



My five cents...

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

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This week Hurricane Nicholas made landfall, impacting the coastal region of Southeast Texas and neighboring counties. Though the storm hit as a hurricane, it was later downgraded to a tropical storm and then to tropical depression. There are 19 counties under the disaster declaration and five are in Senate District 3, including Jasper, Liberty, Montgomery, Newton, and Orange Counties. If you have been affected by Hurricane Nicholas, please complete the Self Reporting Damage Survey found on Texas Department of Emergency Management's website to help the state identify damages to private homes and businesses at <https://damage.tdem.texas.gov/>.

1. Texas Health and Human Services Commission to award \$5 million to rural hospitals

HHSC and Governor Abbott announced that the commission will receive \$5 million in federal funding for rural hospitals through the Centers for Medicare and Medicaid Services (CMS). The funding is coming through an innovative new program at CMS called the Community Health Access and Rural Transformation (CHART) Model. CHART is aimed at improving health outcomes, ensuring access to telehealth, and addressing health disparities in rural communities. It is a seven-year cooperative agreement for rural communities to address significant barriers in access to health care. The funding will help rural hospitals maintain financial stability due to low patient volumes, higher average fixed costs, and difficulty attracting and maintaining healthcare workers. Eligible communities in Senate District 3 include areas within Angelina, Polk, and San Augustine counties. HHSC may expand eligibility as funding allows.

2. Governor Abbott signs bail reform legislation

This week Governor Abbott signed Senate Bill 6 into law in Houston, finalizing bail reform measures he named as an emergency item in January before the regular legislative session. The Damon Allen Act, as the legislation is known, is designed to make it harder for violent offenders to be released from jail. The bill bans the release of those accused of violent crime on personal bonds. Personal bonds do not require offenders to post any bail, they just require a promise that the accused will appear in court. The problem was that numerous violent offenders would go on to commit more violent crime, even murder, while on personal bonds. For example, a pregnant Houston-area woman was murdered by her estranged husband after he was released on a

personal bond after being arrested for attacking her. Keeping these violent offenders behind bars while their case is being resolved keeps the public safe from further criminal acts.

3. DSHS to award \$10 million in grants for local vaccination efforts

The Department of State Health Services announced it is awarding \$10 million in grants for local vaccination efforts through the Texas Vaccine Outreach and Education Grant program. They are encouraging education entities, faith-based organizations, government entities, community coalitions, associations, and non-profit groups to apply for grants ranging from \$50,000 to \$150,000. Community groups should be engaged in vaccine education and aiming at increasing the number of vaccinated Texans. Priority is given to rural communities, disability organizations, and communities of color.

4. SFA launches inaugural Aviation Science Program class

This fall, Stephen F. Austin State University is offering a new degree program – Aviation Science. This month the inaugural class began piloting aircraft at A. L. Mangham Airport. The program is a public-private partnership with Nacogdoches-based HCH Aviation and other entities. The City of Nacogdoches is providing the airport, HCH Aviation and Piper Aircraft provide the planes, and HCH Aviation provides the instructors. Aviation Science graduates will be FAA certified upon graduation. The flight training program is open to collegiate and non-collegiate students, as well as those not interested in earning a bachelor's degree. Though the program now only has 21 students, program leaders are hoping to expand their offerings to have up to 200 or more students in the program.

5. Texas Veterans Commission grants \$1 million to East Texas veteran's services

Six veteran's services groups in East Texas received a combined \$1 million in grants from the Texas Veterans Commission this month. Grants range from general assistance to housing and transportation assistance. The money for these grants comes from veterans' cash lottery tickets, vehicle registrations, and hunting and fishing licenses, which all have the option to donate to the Texas Veterans Commission. Through these small donations, the Texas Veterans Commission has been able to award over \$33 million just this year. Over 5,000 East Texas veterans receive help from the community organizations that received grants this month. Veterans have access to other important resources through the Texas Veterans Commission and can learn more at <https://www.tvc.texas.gov/>.

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