

# **UM Advocacy in PA Report, February 2022**

## ***Legislative redistricting, juvenile justice, services for people with disabilities***

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The Pennsylvania state legislature has been focused on drawing new lines for Congressional and state legislative districts. Seats are at stake and incumbents of both parties have tried to ensure their positions are safe. None of them wants to be pitted against a rival within the same party, or worse, to have their district redrawn to include a majority voters from the rival party.

Both Republicans and Democrats know the redrawn maps will determine the political landscape in Pennsylvania for the next decade. A lot is at stake, and several grassroots organizations, such as Draw the Lines PA and Fair Maps PA, have kept their eyes on the process to try to minimize “gerrymandering,” which is drawing lines so outrageous they zig-zag through regions just to strengthen the chances that one party will remain in power.

The Congressional map has been the most controversial. The Republican-controlled legislature sent Gov. Tom Wolf, a Democrat, maps that were weighted toward their party. And, as expected, the governor vetoed them. That sent the whole matter to the courts, and the Pennsylvania Supreme Court will decide the final map.

### **Decisions on new legislative districts may delay 2022 elections**

The Legislative Reapportionment Commission has approved new legislative district maps, but there are signs Republicans may challenge them. They believe Democrats have been provided more of an advantage in several of the new House districts. Both parties seem to be on board with the new state Senate map, which is mostly unchanged except for the creation of a new district in Philadelphia with many Hispanic voters.

It’s important to note the process is behind schedule and could lead to mid-term elections being postponed. The new maps were supposed to be announced in time for candidates to start collecting signatures on Feb. 15 for the midterm elections in May.

While redistricting has been center stage, the collapse of the bridge in Pittsburgh has put infrastructure funding back in the limelight, and the legislature will need to take concrete steps to start repairing and maintaining the state’s antiquated roads and bridges. President Joe Biden visited Pittsburgh to tout his \$1 trillion bill to rebuild the nation’s infrastructure.

### **Education, judicial reforms for children, youth**

The House of Representatives is also gearing up for a battle over "Critical Race Theory," as some Republican legislators are even calling for banning books they considered too controversial on racism and the enslavement of Black people in the United States. This issue is likely to be debated along party lines, with Democrats opposing any suggestion of censoring books and blocking teachers from providing factual information on the nation’s racial history.

More pressure also is being put on the legislature to take action to stop placing children accused of crimes in adult prisons. The Pennsylvania Task Force on Juvenile Justice Reform has recommended significant changes in the way children are treated in the criminal justice system, noting rampant abuse in juvenile detention facilities and the placement of children as young as 10 years old in adult jails.

The task force offered its recommendations for reform more than six months ago, but legislators have taken no concrete action to change any existing laws to better protect children.

## **Advocacy for people with disabilities**

Advocates for people with disabilities are also putting pressure on both Gov. Wolf and the legislators to raise pay rates for home healthcare workers.

Advocates say families are having great difficulty finding and retaining home healthcare workers to care for family members with disabilities. Pennsylvania is facing a shortage of direct support professionals who help people with intellectual and developmental disabilities bathe, get dressed, eat, exercise, socialize, and perform many other fundamental tasks.

Putting an exact number on the shortfall is difficult, as employment data on these workers is lumped together with health-care aides generally. But the industry was already experiencing double-digit vacancy and turnover rates nationally before COVID-19 arrived.

Finally, Gov. Wolf is presenting his last budget address this month, as this is his final term in office. The state is gearing up for what is bound to be a hotly contested race among Republicans and Democrats to take his place.

*\*Joyce M. Davis (jdavis@susumc.org), a respected journalist and non-profit CEO who serves as the Lay Leader of the Susquehanna Conference of the United Methodist Church, was named the coordinator of [United Methodist Advocacy in Pennsylvania](#) in May of 2021. As coordinator, she works with advocacy leaders from the Eastern Pennsylvania, Susquehanna and Western Pennsylvania conferences to increase awareness of legislative activity related to the United Methodist Social Principles and encourage local church members to engage in advocacy as a means of living out their faith.*

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