scientifically, there are no studies yet proving a link between living in a former meth lab and specific health problems. But the cooking process releases a cloud of toxic chemicals, including hydrochloric acid, phosphorous, iodine and methamphetamine itself, that seeps into floors and walls and can potentially cause long-term health problems, said Shawn Arbuckle, an industrial hygiene program coordinator at the National Jewish Medical and Research Center in Denver, which has conducted several studies on the impact of meth labs.

Potential health problems range from headaches and blisters to damaged lungs, liver and kidneys. Children are especially sensitive to chemical exposure, which can damage their developing brains, Arbuckle said.

"You know that youngsters still crawling around on hands and knees put everything in their mouth, so they're especially at risk of picking up methamphetamine residues," he said.

It's illegal in 12 states (Arkansas, Arizona, California, Colorado, Idaho, Minnesota, Michigan, Nebraska, North Carolina, Oregon, Tennessee and Washington) for anyone to live in a former meth house before it's been decontaminated, according to the National Alliance for Model State Drug Laws, a congressionally funded nonprofit that helps states set drug laws.

But in most other states, there are few protections to warn home-buyers or renters whether they're moving into a former meth house. Only 14 states (Arkansas, Arizona, California, Colorado, Minnesota, Missouri, Montana, Nebraska, Nevada, New Hampshire, Oklahoma, Oregon, South Dakota and Washington) require property owners to disclose former drug production to potential buyers or tenants. And only 13 states (Alaska, Arizona, Arkansas, California, Colorado, Idaho, Minnesota, Montana, North Carolina, Oregon, Tennessee, Utah and Washington) have established guidelines for cleaning up former meth labs.

Colorado was the first state to do toxicology studies attempting to measure contamination caused by meth production and to determine how much cleaning is required to make a home safe to live in. The state estimates cleanup costs of \$15,000 to \$30,000 to decontaminate a 2,000-square-foot house.

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