



North Carolina  
Retired  
Governmental  
Employees'  
Association

## NCRGEA Government Relations Update

### **NCRGEA Governmental Update #20-09 - May 15, 2020**

Legislators are racing against the clock to meet an approaching bill filing deadline. At press time for this update, 36 new bills were filed in the House and an additional 29 filed in the Senate this week. Though COVID-19 recovery remains at the forefront of policy discussions, a diverse slate of bills is being filed.

#### **Here are some highlights.**

#### **SB 719 – Retirement Protection Act**

The Legislature had a one-day session that was mostly about introducing new business. The House took action on just one bill, while the Senate sent several bills to committee but voted on nothing. One of the bills sent to committee was SB 719, introduced by Sen. Andy Wells (R-Alexander) and three co-sponsors, closes loop holes to better prevent pension spiking in the LGERS and TSERS retirement systems.

The bill makes changes to regulations involving the forfeiture of retirement benefits due to felony convictions directly related to the person's employment. The clarifications are necessary after a former Wake County Register of Deeds who had convicted of six counts of embezzlement related to \$2.3 million in missing funds from her county sued the Retirement System. The Retirement System won a partial victory but is still having to pay the jailed plaintiff, Laura Riddick, based on years of service and unused sick leave prior to when she admitted to embezzling nearly \$1 million from the county between 2010 and 2017.

The bill cannot be applied retroactively but will close these loopholes and prevent other convicted felons who committed crimes on the job from receiving benefits.

## **COVID-19 Congressional and Legislative Actions**

**SB 728 and its House counterpart HB 1078** would provide funding assistance to landlords who rely on rental income to support themselves, in the form of no-interest loans. Priority would be given to landlords with current tenants who are displaced students or individuals unable to pay rent as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic.

**SB 730** also went to committee on Thursday. This bill would affirm the rights of family members to be present during hospital care for their relatives, something that has been restricted due to COVID-19. Anyone, either a minor or an adult, would be allowed to designate someone with the unrestricted privilege of being present while they receive hospital care. All of these bills were referred to committee on Thursday.

### **New coronavirus relief bill proposed in Washington**

A new relief bill with a cost of \$3 trillion, a trillion more than the first COVID-19 relief bill passed on March 25, was introduced in the U.S. House of Representatives on Tuesday. The bill would allocate nearly \$1 trillion for state, local and tribal governments, bail out the U.S. Postal Service, and sent a second round of \$1,200 payments to American families. If passed, it would have significant impact for the people of North Carolina; however, the bill is unlikely to gain bipartisan support or to pass in the U.S. Senate even if it gets through the House. The bill was drawn up entirely by House Democrats and contains several other provisions reflecting additional political priorities. There is consensus among most politicians in Washington that a second round of relief legislation will be needed at some point, but Republicans have very different ideas on what the scope of that legislation will be, and when it should be enacted. Senate Majority Leader Mitch McConnell said that further COVID-19 relief bills would be in the form of "narrowly targeted legislation" rather than another omnibus package such as the one in March.

We will have further updates on proposed legislation that materially affects North Carolina as it comes up for discussion in Congress.

### **Other Filed Bills**

With controversy heating up about the continuation of restrictions on business activity, **House Bill 1073** is likely to further fuel the fire.

Introduced by Rep. Jeffrey McNeeley (R-Iredell) with 17 Republican co-sponsors and filed on Thursday, the bill would make anyone who violated Gov. Roy Cooper's executive orders, or local government orders, concerning business closings immune from criminal prosecution. Fines for violating the orders would be capped at \$25 for the first violation and \$1 for any day thereafter, and any past fines beyond that total would be refunded. The bill would be retroactive to March 17.

Perhaps less controversial will be **House Bill 1085 and its Senate counterpart SB 740**, a bill that excuses designated "mandatory employees"—employees who are deemed essential and must work despite the public health emergency—if the employee is high risk, as defined; isolated, quarantined, ill, or subject to other public health control measures; or required to care for an immediate family member who is isolated, quarantined, or ill or who requires the employee's care. It would also provide for hazardous duty pay and/or compensatory time for any mandatory employee who is required to work outside the home at a specific site. Rep. Rachel Hunt (D-Mecklenburg) filed the House version with more than a dozen co-sponsors, while Sen. Harper Peterson (D-New Hanover) filed with four co-sponsors in the Senate. The sticking point will be bipartisan support, as all of the sponsors were Democrats.

**Senate Bill 742** would appropriate \$250,000 from the General Fund in order to implement expanded Medicaid coverage for certain classes of military veterans. The expanded coverage applies to veterans aged 19-64 whose income is below the poverty level and are not otherwise qualified for Medicaid or Medicare.

### **Next week**

Both houses will reconvene on Monday, with the Senate in session at 1 p.m. and the House at 2. At 1:30, Senate President pro tempore Phil Berger (R-Guilford/Rockingham) has a press conference scheduled.

This press conference is likely related to Berger's recent criticism of Governor Roy Cooper's plans to reopen the state's economy and the business restrictions that remain in place. Among other things, Berger is advocating that businesses such as hair salons and barber shops should be allowed to re-open, and that restaurants should be allowed to serve dine-in customers with "common-sense precautions.'

Cooper issued a statement on Wednesday in which he was non-committal about when he would allow more businesses to open again.