

# United Methodist Advocacy in Pennsylvania

July 31, 2019

We have reached the heart of summer and the General Assembly is in recess. However, it should be noted that many legislative committees continue to meet and sometimes even conduct hearings. Lawmakers will also use the time to prepare and fine-tune legislation for the fall.

Obviously, no legislation will be considered for a couple months. However, there were still a lot of things happening in Harrisburg in July. The legislature left the governor with somewhere between 50 and 100 bills to consider. And the various executive agencies and departments continue to operate.

Following are some state-related political news items for United Methodists, from July 2019:

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- **Tracing Guns Used in Crimes**
- **Ordained to Prevent Gun Violence**
- **PA Agencies Oppose Restrictive Housing Proposal**

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## **Attorney General Settles Online Payday Loan Scheme**

On July 24, state Attorney General Josh Shapiro announced a settlement with Think Finance, a national online payday lender, and an associated private equity firm for allegedly engineering a \$133

million illegal online payday loan scheme that targeted as many as 80,000 Pennsylvania consumers. The settlement will void all remaining balances on the illegal loans.

Pennsylvania is one of the leading creditors that negotiated this comprehensive settlement with Think Finance as part of its bankruptcy plan, which is pending approval before the Bankruptcy Court and subsequent approval by the U.S. Eastern District Court of Pennsylvania.

In late 2014, the Pennsylvania Office of Attorney General sued Think Finance, Inc. and Chicago-based private equity firm Victory Park Capital Advisors, LLC, and various affiliated entities. The suit alleged that between 2011-2014, three websites operated by Think Finance—Plain Green Loans, Great Plains Lending and Mobiloans—allowed borrowers to sign up for loans and lines of credit while charging interest rates as high as 448 percent.

Predatory “Payday” loans, which typically charge interest rates higher than 200 or 300 percent, are illegal in Pennsylvania.

“This is a model of how aggressive enforcement by one state can lend itself to nationwide relief for consumers,” said Attorney General Josh Shapiro. “The settlement will provide relief to approximately 80,000 Pennsylvanians...as well as to consumers across the country who were also affected. Our Bureau of Consumer Protection will hold accountable anyone who tries to exploit Pennsylvania consumers by charging illegal interest rates.”

In addition to voiding all remaining balances on the illegal loans, the settlement will enable borrowers who repaid more than the loan principal and the lawful interest rate of 6 percent to share proportionately in a multi-million-dollar fund created by the settlement. Consumers will receive a check in the mail and will not have to do anything to claim their refunds. The defendants will also request that the credit bureaus delete any credit reporting on the loans.

Consumers will receive notices if they are eligible for relief. Affected consumers can obtain more information about the settlement, including whether they qualify for relief, by visiting [www.pathinkfinancesettlement.com](http://www.pathinkfinancesettlement.com) or by calling 1-877-641-8838. Under the terms of the settlement, restitution checks will be mailed to consumers at the addresses on their loan agreements. Any borrowers who have moved since taking out these loans should notify the settlement administrator of their new address at the above telephone number.

## **Reinstatement of Federal Death Penalty**

On July 25, U.S. Attorney General William Barr reinstated the death penalty for federal crimes, following a 16-year moratorium, according to the Department of Justice. Barr’s order includes instructions to schedule the executions of five inmates currently incarcerated on death row for murder.

“Congress has expressly authorized the death penalty through legislation adopted by the people’s representatives in both houses of Congress and signed by the President,” Barr said in a statement. “The Justice Department upholds the rule of law — and we owe it to the victims and their families to carry forward the sentence imposed by our justice system.”

Under the new guidance provided by Barr, the Bureau of Prisons will begin conducting executions using one drug, pentobarbital, rather than the three-drug cocktail that was employed when the last federal execution occurred in 2003. The one-drug system is currently employed in Georgia, Missouri, and Texas and is believed to reduce the potential for mishap.

There are currently 62 federal inmates on death row, according to the Death Penalty Information Center.

## Opposition to Federal Death Penalty

On July 26, Democratic Rep. Ayanna Pressley said the death penalty has "no place in a just society." Consequently, the Massachusetts congresswoman is introducing a bill that would reverse the action and abolish the death penalty altogether.

The intention of the bill would be to "prohibit the imposition of the death penalty for any violation of Federal law, and for other purposes." Pressley is a member of the so-called "squad" of progressive Democratic congresswomen who directly counters the Trump administration.

Pressley tweeted an image of the bill. It states, "no person may be sentenced to death or put to death on or after the date of enactment of this act for any violation of federal law." It notes that those who were sentenced before the bill's enactment should be re-sentenced for their crimes.

## The Cost of the Opioid Crisis

On July 30, a team of researchers from Penn State University published information describing the costs of the current opioid epidemic. They report that tens of billions of dollars have been expended because of this epidemic, including such areas as for medical treatment, law enforcement, child welfare and special education.

Furthermore, observes Dennis Scanlon—a professor and director of Penn State's Center for Health Care and Policy Research, who coordinated the research effort—the crisis was caused in part by federal government decisions to encourage pain control and then to neglect many of the resulting consequences for state and local governments, individuals and families, in ways both tragic and expensive.

The research is detailed in a nine-article special edition of the *American Journal of Managed Care*, entitled "Deaths, Dollars and Diverted Resources: Examining the Heavy Price of the Opioid Epidemic."

Among the researchers' findings:

- Nationally, the number of Medicaid recipients diagnosed with opioid use disorder roughly quadrupled from 1999 to 2013. In 2017, in Pennsylvania alone, 119,500 people in the state Medical Assistance program had diagnoses of opioid use disorder.
- Nationally, between 2011 and 2016, 80,000 children suffered abuse or neglect, and 95,000 children were put into foster care because of parental opioid problems, adding some \$2.8 billion to child welfare service costs.
- From 2000 to 2016, the losses to the labor market from people disabled or deceased due to opioid misuse cost the 50 state governments an estimated \$11.8 billion in reduced income and sales tax receipts.
- In Pennsylvania, opioid misuse added an average of \$7.4 million per year to court costs, plus \$45 million in state prison costs—not including the increased costs to local police and county jails, where most drug possession convicts serve their time.
- Babies born with neonatal abstinence syndrome (NAS), which occurs when they are persistently exposed to opioids in the womb, are more likely to have low birth weight, birth defects and developmental deficits. About one in five of them require special education services. In Pennsylvania alone, NAS will increase special education costs \$8.3 million a year.

The Penn State research started when a coalition of states' attorneys general asked the university to analyze the cost of the epidemic to states.

Professor Scanlon said he hopes the findings encourage policymakers to think ahead. "It certainly seems, in retrospect, that there are a number of things that could have been done to reduce the magnitude of this," he said. "Are we going to learn anything...?"

## **The Berks Detention Center**

I have been following for a few years, off and on, events and circumstances at the Berks County Detention Center, not far from Reading, PA.

The center is one of three federal family detention facilities housing undocumented immigrants, in the nation—the other two being in Texas. It has been the focus of controversy for about five years, with nation-wide attention ebbing and flowing. There have certainly been cases of personal abuse of residents, as well as irregularities in policy. There have also been efforts to make the facility as satisfactory as institutionally possible—at times, some have observed it to be a “gilded cage.”

But, the main questions are whether detention is actually necessary and whether it is cruel and unusual, especially for children.

Human rights advocates have been campaigning for its closure. The federal government contends the facility is needed and that resources are limited. The state government has claimed it has limited jurisdiction. Berks County, that owns the center, has profited from the rent.

Individuals from our Eastern PA United Methodist Conference have offered support for the detainees and some have participated in the movement to close the facility.

I mention the Berks Center in this report because in July it has received attention on a number of occasions: State Auditor General Eugene DePasquale is conducting an investigation of the center. The Third Circuit U.S. Court of Appeals allowed a case of sexual assault at the facility in 2014, to proceed. Mayor Bill Peduto, at a Lights for Liberty demonstration in Pittsburgh, called on the governor to shut down the facility. Presidential candidate Kirsten Gillibrand said she would close the Berks detention center. Governor Tom Wolf stated that he opposes the mission of the center. Congresswomen Madeleine Dean and Mary Gay Scanlon, after a surprise visit to the facility, observed that it is not right to detain immigrants. Experts from both Carnegie Mellon and Temple Universities urged the governor to issue an Emergency Removal Order to close the facility.

**The Berks Center is one element in the ongoing issue of how to deal with border-crossing, unofficial immigration and asylum-seekers in America. It involves Pennsylvania.**

## **Wolf Calls for Broadband Across Pennsylvania**

On July 18, Governor Tom Wolf was joined by representatives from the Governor’s Office of Broadband Initiatives and representatives from businesses, educational institutions, and county governments to talk about state-wide broadband access.

The governor explained that a recent study release by the Center for Rural Pennsylvania analyzed more than 11 million speed tests and found that Pennsylvania does not have a single county where at least 50 percent of the population receives broadband activity as defined by the Federal Communication Commission. He noted that rural counties have slower connectivity speeds and that there are “pockets” in urban and suburban areas that lack fast reliable connections.

Wolf stated that businesses need fast internet to be competitive. Medical facilities and telemedicine need fast internet to communicate with patients. Adults need internet to apply for jobs, and young Pennsylvanians need it for educational purposes.

**Sheri Collins, acting executive director of the Governor’s Office of Broadband Initiatives, said that the need for broadband across Pennsylvania is very important. She asserted that**

**Pennsylvania has a number of providers who are ready to support the expansion of broadband infrastructure. She said that financial support is necessary to expand broadband infrastructure into underserved areas.**

## **Rural Broadband in PA**

On July 23, the state Public Utility Commission designated Tri-County Rural Electric Cooperative as an “Eligible Telecommunications Carrier.” Tri-County is a small rural electric cooperative in Potter County. The designation is necessary for the co-op to be eligible for federal broadband money.

Tri-County was awarded a \$1.5 million state grant last year to build 103 miles of above-ground fiber optic lines to expand broadband internet access to 800 members in the Coudersport area, part of nearly \$50 million in state and federal funding secured by the co-op for a six-year project to connect all of its 1,400 members.

This is significant for two reasons.

First, a large section of rural Pennsylvania is not connected to high-speed broadband internet services. According to a recent federal estimate, at least 800,000 Pennsylvanians lack broadband access. For several decades, it has been telecommunications companies—not electrical carriers—that have provided this access.

However, the cost of deploying broadband to sparse locations and rugged terrain is costly. Telecommunications companies have been reluctant to do so. This is a problem especially in many north-central Pennsylvania locations.

Second, shifting the responsibility of broadband internet access to an electrical carrier breaks current practice. However, there is also nothing to prevent this. The move mirrors a need of the New Deal era.

Electrical cooperatives were formed in the mid-1930s when nine of 10 rural homes lacked electric service due to the same economic constraints that affect rural broadband access now. The passage of the Rural Electrification Act in 1936 and Electric Cooperative Corporation Act in 1937 paved the way for federal aid to help farmer-based, non-profit cooperatives build electric lines. Even today, Pennsylvania has thirteen rural electric cooperatives providing service in 42 counties.

Tri-County’s initiative is supported by Gov. Tom Wolf and is in harmony with the governor’s Restore PA infrastructure plan.

United Methodism is the largest Protestant denomination in Pennsylvania. It is also evenly distributed across the state. Many United Methodist members and congregations are affected by the lack of broadband service.

## **Proposal to Limit State Budget to a Single Year**

On July 23, two Republican lawmakers unveiled a proposal to create a state constitutional amendment to prevent deferring program costs to a different year’s budget.

The most recent state budget, 2019-20, included a \$673 million supplemental appropriation to cover overspending during the previous year, 2018-19.

The proposal by Sen. Kristin Phillips-Hill (R-York) and Rep. Seth Grove (R-York) would require that additional supplemental spending by the Executive branch be approved in a standalone bill and not added to the state budget for the upcoming fiscal year.

The measure would amend Article III, Section 11 of the Pennsylvania Constitution to require general appropriations bills to only contain appropriations for a single fiscal year.

## **PA Nursing Homes**

On July 23, Auditor General Eugene DePasquale provided a follow-up report to a 2016 audit of nursing home care in Pennsylvania. He was joined by Dr. Rachel Levine, secretary of the Department of Health. DePasquale said that there has been progress, but there is need for more work as the state's population grows older. Pennsylvania has more than 700 nursing homes caring for approximately 90,000 residents.

The new report recommends the state Department of Health do a better job of vetting nursing home operators, produce better evaluation data and continue to work on accountability measures. The Auditor General observed that all state agencies should collaborate more to address shortages of registered nurses and direct-care workers—to prepare for an increased need anticipated by aging Baby Boomers.

He estimated that by 2030 the state will be short by thousands of care providers, if there are no changes. As an example, he said, "Pennsylvania's State System of Higher Education and community colleges across the state should view this healthcare workforce crisis as an opportunity to grow. The public and private sectors, along with labor organizations and educators, must work together to recruit and prepare more professionals to enter the field and nurture and next generation of healthcare workers."

## **Elimination of General Assistance Challenged**

On July 22, two organizations filed a class action lawsuit in Commonwealth Court to prevent the cessation of the state General Assistance cash welfare program. Community Legal Services of Philadelphia and Disability Rights Pennsylvania filed the suit.

The General Assistance program provided about \$200/month to approximately 12,000 needy Pennsylvanians. The program was eliminated by House Bill 33, in June, shortly before completion of the current state budget.

CLS and DRP are arguing that the legislation that ended General Assistance contained too many separate and unrelated subjects, in violation of the state Constitution.

## **Government Assistance and Social Attitudes**

On July 22, at the monthly Pennsylvania Press Club luncheon in Harrisburg, state Department of Human Services (DHS) Secretary Teresa Miller spoke about the need for society to reevaluate attitudes and treatment of those who receive government assistance. In her statement, she said that traditional welfare hasn't existed since President Bill Clinton enacted welfare reforms in the 1990s and that human services recipients should not be vilified for needing help.

Sec. Miller said that DHS programs are a "lifeline" for Pennsylvanians, but said that stigmas and negative perceptions of those who utilize them often discourage individuals from taking advantage of them. "DHS's services are not just here for people who currently need them, they're a lifeline and a resource for all of us," she said. "They exist as much for you and I, should our circumstances change."

Miller said Gov. Tom Wolf's administration is committed to establishing programs that empower state residents. "I think I speak for the entire Wolf administration when I say our goal is always to set policy and implement programs that empower Pennsylvanians to live fulfilling lives and build stronger communities. That is and always will be our mission."

## **The Legislature Wants What it Wants**

I have followed this story for a couple years:

State lawmakers have tried three times to obtain \$200 million from a malpractice insurance fund of the Pennsylvania Professional Liability Joint Underwriting Association (JUA). The fund was established by the state General Assembly in 1976.

A federal judge has three times disallowed the Legislature access to this fund. Just because the Legislature created the fund does not mean that they own it. However, the Legislature can regulate the fund.

In a fourth attempt to raid this fund, the Legislature is ready to beat the owners into submission with the stick of regulation.

On July 17, a federal court denied a JUA challenge to sections of the new 2019-20 state budget Administrative Code, establishing numerous requirements, regulations and hoops for the JUA. Apparently, the idea is to pressure the JUA to the point that they will settle the lawsuits which have blocked the Legislature from taking the funds.

Who knows what will happen? However, this looks like an example of the expression, “If THEY want to get you, they’ll get you.”

## **Eliminate the Keystone Exams in PA Schools**

At a July 10 press conference, state Auditor General Eugene DePasquale, as some others have recently suggested, recommended that the state eliminate the Keystone Exams standardized tests for Pennsylvania school students. He said the Keystone Exams should be replaced by nationally-recognized college placement tests like the PSAT, SAT or ACT tests.

The Keystone Exams are end-of-course assessments testing Pennsylvania high school students about Algebra, Literature and Biology. They were first implemented in the 2012-13 school year to evaluate students’ proficiency and school and teacher performance, as part of the federal No Child Left Behind Act of 2002. Due to changes in federal law, the keystones have not been federally-required since 2015.

DePasquale stated, “For less than what Pennsylvania spends on the Keystone Exams, it could instead pick up the tab for every high school student to take the PSAT or SAT.” He said that eliminating the Keystone would save millions of dollars annually.

## **Legislative Conservation Committee to Cease**

The Joint Legislative Air and Water Pollution Control and Conservation Committee will go out of existence in two years, as determined by the state’s new 2019-20 budget Fiscal Code.

The Committee was created in 1968 to provide legislative oversight for water projects authorized under a voter-approved bond issue. Ridding Pennsylvania of polluted streams and scarred lands caused by coal mining was a major issue of the time.

In a cost-cutting move by House Republican lawmakers, the committee will be terminated on July 1, 2021.

On July 10, Mike Straub, spokesman for House Majority Leader Bryan Cutler (R-Lancaster), said, “The move in general is about centralizing different programs and reducing costs and recognizing that a lot of the initiatives of that committee were already being taken up by other standing committees.”

Sen. Scott Hutchinson (R-Venango), who chairs the 18-member committee, was the only Republican senator to vote against the Fiscal Code bill (Senate Bill 712).

In a 50th-year retrospective published last December, Sen. Hutchinson wrote, “The committee was established with a unique mission to monitor abandoned mine reclamation efforts, to assess water quality projects, and most importantly, to identify further practical options for change. It has earned a solid reputation for crafting important environmental legislation, conducting major inquiries into conservation initiatives, and by monitoring key developments that influence the way environmental policies are determined in the future.”

## **Pay Attention to Southwestern Pennsylvania**

In the border counties of Southwestern Pennsylvania, this year, there has been an increasing public disclosure of serious illnesses among the residents, especially cancers and neurological conditions that are typically related to toxic and chemical agency. The Pittsburgh Post-Gazette has been at the forefront of reporting these issues.

The primary—but not exclusive—cause appears to be the environmental and industrial residue of the gas and oil industry, especially from unconventional drilling operations (fracking). This section of the state provides some of the best access to the Marcellus Shale formation. Fracking is widespread there.

Needless to say, the gas industry and its allies continue to deny any responsibility, either denigrating, threatening, paying-off or cajoling anyone who challenges them.

However, research opposing the industry has now been occurring long enough to begin formulating quantitative conclusions demonstrating cause and effect health and environment damage from the industry. This is likely to snowball. Unfortunately, the human toll of illness, especially among children, also seems to be snowballing.

It’s a question of costs and benefits. At the moment, those who benefit have the power. Too bad for those who bear the cost.

So, pay attention to Southwestern Pennsylvania. It’s only the start. The gas and oil industry has big plans for that part of the state. As for the rest of the state, well, you know that a lot of their winds come from the west.

## **Two Campus Safety Provisions**

On July 8, at a ceremonial bill signing, Gov. Tom Wolf drew attention to two bills intended to increase campus safety.

The first bill, Senate Bill 259, sponsored by Sen. Lisa Baker (R-Luzerne), requires higher education institutions to offer anonymous on-line reporting options for victims of sexual assault or violence.

The second bill, Senate Bill 37, sponsored by Sen. Judy Schwank (D-Berks), gives students legal immunity from being disciplined for violations of campus alcohol or drug policies when reporting cases of sexual assault or violence.

“This is really a big deal for Pennsylvania,” said the governor. He was flanked by Sen. Baker and Sen. Schwank. The bills were included in the new state budget’s School Code.

The governor said the new initiatives are part of an “It’s On Us” campaign launched in 2016 to combat sexual assault. Wolf said he plans to unveil a new package of “It’s On Us” bills this fall.



## **Wolf Vetoes Voting Measures Bill**

On July 5, Gov. Tom Wolf announced he had vetoed Senate Bill 48 containing authorization for the state to borrow \$90 million to offset the cost to counties for new voting machines. The governor has committed to updating voting technology. The County Commissioners Association of Pennsylvania estimates the cost will be about \$150 million for statewide replacement of voting machines.

It was not this cost with which the governor disagreed. Wolf vetoed the bill because it would also eliminate straight-party voting and create a commission to review future mass voting machine decertifications. Regarding the second issue Wolf said, “The bill weakens the ability of the commonwealth and counties to quickly respond to security needs of voting systems in the future, creating unnecessary bureaucracy and potentially harmful delays.”

The need for mass replacement of voting machines was prompted by the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania reaching an out-of-court settlement regarding a lawsuit filed by former Green Party presidential candidate Jill Stein. As part of the settlement, the state agreed to begin using paper ballots in 2020, with automatic audits of ballots beginning in 2022.

## **Rural Hospital Grant**

On July 18, the federal Health Resources and Services Administration (HRSA) held a press conference in the Pennsylvania state Capitol. Pam Kania, regional administrator for HRSA, announced that the agency was allocating \$20 million in a Rural Residency Planning and Development Program, providing grants for rural medical centers. The grants are intended to address physician shortages in rural areas.

Dr. George Sigounas, administrator of HRSA, said there are 2,000 rural counties in the United States and 1,500 of them have a shortage of primary care physicians. “The grants will develop newly accredited, sustainable rural residency programs in family medicine, internal medicine, and psychology,” he stated.

They announced that Lehigh Valley Hospital-Schuylkill would be awarded \$750,000 to establish a new residency program. It remains to be seen whether other Pennsylvania rural hospitals will receive grants.

There are nearly 20 percent fewer primary care providers per person in rural areas compared to urban areas. Sixty-five percent of rural counties do not have access to a psychiatrist. 60 percent of rural counties do not have access to any type of federal healthcare provider at all.”

Sarah Boetang, executive deputy secretary for the Department of Health, emphasized that rural health is a major priority of the Wolf Administration. “One in four Pennsylvanians live in rural areas and residents in these areas are more likely to have poor health and develop serious medical conditions including heart disease and opioid abuse disorder. Mental, behavioral, and dental care is often not widely available. Health care services in rural areas need to meet the needs of the community. Our rural hospitals provide health care to 1.8 million Pennsylvanians but nearly half of these hospitals are operating in negative margins or at risk of closure,” she stated.

A high percentage of United Methodists in Pennsylvania live in rural areas.

## **Wolf Signs Victims' Rights Bills**

On July 15, Governor Tom Wolf was joined by lawmakers and Pennsylvania Victim Advocate Jennifer Storm, as he signed six victims' rights bills into law. The governor signed HB 315, HB 502,

HB 504, SB 399, SB 469, and SB 479. (The contents of these bills are described in my report from last month.)

Wolf thanked the legislators who had been instrumental in passing this legislation. He commented that the passage of this legislation was a joint effort to ensure that the Pennsylvania criminal justice system supports victims. He noted his desire to create the fairest criminal justice system for everyone. The governor asserted that he will continue to pursue this goal into the fall session.

Jennifer Storm thanked Gov. Wolf for standing by victims. She said, “We are in the first year of what has become a historic and unprecedented year for legislation enacted for crime victims.” Storm expressed her pride at being present for the signing of these bills.

## **Additions to Medical Marijuana Treatment List**

On July 11, Pennsylvania Department of Health Secretary Dr. Rachel Levine announced that anxiety disorders and Tourette syndrome will be approved serious medical conditions in the medical marijuana program.

Sec. Levine was joined by representatives from the eight approved academic clinical research centers and three approved clinical registrants (growers).

She discussed the new medical marijuana research program created last year and highlighted the three approved clinical registrants and details of upcoming research.

“Research is what is going to set Pennsylvania’s medical marijuana program apart from any other program in the country,” said Levine. “No other state has implemented a program like this one to help provide clinical, evidence-based research on the effectiveness of medical marijuana.”

She said that the research centers will conduct research on the medical conditions approved under the medical marijuana law—now including anxiety disorders and Tourette syndrome, amounting to 23 conditions.

Levine said approval of anxiety disorders and Tourette’s comes with recommendations that medical marijuana should not be a firstline treatment and should not replace traditional therapies and counseling. She added that research indicates medical marijuana with low tetrahydrocannabinol (THC) and high cannabidiol (CBD) content are more effective for treatment of anxiety disorders because high levels of THC could have adverse effects.

## **Tax the Rich Tour**

On July 9, the Tax the Rich Tour stopped in Harrisburg. The Tax the Rich Tour is a project of Tax March. The tour is a national campaign advocating for measures to require that the wealthiest Americans pay more in taxes, as a matter of economic justice.

Organizers spoke outside the Main Capitol. Tax March executive director Maura Quint was joined by representatives from several Pennsylvania-based organizations.

Quint began by stating that Tax March fights “for a fair economy that works for everyone, not just the wealthiest individuals and corporations.” She asserted that taxing the rich is not an extreme idea, noting that the top marginal tax rate in the 1950s was about 90 percent and about three in four Americans think the rich should be taxed more than they are, currently.

“The total amount of money the richest one percent of Pennsylvanians got this year in tax *cuts*, \$3.5 billion, could pay for the salaries of all 119,369 public school teachers for more than half a year,” Quint added.

Several other speakers addressed the issue with stories and statistics pertaining to Pennsylvania.

Quint encouraged people to follow Tax March as it continues on its nationwide tour.

## **Wolf Signs Farm Bill**

On July 1, Gov. Tom Wolf signed into law a package of legislation being called the Pennsylvania Farm Bill.

The governor was joined by lawmakers, Secretary of Agriculture Russell Redding and representatives of 4-H and the Future Farmers of America.

The governor said he was present to celebrate Pennsylvania farms. “The success of our efforts here includes the changes that are going to create a path of long-term prosperity and security for Pennsylvania agriculture.” He stressed that the agriculture industry is the backbone of the state’s economy, and that if farmers in Pennsylvania succeed, then everyone succeeds.

The six main goals of the bill are:

- Creating new resources for agricultural business development and succession planning.
- Increasing opportunities for Pennsylvania’s agricultural workforce.
- Removing regulatory burdens and strengthen the agricultural business climate.
- Increasing processing capabilities.
- Increasing market opportunities and growth of the organic sector.
- Protecting agriculture infrastructure.

Sen. Judy Schwank (D-Berks) observed that Pennsylvania is the top state in the nation in preserving agricultural land, but it has to do more to preserve farmers. She said this bill takes into account what is needed to ensure a future for the agricultural economy.

Sen. Elder Vogel (R-Beaver) noted that the median age of a farmer in Pennsylvania is about 58 or 59 years old, and for every one farmer under 35 years old, there are four farmers above 65 years old.

Sec. Redding said he was proud of this bill and cited a study that found the agriculture industry makes up 18 percent of the state economy, with about 580,000 jobs.

## **Tracing Guns Used in Crimes**

On July 24, state Attorney General Josh Shapiro announced that the Pennsylvania State Police will be added to a network tracking guns used in crimes. The network is part of an initiative called “Track + Trace,” launched by Shapiro earlier in the month. The Philadelphia and Pittsburgh police departments are already part of the network. With the addition of the State Police, the three largest police agencies in the state are now on board.

“Our response calls for an all-hands-on-deck approach,” Shapiro said, referring to the state’s 1,500 gun deaths a year. “All levels of law enforcement must work together to share resources and expertise.”

Since 2007, Pennsylvania’s police departments have been required by state law to report the serial number of guns used in crimes to a statewide law enforcement database. However, many agencies are not reporting the guns they find. Shapiro said just a third of Pennsylvania’s 1,200 law enforcement agencies are sending reports to the Attorney General’s Office.

The Attorney General said there has been “a bit of surprise” from police chiefs who are informed that their departments are not obeying the law, followed by “an immediate desire to be on board with this.”

But, there is another problem. While gun shops must report their sales to the State Police, these transactions are often reported with paper records. Processing paper has created a nine- to 12-month backlog to be entered into the database.

Shapiro said the initiative will ask private gun sellers to electronically send firearm sale records to the State Police. By completing the database, state law enforcement can undertake more gun traces with the federal Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, and Firearms.

By following a gun's serial number, police can identify where a gun was originally purchased and by whom. This can uncover straw purchases, where someone legally purchases a gun then illegally transfers it to someone who cannot own one.

Shapiro noted that he hadn't found any resistance to the plan.

## **Ordained to Prevent Gun Violence**

This month Deanna Hollas was ordained as a minister of the Presbyterian Church USA. The Church then hired her to a new position called Gun Violence Prevention Minister, the first of its kind in the nation.

Rev. Hollas, 52, from Dallas, TX, will oversee over 800 local Presbyterian gun violence prevention advocates across the country and work toward making churches more active in preventing gun violence. She will assist individuals, congregations and judicatories of the church stay involved and informed about preventing gun violence.

Previously, Hollas had been a member of Moms Demand Action for Gun Sense, an organization that advocates for gun control. As a member, she visited lawmakers in Texas, petitioning for gun violence prevention efforts.

In the late 1960s, the Presbyterian Church called for tighter regulation on the sale and possession of guns, after the assassinations of John Kennedy, Martin Luther King Jr., and Robert Kennedy. In 1998, as a safety measure, the Church called on Presbyterians to remove firearms from their homes. In 2010, it adopted a resolution urging its congregations to be active in preventing gun violence.

Today, many would see Hollas's new role as timely. A CNN analysis found that school shootings have increased over the past decade. The US Centers for Disease Control and Prevention say that nearly 40,000 Americans died by guns in 2017—the highest level in 40 years.

Hollas grew up around guns in Texas and, so, is familiar with firearms. She's not against them, but she wants to keep people safe. She is hoping that her background with guns will help her connect across both sides of the issue. "When I talk to folks that are generally gun-rights folks, the first thing they say is that we just want to take their guns away," Hollas said. "And that's not true."

Hollas expected some opposition from gun-rights supporters in the church, but said there hasn't been any. "I think it's because people are just tired of this. People are tired of children being shot in their schools; people are tired of the high numbers of gun violence in communities of color; people are tired of dying by suicide," she said.

"I want to move beyond red and blue and be about Christ," she said. "This isn't a political matter, it's a matter of life and death, and what we're called to do as Christians is to bring life."

## **PA Agencies Oppose Restrictive Housing Proposal**

According to a July 25 press release, Pennsylvania Department of Human Services Secretary Teresa Miller and Department of Community and Economic Development Secretary Dennis Davin have responded to the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD) expressing opposition to a federal proposal that would withhold housing assistance from some immigrant families.

In a letter to HUD Secretary Ben Carson, secretaries Miller and Davin advocated for the continuation of the current system, which provides a method for public housing authorities (PHAs) to support the

housing needs of low-income children and adults who are U.S. citizens or have an eligible immigration status and who live with someone who is ineligible (mixed eligibility families).

Under the proposed new rule, a household would no longer receive any housing assistance unless *every* member residing in the home is of eligible immigration status. This would discontinue the current policy of prorating assistance according to the number of eligible persons in the home.

“Children are the largest group benefiting from the current policy, and they would be the most harmed by a rule change to exclude mixed-eligibility families from access to affordable housing,” Secretary Miller said.

Secretary Davin said. “This policy would place undue burden on our public housing authorities that are providing crucial housing services.” PHAs would be forced to spend time and money to exclude mixed-eligibility families from access to affordable housing.

“The departments of Human Services and Community and Economic Development exist to strengthen Pennsylvania communities, but this federal proposal undermines that mission,” Secretary Miller said.

**Dai Morgan**