



# My five cents...

A monthly column from Sen. Robert Nichols  
by Sen. Robert Nichols, Senate District 3

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Contact: Shelby Conine  
Tel: 512-463-0103

This August marked the 100-year anniversary of the passage of the 19<sup>th</sup> Amendment, which granted women the right to vote. On August 18, 1920, Tennessee was the 36<sup>th</sup> state to ratify the 19<sup>th</sup> amendment, which secured the adoption of the amendment. We celebrate this important centennial of women's suffrage.

Here are five things happening around your state:

## 1. **COVID-19 Data Tracker for Texas Public Schools, Child Care Centers**

Earlier this month, the Texas Education Agency and the Department of State Health Services announced that they will release information about COVID-19 cases in public schools on a weekly basis. Schools will be required to report any cases of COVID-19 in staff or students to the state within 24 hours. DSHS will begin releasing the data in September and that information will be available on their website.

Additionally, the Texas Health and Human Services Commission will regularly post information about COVID-19 cases in child care centers, school age programs, and before and after-school programs across the state. A spreadsheet is available on their website to view this information. The data is broken down by child care center. It shows the current number of positive cases as well as how many cases each location has had since March. It's updated Monday through Friday by 3 pm.

## 2. **TEA Back-to-School Guidance**

The Texas Education Agency has released a detailed document of requirements and recommendations to Texas school districts on what school will look like in the midst of the coronavirus pandemic. Decisions about when to open schools and whether or not in-person classes will be offered have been largely left to school districts, but the guidance from TEA is meant to be statewide. It covers information regarding providing notice to parents and the public about on-campus activities, preventing the virus from entering schools, responding to a positive case, and mitigating the spread of the virus in schools. The document is available on the TEA website at [www.tea.texas.gov](http://www.tea.texas.gov).

### 3. **Additional Federal Funding for Unemployment Benefits**

The Texas Workforce Commission announced that Texans receiving unemployment benefits may receive an additional \$300 per week after FEMA approved additional jobless relief funding to the state. The funds are backdated to August 1, so those who qualify for the added benefit will receive the funds they would have gotten starting at the beginning of August. To qualify, applicants must indicate they lost work because of the coronavirus pandemic on their unemployment filing. Texans can change their status and report they lost their job due to the pandemic on future payment requests to begin receiving the extra \$300. Texans receiving less than \$100 per week in unemployment benefits do not qualify for the additional federal funds.

### 4. **Operation Connectivity**

The state announced it has procured one million personal devices and WiFi hotspots through the Operation Connectivity initiative. The effort was funded by a \$200 million allocation from the CARES Act and matched by school districts across the state. The program, run by TEA and local education agencies, is meant to close the digital divide for public school students and ensure they have a device and an internet connection throughout this school year. Due to the coronavirus pandemic, many schools have opted for virtual instruction, leaving those without a reliable internet connection or device in a bind. We are making every effort to connect as many students as possible with our limited internet infrastructure.

### 5. **Vote By Mail**

As the November election approaches, it's important to understand who is qualified to vote by mail in Texas. To request a mail-in ballot, you must be a registered voter that is either 65 years or older, can cite a disability or illness, is confined in jail but still eligible to vote, or will not be in the county on Election Day or during early voting. Lack of immunity to the novel coronavirus does not qualify as a disability or illness independently but may be considered in conjunction with a voter's medical history to decide if they qualify. You can print an application at home, request one from your local election's office, or contact the Secretary of State's office. You must submit your application for ballot by mail to your county elections office by October 23. Once you have received your ballot by mail, it must be returned to the election administrator by Election Day. The United States Postal Service is recommending anyone voting by mail send their ballot back at least a week before they are due to ensure it arrives on time.