New Session Brings New HOPE

After a brief break during the holiday season, the Wisconsin State Legislature is officially back to work. On Tuesday, legislators in both houses met on their respective floors to open the spring session of 2016, the last session before the next election cycle.

With the 2015-2016 session wrapping up by April, the legislature is working with a sense of urgency to finish their agendas. Starting the year on a bipartisan note, the Assembly focused their first day back on tackling the ever growing opiate abuse problem within our state by passing the HOPE (Heroin Opiate Prevention and Education) agenda.

Introduced by Rep. John Nygren, R-Marinette, in September, Assembly Bills 364, 365, 366, and 367 are the second installment in the continuing fight against opiate abuse in our state. The proposed bills would do the following:

- Require a practitioner to check a patient’s record before prescribing monitored prescription drug. The practitioner must also update prescription in the Prescription Drug Monitoring Program (PDMP).
- Law enforcement officials must report to the PDMP any controlled-substance violations, opioid-related overdoses or deaths and reports of stolen prescription drugs.
- The Department of Health Services (DHS) will oversee all pain management clinics within the state.
- Require methadone clinics to track and report all data to DHS on an annual basis.

The HOPE agenda passed the Assembly unanimously and has been immediately messaged to the state Senate. Gaining much support, this package of bills will likely be taken up within the next few weeks on the Senate floor. Once approved, they will be messaged to the Governor for his final signature.

In addition to the HOPE package, Senate Majority Leader Scott Fitzgerald has made it clear that he plans on passing a DUI bill aimed at harsher punishments for repeat offenders. Assembly Bill 432/Senate Bill 335 would permanently revoke a person’s
driving privileges after their 5th drunk driving arrest or 3 or more OWIs followed by 2 or more qualifying convictions.

As for next week, both houses will once again hold session, with the Assembly convening on Tuesday and the Senate on Wednesday. Each house will be tackling more issues with the Assembly in particular focusing on rights and care of children.

Legislators Announce their Retirement

This past week not only brought the start of the spring legislative session, but also the announcement of retirements. As of January 15th, two members of the State Assembly have publicly announced that they will not be seeking another term, Representative Dean Knudson and Representative Dave Heaton.

Rep. Dean Knudson has served as Assemblyman of the 30th Assembly District for the past 5 years. Since his election, he has served on numerous committees including the Joint Committee on Finance and as vice-chairman of the Joint Committee on Review of Administrative Rules. The representative announced his retirement with the following statement:

“The time-honored American principle of rotation in office makes our government stronger by encouraging citizens to step up to serve in public office, bringing their experience and perspective to our system of self-governance. It has been an honor and privilege to represent the people of the 20th District in the Assembly. I am very grateful to all those who worked and sacrificed to support my service in legislature.”

Rep. Dave Heaton was amongst the newest members of the Assembly, serving only one term in office. Rep. Heaton’s election race was one of debate after he won by less than a 100 votes to incumbent Mandy Wright in the 85th Assembly District. Over the past year, Rep. Heaton made a name for himself in office passing legislation to reform the food share program as well as his support for the Justice for Children bill package. The Representative made the following statement in regards to his retirement:

“Representing the people of the 85th District is one of the greatest honors of my life and I recognize how fortunate and blessed I am that the people selected me for such an important duty.”

With the end of session only a few months away, many predict there will be more retirements to come. A majority of the legislature joined during the 2010 election cycle when the Republican Party took the majority in both houses as well as the Governor’s office.

Governor Walker Proposes College Affordability Legislation

The cost of college tuition has been a hot topic for years, with graduates facing a lack of jobs and an ever growing debt. The presidential race has picked up on the concerns of young voters with candidates, such as Sen Bernie Sanders, offering free tuition. One time, former hopeful for president, Wisconsin Governor Scott Walker, has heeded the constant concerns from students in our state and answered their call.

On Monday, Governor Walker announced his newest legislative plan to reduce the cost of college, the college affordability package. Drawn up by Republican lawmakers, the package aims to eliminate the student loan interest cap, deducted from state income tax, putting an extra $165 back in the hands of taxpayers. In addition, the bills would provide students with emergency assistance, internship opportunities with Wisconsin employers, and additional information regarding their loans to assist in making smart
financial decisions.

“The best way to hold down student loan cost is to keep down education costs...Our college affordability legislation will help students and families make informed decisions about choosing the higher education path that is right for their future dreams and for their budgets,” said Walker.

Critics of the package say it does not do enough for students. Democrats want more, such as loan forgiveness or the option to refinance loans to a lower interest rate. Democrat Senator Jennifer Shilling described Walker's plan as "nibbling around the edges" and that "it's really window dressing" not solving the problem. Currently, democrats have a bill that would allow students to refinance their debt but it has stalled in the Senate.

The college affordability package was introduced to the State Legislature this past Monday and co-sponsors are asked to sign up by the end of the day today. With only a few months left of session, it is unclear as to whether or not the bills will pass.