

## General Assembly Adjourns Short Session



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## **General Assembly Adjourns Short Session...For Now**

PEACE. Recent years have seen North Carolina state lawmakers in session all year, year after year. What used to be a part-time legislature is now pretty much full-time.

Though the General Assembly may have wrapped up its main legislative business for the year, the door is still open to more law-making with plans to come back to Raleigh for legislative sessions in late July, August, September, October, November, and December. The NC House Speaker announced that votes may be held during those sessions or they may not – we will have to wait and see.

## State Budget Passes General Assembly, Heads to Governor Cooper

Before this year's short session adjourned, the General Assembly amended the second year (fiscal year 2022-2023) of the two year State Budget passed in 2021 and sent it to Governor Cooper. The Governor may sign it into law, he may allow it to become law without his signature, or he may veto it and block it. If he vetoes the State Budget bill, the current two year spending plan remains in effect without any changes. Legislators could try to override his veto or negotiate a compromise.

The State Budget bill is hundreds of pages long, but here are some highlights and lowlights of what is and is not included.

### **State Employees and Retirees**

Last year's budget bill provided a 2.5% pay raise for state workers for 2022-23. This raise increases to 3.5%, an increase smaller than what state employees wanted and smaller than the 5% pay raise Governor Cooper and House Democrats pushed for.

Once again, retired state workers receive no COLA increase. Instead, they receive a 1% one-time bonus on top of the 3% one-time bonus already planned. House Democrats had pushed for 3% *recurring* COLA increase, meaning compensation would increase to help keep pace with inflation for retirees on fixed incomes.

The budget also fails to provide state workers with 12 weeks of paid family leave when they have or adopt a child. House Democrats had pushed for this to help recruit and retain state workers and allow workers to spend time with families.

### **Teacher and School Employee Pay Raises**

The budget includes pay raises for teachers and school employees, but, like with state employees, the raises fall short of what House Democrats and Governor Cooper supported. Under the revised budget, the average teacher would receive a 6.7% raise across the two years. That is an average number and it works out that newer teachers would receive more and experienced teachers less. Democratic proposals called for a at least a 7.5% raise for any teacher across the two year period.

School employees will receive a 4% raise or \$15/hour, whichever is greater for the worker. This is important because many of these workers were left behind with previous years' compensation increases.

### **Medicaid Expansion**

The State Budget once again does not include Medicaid Expansion. North Carolina remains one of the few states to refuse to accept billions of dollars in federal money to expand health care access, lower health care costs, and create health care jobs. Research shows people have died and led less healthy lives because we refuse to do this. Our refusal drives up health care costs for people with insurance because we all end up paying for uninsured folks who end up in the Emergency Room because they lack regular access to health care.

It is never too late to do the right thing and I hope the General Assembly finally gets around to expanding Medicaid. In the meantime, our failure to act costs us billions of dollars and damages the health of thousands of citizens.

### **Early Childhood**

The State Budget includes a \$9 million increase for North Carolina Pre-K

programs, but falls well short of what is needed to fully fund what is required for early childhood education under the Leandro plan. Governor Cooper's budget had requested a \$97 million increase for early childhood programs like Smart Start.

### **Sound, Basic Education for All Students**

Similar to Early Childhood, the State Budget increases investment in K-12 schools (\$109 million) but falls far short of what Governor Cooper had proposed (\$438 million) and what is required under the Leandro plan.

North Carolina's state constitution guarantees every child, no matter where they live in the state, the right to a sound, basic education. Our state courts have clashed repeatedly with the General Assembly about what state resources are needed to make this right a reality for every student and this budget does not end that fight. The NC Supreme Court is scheduled to hear from all parties on the issue later this year.

In the meantime, the bottom line is that the State Budget misses an opportunity to make an historic investment in public schools across the state.

### **Climate Change and Clean Water**

A significant missed opportunity in the budget bill was its failure to meaningfully address climate change or to make clean water improvements. House Democrats had proposed an ambitious plan to invest billions of dollars in energy efficiency upgrades in local schools and in electric school buses. The proposal would have used one-time money that is just sitting, unspent, in state reserve accounts. It would have created NC jobs, lowered energy costs for local school districts, and reduced our state's carbon footprint.

### **Private School Voucher Expansion**

One of the worst pieces to the Budget is that it doubles state spending on private school vouchers by 2028, while exempting private schools from student performance reporting requirements that all public schools must follow.

### **Affordable Housing**

The State Budget includes \$10 million for the NC Housing Trust Fund to help with statewide housing needs and \$35 million in grant money to help with affordable housing in Dare County.

### **Capital Investments**

The State Budget invests \$278 million for capital improvements in public schools statewide and \$24 million each for the UNC System and the Community College system. It creates a \$250 million "inflationary reserve" to be controlled by legislative leadership that can be used to offset higher building costs in already approved capital building projects.

### **Community Safety**

The bill includes \$32 million for a statewide competitive grant program where local schools can apply for money to help with school safety enhancements. It also appropriates \$15 million for more school resource officers. There is a \$12 million increase in court funding.

## **Governor Cooper Signs Executive Order to Help Protect Women's Access to Reproductive Health Care in North Carolina**

Last week Governor Roy Cooper signed an Executive Order that takes several steps to defend access to reproductive health services in North Carolina.

[Executive Order 263](#) helps protect North Carolina doctors and nurses and their patients. It directs Cabinet agencies to coordinate to protect reproductive health care services in North Carolina. As a result of this Order, Cabinet agencies cannot require a pregnant state employee to travel to a state where there are not protections for the health of the pregnant person. It directs the Department of Public Safety to work with law enforcement to ensure enforcement of a state law that prohibits anyone from blocking access to a health care facility. The Order also provides protections against extradition for those seeking or providing reproductive health care services in North Carolina and prohibits Cabinet agencies from cooperating in investigations initiated by other states into anyone obtaining or providing reproductive health care that is legal North Carolina.

While an executive order is a good first step, we need to codify women's health protections from previous US Supreme Court decisions like *Roe v. Wade* into state law. Republican legislative leaders blocked consideration of bills like [SB 888](#) which would write into state law the constitutional protections women had before the most recent US Supreme Court decision or [HB 1119](#) which codifies constitutional protections and removes recent restrictions passed by the General Assembly in recent years.

## **COVID-19 and Monkeypox Vaccine Update**

## From the NC Department of Health & Human Services

- COVID-like illness in hospital emergency departments is down to 4.9%.
- COVID-19 reported cases for the week are up to 24,613.
- COVID-19 hospital admissions of COVID-19 patients the week are up to 889.
- Booster rates are 57% for the total population. We have 77% of adults with at least one dose and 29% of children and teens ages 6 months -17 years with at least one dose.
- 11.05% are Omicron BA.2, 48.53% are BA.2.12, 11.46% are BA.4, and 28.97% are BA.5.

This information, plus the rest of our data dashboards and reports can be found here: <https://covid19.ncdhhs.gov/dashboard>

### Monkeypox Vaccine

The federal government has allocated North Carolina 444 doses of Jynneos, a vaccine that can prevent illness or lead to less severe symptoms if given within two weeks after someone is exposed to monkeypox. Those doses have been allocated to seven local health departments to ensure access across the state. As additional doses become available, more locations will be added.

The local health departments first receiving doses are Buncombe, Durham, Forsyth, Mecklenburg, New Hanover, Pitt and Wake.

Because of limited supply, vaccination is currently only being offered to individuals with known or suspected exposure to monkeypox. This includes:

- People who have been in close physical contact with someone diagnosed with monkeypox; and
- Men who have sex with men, or transgender individuals, who have had multiple or anonymous sex partners in the last 14 days in either a venue where monkeypox was present or in an area where the virus is spreading. Currently, this includes several locations in Europe and parts of California, District of Columbia, Florida, Illinois, Massachusetts, New York and Texas. Updated global and U.S. case numbers are posted on the CDC site [here](#).

Individuals who meet these criteria can [call their local health department](#) to make an appointment to receive the vaccine, or they can call one of the seven local health departments that have already received vaccines as part of the phase 1 allocation of Jynneos vaccine:

- Buncombe (828) 250-5300
- Durham (919) 560-9217
- Forsyth (336) 703-3100
- **Mecklenburg (980) 314-9400**
- New Hanover (910) 798-6800
- Pitt (252) 902-2300
- Wake (919) 250-4462

Monkeypox vaccines are free and are based on availability of vaccine, which is in limited quantities currently.

Monkeypox is transmitted person to person through direct skin-to-skin contact, having contact with an infectious rash, through body fluids or through respiratory secretions. Such contact often occurs during prolonged, face-to-face contact or during intimate physical contact, such as kissing, cuddling or sex.

Anyone can get monkeypox, but many of the cases identified in the current outbreak have been in men who have sex with men. Cases have been able to be identified in part thanks to the vigilance of those who sought testing when concerns arose leading to the recognition that monkeypox was spreading in the U.S.

People can take basic steps to prevent the spread of monkeypox. If you have an unexplained rash, sores or other symptoms, see your health care provider — if you don't have a provider or health insurance, visit a public health clinic near you. Keep the rash covered and avoid sex or being intimate with anyone until you have been checked out by a health care provider. Monkeypox is usually a self-limited disease with the symptoms lasting from 2 to 4 weeks, though severe cases can occur. Standard household cleaners and detergents are effective at cleaning environmental surfaces and linens.

More information can be found on the CDC website:

[Signs and Symptoms](#)

[How it Spreads](#)

[Monkeypox Facts for People Who are Sexually Active](#)

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**Stay safe....PEACE!**

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