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2017 Legislative Session Kicked Off Monday; State-of-the-State Address Scheduled for Wednesday

The 2017 session of the Georgia General Assembly began on Jan. 9. While it's just getting started, some expected hot topics have already emerged, including education, medical marijuana, health care, and casino gambling.

As is tradition during the first week of session, Gov. Nathan Deal will give his State-of-the-State address on Wednesday, Jan. 11, at 11 a.m. Deal is expected to outline his priorities for the 2017 session and provide the first glimpse of his budget recommendations for the Amended FY17 and FY18 budgets. You can [watch the speech](#) live online.

Education

Georgia voters rejected an Opportunity School District ballot measure in November, but Deal remains committed to addressing the issue of chronically failing schools in Georgia. According to a [recent article](#) in the *Atlanta Journal Constitution*, the governor "is working with lawmakers on a plan that would give the state more power to let students transfer from the 153 schools on the state's failing list." He also indicated that plans to overhaul the school funding formula might be delayed, because "the first and most important thing is to deal with chronically failing schools."

Medical Marijuana

Legislation passed in 2015 allows the use of cannabis oil to treat limited medical diagnoses, but attempts to expand the law in 2016 were unsuccessful. Rep. Allen Peake (Dist. 141) said he intends to introduce legislation again this year that will expand the number of diagnoses that can be treated with cannabis oil. There is also some support for legislation allowing an in-state growing program for medical cannabis.

Health Care

Plans by congressional leaders to repeal the federal Affordable Care Act (ACA) have created uncertainty among Georgia's elected officials regarding how changes will affect our state.

Lt. Gov. Casey Cagle announced last week that he is forming a [Health Care Reform Task Force](#) to guide how Georgia will respond to a repeal of the ACA. According to a press release from Cagle's office, "numerous experts from around the state will be brought in to offer testimony."

The task force will be led by:

- Sen. Renee Unterman (Dist. 45),
- Sen. Dean Burke (Dist. 11),
- Sen. Ben Watson (Dist. 1), and
- Sen. Judson Hill (Dist. 32).

Casino Gambling

It's expected that legislation to legalize casino gambling in Georgia will be introduced this year. Supporters are touting casino gambling as a possible revenue source for the HOPE Scholarship.

Legislative Study Committees

After the 2016 session, legislative study committees met in the interim and some examined issues related to Georgia's children and families.

Mental Illness Initiative, Reform, Public Health, and Safety

[HR 1093](#) created a five-member House Study Committee on Mental Illness Initiative, Reform, Public Health, and Safety, chaired by Rep. Katie Dempsey (Dist. 13). The committee met four times and issued a [final report](#) with several recommendations, including the creation of the Georgia Children's Mental Health Reform Council, to be modeled after the Criminal Justice Reform Council.

Hearing Aids for Children

[SR 1091](#) created a five-member Senate Study Committee on Hearing Aids for Children. The committee was originally chaired by Sen. Charlie Bethel of Dalton, but Unterman (Dist. 45) took over leadership when Bethel was appointed to the Georgia Court of Appeals last fall. Although the Committee did not release a final report, Senate Research prepared a [summary](#) of the meetings.

Opioid Abuse

[SR 1165](#) created the Opioid Abuse Senate Study Committee chaired by Unterman (Dist. 45). Sen. Butch Miller (Dist. 49) was also appointed to the committee, along with Georgia Department of Public Health Commissioner Dr. Brenda Fitzgerald, Rick Allen of the Georgia Drugs and Narcotic Agency, and three citizens with expertise on the issue. The committee received an extension until Jan. 9 to finalize their work and release a report.

Schedule

The House and Senate passed an [adjournment resolution](#) on Monday, setting the legislative calendar for the first 12 days. Legislators are scheduled to be in session through Jan. 12 this week, then they will

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reconvene on Monday, Jan. 23. Joint House and Senate budget hearings are expected to take place in the interim.

Legislation

Seven bills related to children and families were pre-filed for the 2017 session; however, these bills must be formally introduced, now that the session has begun, to become active legislation.



[HB 7](#) (Rep. Keisha Waites, 60th) mandates that only hands-free telephone calls may be made while one is operating a motor vehicle, except in certain identified emergency situations.

[HB 11](#) (Rep. Keisha Waites, 60th) requires the completion of firearms safety training by certain persons in order to be issued a carry license. The requirement does not apply to renewal licenses.

[HB 18](#) (Rep. Sandra Scott, 76th) prohibits smoking inside motor vehicles when a person under age 18 is present.

[HR 1](#) (Rep. Keisha Waites, 60th) proposes a constitutional amendment to dedicate existing fees and assessments to fund driver education and training courses for ninth- through 12th-graders in public schools.



[HB 16](#) (Rep. Keisha Waites, 60th) requires local boards of education to collect data on instances of bullying and harassment and to provide the data to the Georgia Department of Education via an existing annual report on disciplinary and placement actions.

[HB 26](#) (Rep. Erica Thomas, 39th) raises the age of mandatory education from 16 to 17.



[HB 2](#) (Rep. Jason Spencer, 180th) extends by two additional years (until July 1, 2019) a current two-year window of opportunity for plaintiffs of any age to file civil actions related to childhood sexual abuse. Until the 2015 passage of HB 17, the Hidden Predator Act, adult victims covered by the law were unable to file civil action suits due to expired statutes of limitations.