STATELINE MIDWEST

CSG MIDWEST

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STATES CONTINUE TO RESHAPE ELECTION POLICY — AND THE VOTER EXPERIENCE

by Tim Anderson *(tanderson@csg.org)*

Variation in the 50 states' election laws is as old as the nation itself, a reflection of the "times, places and manner" authority constitutionally granted to state legislatures.

Across the country, those legislatures have been quite active on election policy in recent years, implementing changes on how voters register, where and when they vote, and what they need in order to cast a ballot.

Since 2022, U.S. states have enacted 275 voting laws, as tracked by the Brennan Center for Justice. The center categorizes some of these measures as "expansive," meaning they have made it easier to vote, and others as "restrictive," limiting voter access in some way. (The independent, nonpartisan organization's tracking of laws also includes measures related to election interference.)

Beyond the laws directly impacting voter experiences and access, states also play a central role in election administration, which, in turn, can affect voter confidence in the entire process.

This CSG Midwest analysis of regional trends is based on a state-by-state review of new laws, plus interviews with legislators. It focuses on these developments in particular:

- mandatory post-election audits;
- changes in the voter registration process;
- new proof-of-citizenship requirements; and
- tweaks to the policies on early voting, both in person and by mail.

ON THE BACK END: NEW LAWS ON POST-ELECTION AUDITS

So far this decade, one particularly active state on election policy has been South Dakota.

"There was just a lot of suspicion after the 2020 election, when you saw so many of the rules were changed," Senate Majority Leader Jim Mehlhaff says.

That was the year of voting during the COVID-19 pandemic. Mehlhaff says suspicion among South Dakotans often has been rooted in what they have read, heard or learned about elections in other states.

Still, South Dakota legislators have looked for ways to secure their state's own voting system and ensure confidence in it.

"We're a small state; our legislative districts are small," Mehlhaff notes. "So we have a number of close legislative races almost every year, and it draws a lot of scrutiny."

Hence the need for a state-funded, county-run system of post-election audits, Mehlhaff says, which the Legislature began requiring under a 2023 law (SB 160). He points to that measure as a "valuable addition" to how the state can better oversee elections while also "quelling some of the concerns about election integrity."

With the law in place, after every primary and general election, each South Dakota county must review the results of two contests in 5 percent of its voting precincts. All votes cast in those contests and precincts are counted manually, with results from the paper record then compared to those from the automatic tabulating equipment.

Notably, the entire post-election audit process in South Dakota must be open to the public, from the random selection of contests and precincts, to the unsealing and opening of ballot boxes, to the manual counting of votes.

North Dakota followed two years later by establishing a new mandatory process for post-election auditing (SB 2175 of 2025).

This policy is now used in every Midwestern state.

Indiana, Michigan and Ohio also are among the U.S. states with laws or programs that encourage or allow for "risk-limiting audits" (RLAs): use of a statistical sampling method to check a certain number of paper ballots

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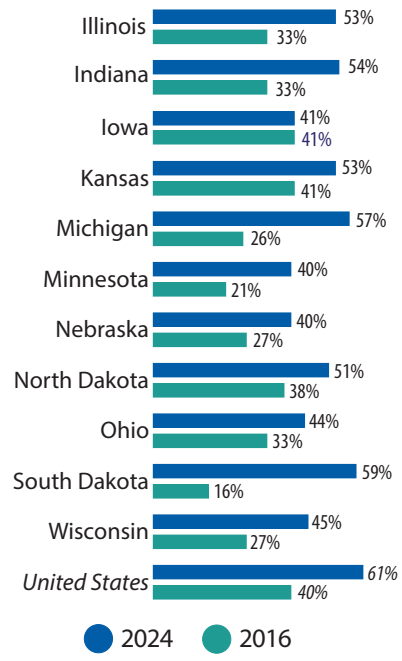
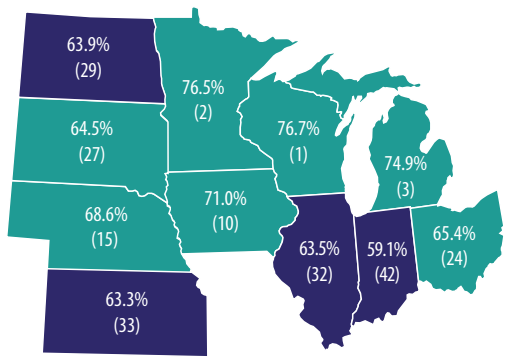
RISE OF EARLY VOTING: % OF VOTES CAST BEFORE ELECTION DAY, 2024 VS. 2016*



*Votes cast before Election Day include mail voting and early in-person voting. Nationwide, in 2024, early in-person voting accounted for 31 percent of all votes cast and mail-in voting for 26 percent. (Four percent of the votes before Election Day were unspecified.)

Source: The Center for Election Innovation and Research

VOTER TURNOUT RATES: 2024 (U.S. RANK)*



* The rate is based on the percentage of the state's voting-eligible population that voted.

Source: University of Florida Election Lab

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Voters' Turn: 21 Measures on the Ballot in 11-State Midwest

This November, the most common type of measure on ballots will be legislatively referred constitutional amendments. Proposals include a higher threshold for raising taxes (Iowa), greater judicial authority to deny bail (Indiana), a change in term limits (Nebraska), and protections for places of worship (Wisconsin). Among the citizen-initiated statutes or constitutional amendments: providing free school meals for children (North Dakota), legalizing online sports betting (Nebraska), and banning male participation on female school athletic teams (Nebraska).

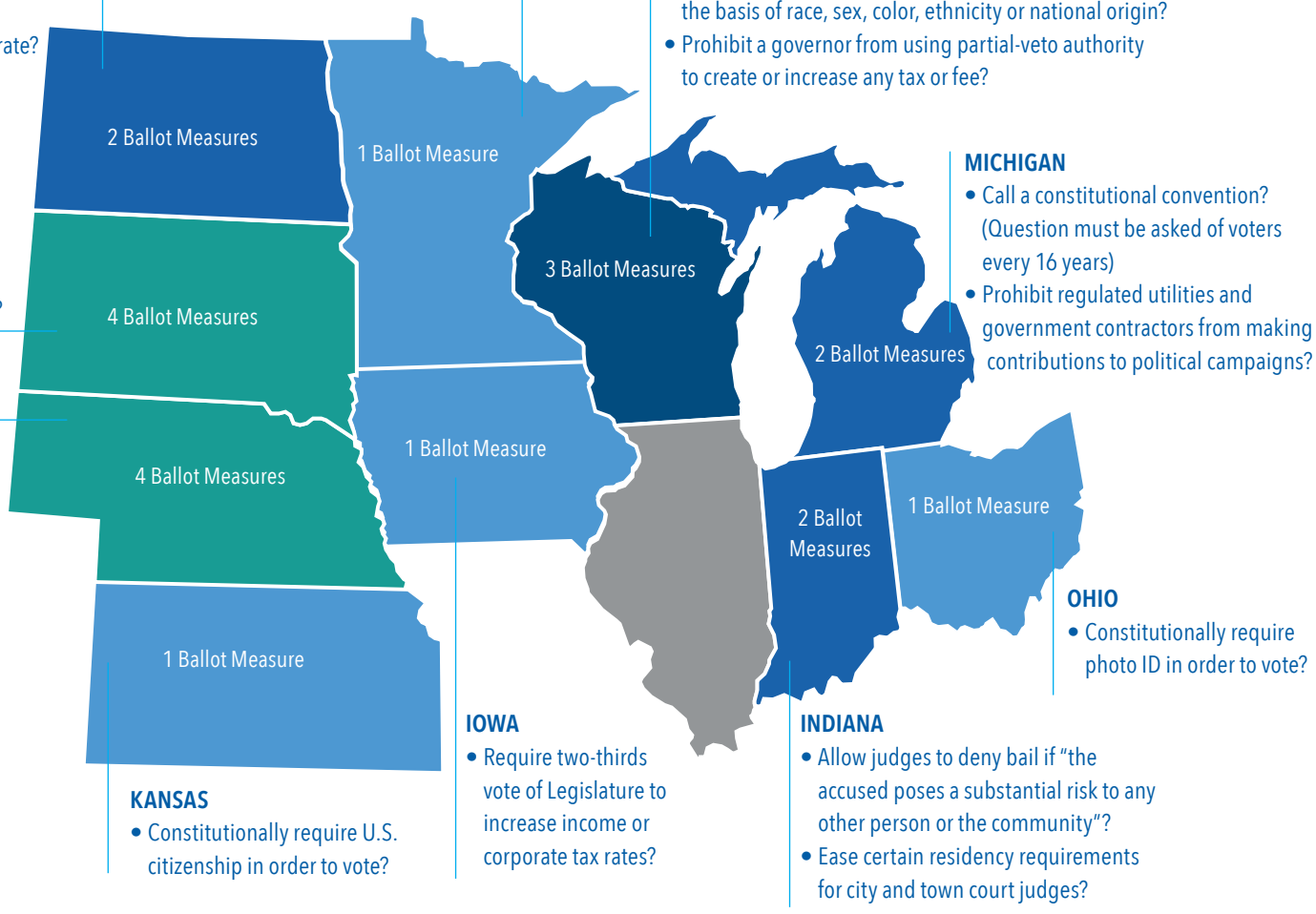
NORTH DAKOTA
- Raise threshold for amending state Constitution, from simple-majority approval by voters to 60 percent?
- All public schools must provide one free breakfast and one free lunch to students, with costs reimbursed by state?

SOUTH DAKOTA
- Repeal state expansion of Medicaid eligibility if federal funding falls below 90 percent matching rate?
- Constitutionally require U.S. citizenship in order to vote?
- Raise threshold for amending state Constitution, from simple-majority approval by voters to 60 percent?
- Establish trust fund to deposit unclaimed/ abandoned intangible property, with portion of interest and income going to state general fund?

NEBRASKA
- Ease legislative term limits, allowing for three consecutive, four-year terms in Unicameral Legislature (existing limit is two consecutive, four-year terms)?
- Legalize online sports betting and dedicate most new revenue to property tax relief? (two ballot measures)
- Designate school athletic teams as male, female or coed and prohibit students of male sex from participating on female-designated teams?

MINNESOTA
- Increase allowable distributions from Minnesota Permanent School Fund to provide more money to local schools (money in fund comes from activities on school trust lands)?

WISCONSIN
- Constitutionally prevent the state and local governments from ordering closure of places of worship, or from forbidding gatherings in these places of worship, during states of emergency, including public health emergencies?
- Prohibit governmental entities from discriminating against, or granting preferential treatment to, any individual or group on the basis of race, sex, color, ethnicity or national origin?
- Prohibit a governor from using partial-veto authority to create or increase any tax or fee?



MICHIGAN
- Call a constitutional convention? (Question must be asked of voters every 16 years)
- Prohibit regulated utilities and government contractors from making contributions to political campaigns?

OHIO
- Constitutionally require photo ID in order to vote?

KANSAS
- Constitutionally require U.S. citizenship in order to vote?

IOWA
- Require two-thirds vote of Legislature to increase income or corporate tax rates?

INDIANA
- Allow judges to deny bail if "the accused poses a substantial risk to any other person or the community"?
- Ease certain residency requirements for city and town court judges?

WHAT CAN GET ON THE BALLOT? Overview of State Laws in Midwest

	IL	IN	IA	KS	MI	MN	NE	ND	OH	SD	WI
Allows for legislatively referred constitutional amendments?	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Allows for citizen-initiated state statutes and constitutional amendments?	Limited*	No	No	No	Yes	No	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	No
Allows for citizen-initiated measures to veto an enacted law?	No	No	No	No	Yes**	No	Yes	Yes	Yes**	Yes	No
Requires recurring ballot question on whether to hold a state constitutional convention?	Yes, every 20 years	No	Yes, every 10 years	Yes	Yes, every 16 years	No	No	No	Yes, every 20 years	No	No

* Illinois only allows for citizen-initiated constitutional amendments that propose structural or procedural changes to the legislative article of the Constitution
** Michigan and Ohio also allow for citizen-initiated measures that amend an existing state statute

Source: Ballotpedia

Ballot thresholds: Signature Requirements for 3 Types of Citizen-Initiated Measures

	CONSTITUTIONAL AMENDMENT
IL	**8%** of votes cast in last election for governor
MI	**10%** of votes cast in last election for governor
NE	**10%** of registered voters
ND	**4%** of state population
OH	**10%** of votes cast in last election for governor
SD	**10%** of votes cast in last election for governor

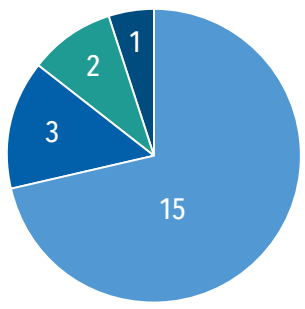
	STATE STATUTE
MI	**8%** of votes cast in last election for governor
NE	**7%** of registered voters
ND	**2%** of state population
OH	**3%** of votes cast in last election for governor
SD	**5%** of votes cast in last election for governor

	VETO REFERENDUM
MI	**5%** of votes cast in last election for governor
NE	**5%** of registered voters*
ND	**2%** of state population
OH	**6%** of total votes cast in last election for governor
SD	**5%** of votes cast in last election for governor

* Signatures of 10% of voters will suspend the law until the vote

OTHER CONSIDERATIONS:
Nebraska: Signatures must include at least 5 percent of the registered voters in each of two-fifths of the counties in the state
Ohio: For a constitutional amendment, signatures must be obtained in at least one-half of Ohio's 88 counties. For each county, the signatures collected must be equal to or greater than 5% of the votes cast in the last gubernatorial election. This same distribution requirement applies for a citizen-initiated state statute and veto referendum, but with a different percentage threshold: 1.5% and 3%, respectively.

Overview of November 2026 Ballot Measures, By Type



50 STATES, 50 ELECTION SYSTEMS: NEW LAWS IN MIDWEST REFLECT VARIED APPROACHES

» CONTINUED FROM PAGE 1

and ensure the election outcome was correct. RLAs have been cited as the "gold standard" of post-election audits.

In Indiana, the Voting System Technical Oversight Program (created legislatively and operated out of Ball State University in coordination with the secretary of state) has conducted 45 RLAs in 41 Indiana counties in recent years. The result of each audit, program officials say, showed that the local voting system was functioning and the election outcome was correctly reported.

SOUTH DAKOTA: NEW LAW ON PROOF OF CITIZENSHIP

Promoting voter confidence is a central goal of post-election auditing.

But the actual voter experience is impacted more by other parts of state election policy, such as the registration process, as well as the laws that govern voting in person or absentee, and voting early or on Election Day.

Changes in these types of laws garner the most public attention, and enacted measures in South Dakota and Minnesota illustrate the extent to which policies can vary among states.

Earlier this year, with the passage of SB 175, South Dakota began requiring individuals to provide documentary proof of citizenship when registering to vote for the first time or if they had been removed from the state's voter rolls.

According to the Movement Advancement Project, an independent, nonprofit think tank that monitors election laws, six other U.S. states (none in the Midwest) have similar proof-of-citizenship requirements.

One year earlier, South Dakota legislators had passed SB 75. It requires new state-issued driver's licenses and nondriver identification cards to indicate citizenship status.

At the time of the bill's passage, proponents of SB 75 said it would prevent noncitizen voting by allowing election officials to check citizenship status via the state-issued driver's license or ID. (Photo ID must be presented when voting in South Dakota.)

Under the 2026 proof-of-citizenship law, those newer cards (issued after July 1, 2025) are one of the acceptable documents for individuals to show when registering to vote. Others include a tribal ID card and photocopies of a birth certificate or a U.S. passport.

According to Mehlhaff, SB 175 also has language to address another concern in South Dakota: individuals who do not reside in the state, but who use it for mail-forwarding services and then vote in state elections.

Under SB 175, individuals receive a "federal voter" designation if they don't provide the necessary documentary proof of citizenship or documentation of a physical address in South Dakota.

Their ballots then only include federal races; state and local contests are excluded. (The designation itself was created under a 2025 law, HB 1208.)

"Why should they get a ballot to vote for who's sitting on the school board? The county commission? Legislative races?" Mehlhaff says, explaining the rationale for federal-only ballots.

He notes that the issue may be particular to South Dakota because of its status as a non-income-tax state.

In other parts of the Midwest, Ohio (HB 54 of 2025) and Indiana (HB 1680 of 2025) also have established proof-of-citizenship requirements, though these laws are more limited in scope than South Dakota's.

- The requirement in Ohio applies to the voter registration process for individuals applying for a driver's license or state identification card.
- Under the Indiana law, county clerks send a notice requesting proof of citizenship for any individual who registers to vote using a state-issued temporary credential. Once notified, the individual has 30 days to provide documentary proof of citizenship — for example, a birth certificate, a U.S. passport or a certificate of naturalization.

OVERVIEW OF VOTER REGISTRATION LAWS IN MIDWEST

No voter registration required?	North Dakota (only state in nation)
Allow for online voter registration?	Every Midwest state except South Dakota
Allow pre-registration of 16- and 17-year-olds?	Illinois, Iowa (age 17 only), Michigan, Minnesota and North Dakota
Allow for Election Day registration?	Illinois, Iowa, Michigan, Minnesota and Wisconsin
Some form of automatic voter registration?	Illinois, Michigan and Minnesota
Proof-of-citizenship requirement?	South Dakota

Source: Movement Advancement Project

MINNESOTA: AUTOMATIC VOTER REGISTRATION AND MORE

Minnesota Rep. Emma Greenman has a unique perspective on state election law. Outside the Legislature, she has worked in different states on voting-rights issues and cases. Inside the Legislature, she has spearheaded a series of changes to Minnesota's election laws, most notably in 2023 and 2024.

"In Minnesota, for many years, we had been offering same-day registration, online registration, no-excuse absentee voting," she says. "But we had been sort of resting on our laurels and had seen other states leapfrog us.

"Then we made about half a century of gains [during that 2023-2024 period]."

Among the recent advances in Minnesota, she points to the passage of a state-level Voting Rights Act (HF4772 of 2024), which aims to protect citizens from discriminatory voting practices, and creation of a new state fund to assist local governments with election administration (purchasing voting equipment, making security-related improvements, upgrading polling places, etc.).

Minnesota added statutory protections for election workers as well, Greenman says, with new crimes and penalties for intimidating these workers, interfering with election administration, and tampering with voter equipment and registration systems (HF 1830 of 2023).

Also in place are new options for Minnesotans to register to vote — a pre-registration option for 16- and 17-year-olds, for example, as well as the launch of a "back-end," secure process of automatic voter registration (HF 3 of 2023).

As a result, individuals in Minnesota seeking a driver's license, a driver instructional permit or a state ID card do not need to affirmatively opt in to voter registration. Rather, if the individual provides proof of citizenship during the transaction, state and local officials initiate an internal process of confirming voter eligibility. If confirmed, the individual is registered to vote. (A notice is sent giving the individual the opportunity to opt out.)

CHANGES IN EARLY-VOTING LAWS

Across the country, one big change in the voter experience has been the shift from a single Election Day to a state voting period that often stretches over weeks.

In five U.S. states (Hawaii, Oregon, Washington, Utah and Colorado), pre-Election Day voting accounted for 94 percent or more of all votes cast in 2024, according to The Center for Election Innovation and Research.

No Midwestern state comes close to that rate. However, in Illinois, Indiana, Kansas, Michigan, North Dakota and South Dakota, a majority of the votes cast in 2024 were done so through early voting, either in person or by mail/absentee ballot.

The center notes that state laws have contributed to this change in voting habits; they have made mail-in and early in-person voting more widely available.

Today, these two options are accessible to all voters in every Midwestern state except Indiana. (In that state, early in-person voting is available to all, but voters must apply to vote by mail and cite a reason they cannot make it to the polls.)

How long should the period of early voting last? Should a permanent list of absentee/vote-by-mail voters be created? What should the deadline be for returning mail-in ballots?

Legislators continue to debate those and other questions about early voting.

Five years ago, Iowa reduced the length of time for in-person absentee voting and for when absentee mail ballots are sent out: from 29 days to 20. The same law (SF 413 of 2021) set a stricter deadline for when mail ballots must be received — it is now before polls close on Election Day.

Laws enacted in 2025 in Kansas (SB 4), North Dakota (HB 1165) and Ohio (SB 293) also now require mail/absentee ballots to be received by Election Day. Ohio had previously allowed for a grace period of four days, but proponents of the change say the stricter deadline will prevent prolonged vote counting and allow for a timely public reporting of election results.

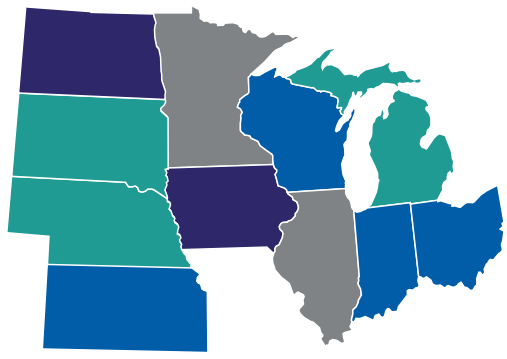
According to the Movement Advancement Project, Illinois is now the only Midwestern state whose deadline for receiving mail ballots extends beyond Election Day. In that state, these ballots must be postmarked on Election Day (or sooner) but can be received as many as 14 days later of that date.

Illinois also now keeps a permanent list of individuals wanting to receive ballots by mail (SB 825 of 2021). Those on the list automatically receive ballots every election season. Other states giving voters the opportunity to sign up and receive mail/absentee ballots on a permanent basis include Michigan (HB 4699 of 2023) and Minnesota (HF 3 of 2023).

Among the other notable legislative changes to the early-voting process:

- Under HB 1334 of 2023, Indiana has enhanced ID requirements for individuals requesting to vote by mail. With their application, voters must provide a photocopy of a valid photo ID (driver's license, for example) or a valid voter ID number (a Social Security number, a driver's license number or a number associated with the voter registration record). Nebraska has established similar identification requirements for voting by mail (LB 514 of 2023).
- Michigan requires local governments to offer, at minimum, nine consecutive days of early voting, ending on the Sunday before Election Day (SB 367 of 2023).
- Minnesota has created an 18-day period for early voting (HF 1830 of 2023). That is in addition to the 46-day period for voting via absentee ballot, which can be returned by mail or completed in person.

STATE ELECTION LAWS ON VOTER ID AT POLLS



- "Strict" photo ID law in place[1]
- "Non-strict" photo ID law in place[2]
- "Strict" non-voter ID law in place[1]
- ID not required to vote; voter eligibility verified by other means

[1] "Strict" means voters without acceptable ID are usually required to take additional steps after Election Day to ensure their vote is counted

[2] "Non-strict" means voters without acceptable ID may still be able to cast a regular ballot and not have to take additional steps after Election Day to ensure their vote is counted

Source: Movement Advancement Project

THE ECONOMY & INFRASTRUCTURE

With less gas being pumped, states pursue new options to fund roads

by Joe Dell'Olio *(jdellolio@csg.org)*

Since the start of this decade, the number of vehicle miles traveled in the United States has increased, eclipsing 9 billion miles per day in 2025.

Falling over this same time, though, has been the consumption of gasoline — a drop of 4 percent from the pre-pandemic demand level of 2019.

"Each vehicle, or each driver, is providing less typically right now," says Adie Tomer, a senior fellow at the Brookings Institution, noting the loss of "purchasing power" from state and federal gas taxes.

Recent federal studies underscore this point.

The U.S. Energy Information Administration analysis detailing recent declines in motor fuel consumption says this trend will continue because of future increases in fuel efficiency.

This decade, separate EIA data show, sales of electric, hybrid electric and plug-in hybrid vehicles have increased 364 percent. They now account for close to 25 percent of all U.S. sales of new light-duty vehicles.

Less gas being pumped means more questions about how to fund roads and highways, a responsibility that primarily rests with state and local governments. (Non-federal spending accounts for 77 percent of the total, according to the U.S. Congressional Budget Office.)

"If you ever try to raise money for anything, it always helps to get different pots of money. … It's good to have that resiliency and the stability," says Philip Plotch, a principal researcher and senior fellow for the Eno Center for Transportation.

States appear to be diversifying their financing models for transportation. In 2025, the share of U.S. states' transportation revenue coming from the gas tax was 36.5 percent. It was 41.1 percent in 2016, according to the National Association of State Budget Officers.

Nebraska Sen. Mike Moser

Over this time, the NASBO study notes, states have been imposing other user-based fees to help meet their infrastructure needs. That includes increased registration fees, including surcharges on electric and hybrid vehicles, as well as fees at charging stations. States also are studying, piloting and even implementing (in Hawaii) programs that charge vehicle owners based on miles traveled.

Other options beyond the gas tax under consideration: tolls, public-private partnerships, sales taxes, and revenue from expansions in legalized gambling or marijuana. Here is a look at some of the notable recent developments in the Midwest.

'MORE FLEXIBILITY' — AND REVENUE SOURCES

Signed into law in April 2026, Nebraska's LB 1126 establishes a framework for new state-local partnerships on transportation, plus the involvement of the private sector in local road projects.

The newly created Infrastructure Development Investment Program will essentially function as a state infrastructure bank. Loans, grants, bonds and other financing from various sources will be made available for local transportation projects.

"It's important to give more flexibility to local governments, counties and cities, and how they finance [projects]," says Sen. Mike Moser, primary sponsor of the bill.

"And then we're hoping that the Legislature has money to fund it at some future time, or that we get some federal dollars that we could use in this program. But a lot of federal dollars come with strings, and so it would have to be the right kind of grant money."

Nebraska's political subdivisions are now authorized to enter into public-private partnerships, or P3s, for the construction or financing of capital projects. P3s are long-term contractual agreements between a public agency and a private entity to design, finance, build and maintain infrastructure.

"P3s can accelerate project delivery, not only through efficiencies provided by the private sector to accelerate construction, but also by shaping the start of the project implementation so that the public can benefit from the early completion of the project, also saving money," says Qingbin Cui, director of the Build America Center at the University of Maryland.

Moser lists many of those same potential benefits in explaining why Nebraska has embraced the P3 concept.

Nebraska also has been dedicating general sales-tax revenue to road projects. The amount is one quarter of 1 percent, as required under a law enacted in 2011 and extended in 2023 (LB 727).

In Illinois, as part of a major new capital plan enacted in 2019, legislators approved a gradual shift in the use of revenue from the state sales tax on motor fuels: away from the state general fund and toward the Road Fund. (Subsequent legislative actions have used this revenue source for other uses, including public transit.)

Rebuild Illinois also raised the per-gallon tax on gas and other fuels as well as increased registration fees.

MICHIGAN: MARIJUANA TAX

Road funding has been a much-discussed topic for years in Michigan. A bipartisan deal reached in 2025 sets a new framework for funding the state's transportation infrastructure.

First, the Legislature made gas purchases exempt from the 6 percent sales tax (HB 4183), replacing it with a 20-cent increase in the per-gallon gas tax. A key difference in these two revenue sources: the gas tax must go to transportation funding under the Michigan Constitution; no such restriction exists for the sales tax.

Legislators also are tapping into a newer revenue stream — namely, a 24 percent tax on the wholesale price of marijuana (HB 4951). The new tax took effect at the start of 2026 and was expected to bring in about $420 million a year. These dollars will go mostly to the Neighborhood Road Fund (also created in 2025), which supports local and regional transportation projects.

In all, the bipartisan package of bills from 2025 is estimated to bring in $1.85 billion a year for Michigan roads.

HIGHER ELECTRIC VEHICLE FEES

One of the changes in Michigan (HB 4183) has increased the state's annual registration surcharge on electric vehicles, up to $267 in 2026 (third-highest in the nation, according to the Tax Foundation). Michigan's fee for plug-in hybrid vehicles is $113.

As part of the Rebuild Illinois law from 2019, legislators added a $100 yearly surcharge on electric vehicles.

In Minnesota (HF 14 of 2025, special session), the annual EV surcharge has been increased from the previous flat fee of $75. At a minimum, the new surcharge is $150 for electric vehicles and $75 for plug-in hybrid electric vehicles. But a sliding-scale calculation (based on the vehicle's age and value) will make the fee higher for some owners.

The same Minnesota law also establishes a new tax on the operators of public charging stations: 5 cents per kilowatt-hour of electricity. The tax, which takes effect in July 2027, does not apply if the station offers free charging or if it has a charging capacity of less than 50 kilowatts.

INDIANA: POTENTIAL NEW TOLLS

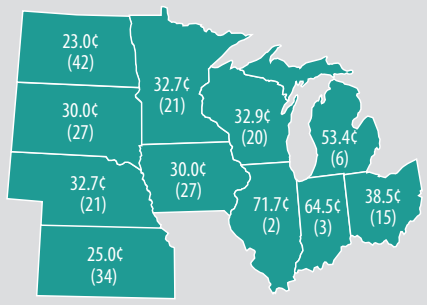
Under HB 1461 of 2025, Indiana's governor was granted authority to seek a federal waiver for the tolling of lanes on existing interstate highways. If such a waiver is granted, the legislature would not need to enact enabling legislation for tolling to begin.

A legislative fiscal analysis for HB 1461 notes that a previous study found that Indiana could receive approximately $38 billion in revenue from tolling between 2029 and 2050.

The Indiana Department of Transportation now has applied for a waiver with the Federal Highway Administration. According to the *Indiana Capital Chronicle*, the plan eyes tolling on Interstate 70: a 10-cent-per-mile toll for passenger vehicles and a 54-cent-per-mile toll for semi-trailers on I-70. It outlines roughly $6.5 billion in improvements to that highway.

Joe Dell'Olio is CSG Midwest staff liaison to the Midwestern Legislative Conference Economic Development and Infrastructure Committee. Nebraska Sen. Kathleen Kauth and Ohio Sen. Hearcel Craig serve as committee co-chairs.

GAS TAX RATES AS OF JULY 1, 2026: CENTS PER GALLON (U.S. RANK)*



* The rate includes a state's excise tax, plus other taxes and fees (environmental fees, inspection fees, special taxes, etc.). Earlier this year, Indiana Gov. Mike Braun instituted a temporary suspension of the gas tax in his state (still ongoing as of September). Ohio legislators also were considering a suspension.

Source: U.S. Bureau of Transportation Statistics

VEHICLE REGISTRATION FEES: ANNUAL SURCHARGE ON ELECTRIC VEHICLES, 2026

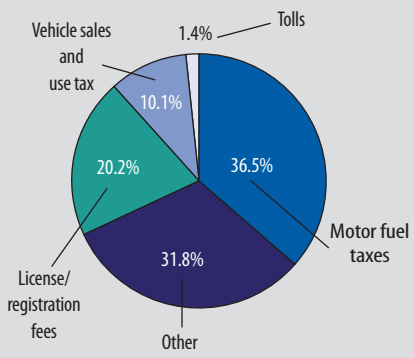
State	Surcharge on EVs	Surcharge on plug-in hybrid EVs*
Illinois	$100	$0
Indiana	$242	$81*
Iowa	$130	$65
Kansas	$165	$100*
Michigan	$267	$113
Minnesota**	$150	$75
Nebraska	$150	$75
North Dakota	$120	$50
Ohio	$200	$150*
South Dakota	$100	$0
Wisconsin	$175	$75*

* Traditional hybrid vehicles are included in this surcharge in states such as Indiana and Wisconsin. Additionally, Kansas and Ohio have a separate surcharge for traditional hybrids — $70 and $100, respectively.

** The surcharge shown for Minnesota is the minimum annual fee. It may be higher based on the vehicle's age and value.

Sources: Tax Foundation, U.S. Department of Energy Alternative Fuels Data Center, and CSG Midwest research

BREAKDOWN OF STATE SOURCES OF TRANSPORTATION REVENUE



Source: National Association of State Budget Officers, "2025 State Expenditure Report"

SHARE OF SPENDING ON NATION'S TRANSPORTATION INFRASTRUCTURE

Type	Federal	State and local
Highways	23%	77%
Mass transit and rail	28%	72%
Aviation	44%	56%
Water transportation	48%	52%

Source: U.S. Congressional Budget Office

AGRICULTURE & RURAL AFFAIRS

Use of newly available federal funds is only one part of states' plans to meet challenge of building sustainable rural healthcare systems

by Becky Leis *(bleis@csg.org)*

Across South Dakota, many communities and residents rely on one of the state's 40 federally designated Critical Access Hospitals (CAH).

These hospitals are small, provide 24/7 emergency care services, and are located in a rural area with no other facility nearby. They are essential lifelines, Rep. Drew Peterson says, as he experienced firsthand with his own family.

Peterson credits a local CAH with helping save his wife and firstborn child's lives during pregnancy and delivery at 27 weeks. Without access to nearby care and timely interventions, Peterson wonders whether he would have a family.

He wants to make sure future generations of rural South Dakotans don't lose this access, and says one way to do so is through wise use of a new five-year funding stream for the state: the federal Rural Health Transformation Program (RHTP).

South Dakota Rep. Drew Peterson

"We can serve our communities with these [RHTP] dollars," Peterson says. "We can help keep these facilities open in our communities so that we can continue to allow people living in rural communities to have a high-quality of life, and keep them alive in certain cases, so that we can continue to have a vibrant state."

LIMITS OF FEDERAL PROGRAM

The stability and long-term sustainability of rural hospitals — and rural healthcare, more broadly — became a central part of debate last year over HR 1, the 2025 law that makes significant changes in federal Medicaid policy and finance.

For rural areas, the law's various provisions will result in a loss of $137 billion over 10 years, according to estimates by KFF, one of the nation's leading organizations for health policy research.

Concerns about that loss of federal funding led U.S. Congress to include the RHTP in the final version of HR 1. This program marks the largest targeted federal investment in rural healthcare in decades, with $50 billion in federal funds going to states over five years.

Earlier this year, Peterson encouraged passage of HB 1044, the South Dakota law creating a framework for the state to receive hundreds of millions of dollars in RHTP funding. To ensure oversight, the law requires the South Dakota Department of Health to submit quarterly expense reports to the Legislature. Kansas also requires reporting — annually for the program as a whole and quarterly for grant recipients. Ohio, meanwhile, requires stricter oversight, with legislative approval required before RHTP funds are disbursed.

In other states, oversight often rests largely with state agencies and/or voluntary updates from plan administrators.

The RHTP alone will not sustain rural hospitals. The program ends after five years and limits how much states can provide in directed payments to providers; that cap is 15 percent of total state program funds.

Additionally, the RHTP includes a clawback provision if states do not use funds in a manner consistent with their federally approved application. For many rural hospitals with limited staff, data collection and compliance requirements could make it challenging to demonstrate proper use of these funds and avoid such a clawback, particularly given the program's accelerated rollout.

States, then, may need other strategies to stabilize at-risk hospitals, while investing their RHTP dollars in initiatives that transform rural healthcare over the longer term.

STATE STABILIZATION EFFORTS

Over the past 15 years, 11 CAHs in the Midwest have closed and another 17 have converted to facilities without inpatient care. Of the 852 rural hospitals in the 11-state Midwest region, 18 percent are vulnerable to closure and 40 percent are operating with negative margins, according to the National Rural Health Association.

In Minnesota, legislators have established a multifaceted plan to stave off hospital closures (SF 4612 of 2026), including $205 million for the state's largest Level I trauma center, $500 million for a Hospital Stabilization Reserve Account, and $30 million for a statewide program supporting CAHs, rural emergency hospitals and other financially vulnerable facilities.

Illinois legislators, meanwhile, created an $85 million Distressed Hospital Loan Program (SB 3365), which will provide interest-free loans to prevent hospital closures and facilitate reopenings. The state's budget also allocates $118 million in "add-on" payments to safety-net hospitals: facilities that serve a significantly high number of uninsured and low-income patients.

Shortly before congressional passage of HR 1, the Kansas Legislature approved SB 126, which increased the maximum hospital provider assessment from 3 percent to 6 percent of hospital net inpatient and outpatient operating revenue. This use of provider taxes is a common funding mechanism used by states to finance their share of Medicaid and fortify payments to hospitals and other providers.

The new Kansas law exempts CAHs and rural emergency hospitals from the provider assessment if they have revenues that fall below a specific threshold.

Notably, because Kansas is not a Medicaid-expansion state (it has not extended coverage to non-elderly adults with household incomes up to 138 percent of the federal poverty level), its provider assessment is not subject to future reductions. By contrast, under HR 1, expansion states must reduce hospital provider assessments to no more than 3.5 percent by 2032.

TRANSFORMATION EFFORTS

All Midwestern states have prioritized RHTP funds for two areas: technology innovation and workforce development. They are two of the five strategic goals established by the U.S. Center for Medicare & Medicaid Services' new Office of Rural Health Transformation (see side panel).

Keith Mueller, director of the Rural Policy Research Institute, points to one piece of that federal framework that may be particularly helpful to states looking to stabilize rural hospitals and providers over the long term: a shift to a value-based payment model.

"To fully transform the healthcare system in a way that benefits everyone, and to sustain that transformation, we're going to have to realign payment incentives," he says.

Specifically, Mueller believes states should use RHTP funds to help lay the groundwork for moving away from the current volume-based, fee-for-service payment system, which he describes as poorly suited to low-density areas served by small rural hospitals.

He suggests that states look at incentivizing value-based systems where payments are based on outcomes rather than individual encounters.

"[It] potentially shifts healthcare spending away from encounters for the sick and the injured to spending that keeps people healthy," he says.

In his analysis, Dr. Mueller determined that 23 states, including South Dakota, Kansas and Minnesota, included value-based payment initiatives in their first-year RHTP plans submitted to the Office of Rural Health Transformation.

Becky Leis is CSG Midwest staff liaison to the Midwestern Legislative Conference Agriculture and Rural Affairs Committee. Nebraska Sen. Teresa Ibach and North Dakota Sen. Paul Thomas serve as committee co-chairs. Minnesota Sen. Robert Kupec and Illinois Rep. Bradley Fritts are co-vice chairs.

YEAR 1 OF RURAL HEALTH TRANSFORMATION PROGRAM: FEDERAL FUNDS FLOWING TO MIDWEST STATES

State	$ amount for FY 2026	$ amount per rural resident in the state
Illinois	$193.4 million	$101
Indiana	$206.9 million	$106
Iowa	$209.0 million	$139
Kansas	$221.9 million	$191
Michigan	$173.1 million	$83
Minnesota	$193.1 million	$114
Nebraska	$218.5 million	$280
North Dakota	$198.9 million	$561
Ohio	$202.0 million	$69
South Dakota	$189.5 million	$379
Wisconsin	$203.7 million	$95
United States	$10.0 billion	$157

Source: KFF

RURAL HEALTH TRANSFORMATION PROGRAM: 5 STRATEGIC GOALS

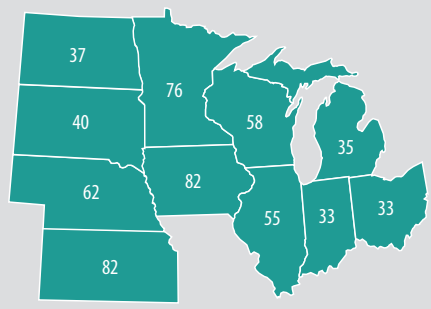
1. Promote preventative health and address root causes of disease
2. Help providers become long-term points of care by improving efficiency, coordination
3. Attract and retain a high-skilled healthcare workforce for rural areas
4. Grow innovative care models; develop new payment mechanisms for providers
5. Foster use of technologies that support remote care, data sharing and cybersecurity

% OF RURAL HOSPITALS IN STATE THAT OPERATE ON NEGATIVE MARGINS*

* Nationally, the operating margin for the median rural hospital is 1%.

Source: National Rural Health Association

OF CRITICAL ACCESS HOSPITALS*



*"Critical Access Hospital" is a federal designation for hospitals that meet certain criteria— for example, has less than or equal to 25 acute care beds, is 35 miles from the nearest hospital, and provides 24/7 emergency care services. State numbers are as of 2025.

Source: National Rural Health Association

ENERGY & THE ENVIRONMENT

For consumers big and small, 'bring your own power' policies attract interest

by Jon Davis *(jdavis@csg.org)*

In the race to meet growing demand for electricity while also controlling costs for electric utility consumers, the idea of "bring your own power" appears to be gaining traction in state legislatures.

These policies can take very different forms, starting with the "your" in the state law or program — large-load users (data centers, advanced manufacturing facilities, etc.) in some instances; residential consumers in others.

They share the idea, though, of expanding opportunities for end users to generate, store and/or manage their own energy. Here is a look at three legislative developments and trends in the "bring your own power" push.

BEHIND THE METER IN OHIO

In May 2025, as part of a new energy law, Ohio legislators sought to remove barriers that stood in the way of large electricity users generating power for their own consumption.

According to a May 2026 analysis by the Electric Power Supply Association, HB 15 has unleashed behind-the-meter generation: from none before its passage to 2 GW worth of projects approved as of May by the Ohio Power Siting Board. Another 2.5 GW was in line for approval.

The association's analysis identifies several key changes under HB 15.

One, it clarified that a behind-the-meter generation system may be owned or operated either by the customer or by a third party under a lease, a power purchase agreement, or other service contracts. Second, HB 15 confirms that such systems are not "public utilities" and don't violate state rules governing certified utility service territories.

"Third, and perhaps most significantly," the law eliminated a "same premises" requirement that behind-the-meter generation be physically co-located or adjacent to the customer's load.

The law also allows "mercantile customer self-power" systems, including battery storage, serving one or more large user as long as power stays behind the meter and is not distributed via utility-owned wires.

The end result, the association says: "More complex [behind-the-meter] configurations that were previously impossible are now moving forward."

In a February 2026 report, the market intelligence company Cleanview identified 46 data center projects across the country with plans to build 56 gigawatts (GW) worth of behind-the-meter power generation, mainly in areas with easy access to natural gas "and regulatory frameworks that favor rapid development."

Ohio has been a hot spot of this activity — one of five U.S. states accounting for 83 percent of proposed behind-the-meter capacity by data centers.

"We all know this is a historic moment; there are unprecedented amounts of load coming onto the grid between not just data centers, but onshoring of manufacturing, the increase in electrification," says Kristine Tedford, executive director of the Edison Electric Institute, a national association of investor-owned electric companies. "EEI is supportive of all the ways to get as many electrons as possible onto the grid."

However, she adds that caution is warranted as policymakers consider behind the meter as a solution to meeting increased demand.

"While certain actions can maybe be beneficial in terms of what you're looking at in the shorter term, what does that mean for reliability for all customers?" Tedford says.

A report from Concentric Energy Advisors (produced for EEI) notes that off-grid systems may remove customers who "would otherwise help spread fixed costs and put downward pressure on electricity rates for everyone else." Behind-the-meter generation also raises questions about the risks of long-term fragmentation of the grid, as well as off-grid systems competing for limited supplies of equipment and manpower.

RISE OF PLUG-IN SOLAR

At the other end of the customer spectrum are policies such as plug-in (or balcony) solar.

While behind-the-meter laws like Ohio's target large users, the goal of plug-in solar is to give homeowners or apartment tenants an easy, inexpensive entry to renewable energy. These systems generally include panels that can be set in a yard or on a balcony and be plugged into a standard wall outlet, a DC/AC converter and plug.

Utah (HB 340 of 2025) was the first U.S. state to create a legal classification for plug-in solar systems. Eight other U.S. states have since adopted similar plug-in solar laws, and bills in California and New York were awaiting gubernatorial signatures as of late August.

Proponents of these measures say they reduce the electricity a home draws from the grid, thus lowering residential electricity bills. Concerns about safety (for example, hazards to utility workers) have been raised by opponents and led some bills to stall.

In the Midwest, plug-in solar bills have been introduced, but not passed, in Illinois, Indiana, Iowa, Michigan, Minnesota and Ohio.

Like Utah's law, these measures would allow solar panel systems capable of exporting up to 1,200 watts of electricity into an existing outlet. They would bar utilities from charging customers a fee to use plug-in solar or requiring approval before use. Interconnection agreements with utilities would not be needed.

Minnesota Rep. Larry Kraft discovered plug-in solar while on a trip to Germany (where its use is common) and came away impressed with the technology. He drafted HF 3555 after a conversation with the author of Utah's law.

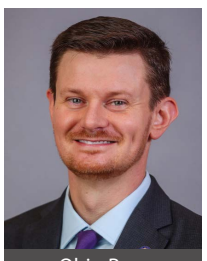
"It's the bill I've heard more about than almost any other bill I've had in my four years in the Legislature," says Kraft, who plans to reintroduce a plug-in solar measure for the 2027 session.

For Ohio Rep. Tristan Rader, author of HB 755, plug-in solar is first and foremost about affordability and accessibility.

"Rooftop solar has been only accessible to people who can afford it, because you were talking about a $10,000, $20,000, $30,000 investment depending on size of your home, and to people who own a home," he adds.

"These plug-in solar panels can be bought online and plugged into a regular outlet and can produce some savings every single month."

Minnesota Rep. Larry Kraft



Ohio Rep. Tristan Rader

VIRTUAL POWER PLANTS

Another variant of "bring your own power" seems to befit the internet era: virtual power plants (VPP), under which utility customers earn revenue by automatically supplying energy (via their home batteries, electric vehicle chargers, solar panels, or "smart" appliances and thermostats, for example) to the grid when needed.

Illinois authorized electric utilities to establish VPPs in 2025 as part of a comprehensive energy law (SB 25). Electric utilities with more than 300,000 customers must have VPP programs ready to start in 2029.

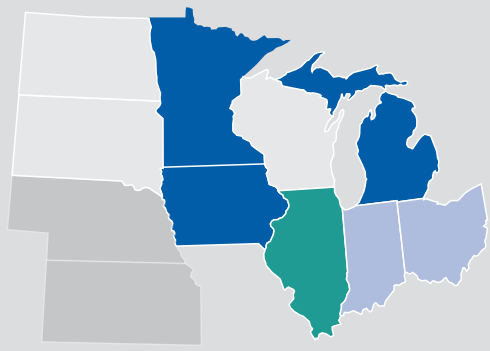
Once running in Illinois, VPPs will initially take control of behind-the-meter devices for retail customers on weekdays from June through September from 4 to 6 p.m. (peak grid usage time), and from 4 to 7 p.m. for systems connected to the grid for non-retail customers. The Illinois Commerce Commission can modify that schedule based on consumption patterns and energy needs.

A Kansas home battery storage pilot program run by Evergy isn't a full-blown VPP but is helping the company test how home batteries interact with the grid. Batteries charge up during periods of low electricity demand and provide electricity during high-demand hours. The program began in 2024 and is scheduled to end in December.

VPP authorization bills have been introduced this year in Iowa (HF 2668), Michigan (SB 731 and SB 732) and Minnesota (HF 2986/SF 3209).

Jon Davis is CSG Midwest staff liaison to the Midwestern Legislative Conference Energy and Environment Committee. Illinois Sen. Laura Ellman and Michigan Rep. Pauline Wendzel serve as committee co-chairs. Kansas Rep. Lauren Bohi and Saskatchewan MLA Erika Ritchie are the co-vice chairs.

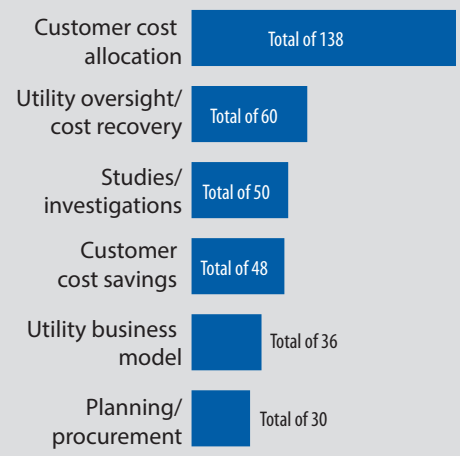
SUMMARY OF LEGISLATIVE ACTIVITY ON TWO TYPES OF 'BRING YOUR OWN POWER' MEASURES: PLUG-IN SOLAR AND VIRTUAL POWER PLANTS (AS OF SEPTEMBER 2026)*



- Law in place authorizing virtual power plants (VPP) and requiring certain utilities to run VPP programs; plug-in solar bill introduced in 2026 but did not advance
- Plug-in solar and VPP bills introduced in 2026 but did not advance
- Plug-in solar bill(s) introduced in 2026 but did not advance

Source: CSG Midwest research

ENERGY AFFORDABILITY STRATEGIES: # OF STATE ACTIONS, BY TYPE, IN 2026 (AS OF JUNE)



Source: North Carolina Clean Energy Technology Center

Center's description of each strategy

Customer cost allocation
This includes both overall cost-shifting, from one group of customers to another, as well as efforts to intentionally shift costs away from energy-burdened customers. One common action in 2026 has been to implement large-load tariffs or take other steps in order to protect consumers from higher costs due to greater demand from new, large-load users (such as data centers).
Actions taken in Illinois, Indiana, Michigan, Minnesota, Nebraska, Ohio, South Dakota and Wisconsin.

Utility oversight/cost recovery
This includes cost trackers, audits, and consumer representation and monitoring efforts, as well as rate freezes and changes to cost-recovery protocols.
Actions taken in Illinois, Indiana, Michigan and Ohio

Studies/investigations
This includes state- or utility-led efforts to analyze issues related to energy affordability.
Actions taken in Illinois, Indiana and Ohio

Customer cost savings
These are programs that pay a customer for taking some action or that provide a tool or service to a customer at no cost or a low cost. For example, customers are assisted with weatherization and energy efficiency or with building their own generation or battery infrastructure.
Action taken in Illinois (Storage for All program)

Utility business model
Actions tracked under this category include changes to how utilities collect revenue and earn a return. Examples include state implementation of performance incentive mechanisms and revenue decoupling.
Actions taken in Illinois and Indiana

Infrastructure planning/procurement
These actions include procurement methods, innovative financing, and evaluations of advanced transmission technologies and non-wire alternatives that are related to energy affordability.
Actions taken in Illinois, Indiana, Michigan and Ohio

NEW LAWS ON TEACHER TRAINING, STAFFING REQUIREMENTS CENTRAL TO STATES' PUSH TO IMPROVE LITERACY

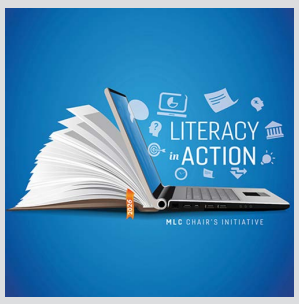
By fall 2029, every school district in **Kansas** will have a licensed reading specialist available at each of its elementary schools.

The new requirement, part of a larger education bill (HB 2485) that received overwhelming legislative support and became law in April 2026, reflects a trend across the region and nation: States strengthening staffing along with teacher training in an effort to improve student literacy.

A similar staffing requirement is in place in **Wisconsin**, and in **Minnesota**, districts must have a "literacy lead" that guides implementation of the READ Act (HF 2497 of 2023). All three states allow some flexibility for how districts meet the requirement; for example, districts may enter into cooperative agreements in which they "share" the reading specialist (Kansas and Wisconsin) or literacy lead (Minnesota).

Even more common in the Midwest have been new laws and investments related to teacher training on the science of reading.

In **Michigan** this year, the state's final education budget (HB 5630) includes $50 million to deliver this training to pre-K, elementary and special-education teachers.



Under **Indiana's** SB 199, signed into law in March 2026, more schools will participate in the Literacy Cadre, a professional development program for teachers on evidence-based reading instruction. This program is for teachers in schools where a relatively high percentage of the student population has failed to pass a state assessment of foundational reading skills. The threshold is now an average fail rate of 25 percent over three consecutive years. Also under the Indiana law, these schools must hire an instructional coach trained in the science of reading.

According to *Education Week*, as of April 2026, 24 U.S. states — including Indiana, Michigan, **Ohio** and Wisconsin in the Midwest — had implemented policies requiring teacher preparation programs to incorporate the science of reading into their course offerings and instructional approaches.

Under the new law in Kansas, the Board of Regents must ensure that teacher training programs at state universities "are exclusively utilizing science of reading and evidence-based practices." HB 2485 also will require individuals seeking licensure as a reading specialist to complete 45 clock hours of training in the use of evidence-based reading instruction and assessment tools.

"Literacy in Action" is the 2026 Midwestern Legislative Conference Chair's Initiative of Minnesota Sen. Mary Kunesh. In support of this initiative, CSG Midwest is developing a series of articles, policy resources and programming for legislators. More resources can be found at csgmidwest.org.

5 POLICY STEPS FOR STATES TO BUILD TEACHER EFFECTIVENESS IN THE SCIENCE OF READING

1. Set specific, detailed reading standards for teacher preparation programs
2. Review teacher preparation programs to ensure the science of reading is taught
3. Implement a strong reading licensure test and require new elementary-school teachers to pass it
4. Require and help school districts select and use high-quality reading curricula
5. Fund professional learning opportunities and ongoing supports for educators to sustain science-of-reading implementation

Source: National Council on Teacher Quality

FOUR STATES HAVE NEW, DISTINCT LAWS ON PARTICIPATION BY EMPLOYERS IN FEDERAL E-VERIFY

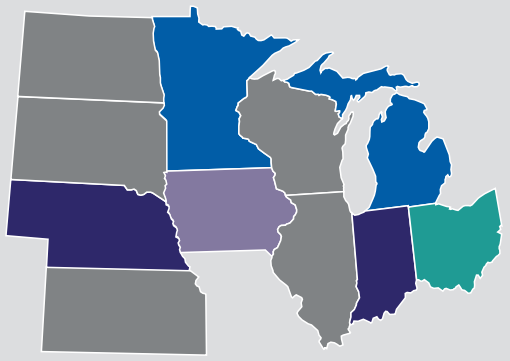
Since it began nearly 30 years ago, the federal E-Verify program has spurred action in the states, including laws on contracting and/or business licensing that require employers to check whether newly hired employees are authorized to work in the United States. According to the Migration Policy Institute, as of 2025, 10 U.S. states (concentrated mostly in the South) mandated that all or most employers use E-Verify. Another 11 states were requiring its use by public employers and/or government contractors.

Legislative developments in **Iowa**, **Indiana**, **Ohio** and **Illinois** are changing those four Midwestern states' approaches to E-Verify, the federal government's web-based system through which employers electronically confirm the employment eligibility of workers. Here is a summary of the new laws in place in these states.

- In Iowa, state agencies and local school districts are among the public employers now statutorily required to use the E-Verify system. SF 2218 (signed into law in June 2026) also establishes criminal penalties for individuals who provide a false Social Security number to an employer. Businesses that knowingly accept false Social Security numbers or knowingly hire individuals that provided false numbers can be subject to enforcement action and civil fines.
- Indiana's approach under this year's SB 76 is twofold. First, add statutory language that prohibits all employers from knowingly or intentionally recruiting, hiring or employing unauthorized individuals and that establishes graduated penalties for noncompliant businesses. Second, shield employers from liability if they used E-Verify during the hiring process.
- Ohio's new law (HB 246 of 2025) took effect in March 2026. It requires E-Verify within a particular industry sector, specifically all contractors, subcontractors and labor brokers involved in nonresidential construction. Fines for noncompliance will go to an E-Verify Enforcement Fund.
- Two recent Illinois laws (SB 508 of 2024 and SB 2339 of 2025) seek to provide protections for individuals who have the legal right to work in the United States but face E-Verify problems due to discrepancies in the paperwork. These workers must be given a chance to fix the discrepancies as well as be afforded certain legal protections. The Migration Policy Institute notes, too, that Illinois employers using E-Verify must meet requirements on program training and proper reporting to employees.

Nationwide, close to 1.4 million employers participated in E-Verify in 2025.

E-VERIFY REQUIREMENTS IN MIDWEST



- Required of public employers, plus government contractors and select others*
- Required of public employers
- Required of certain state contractors*
- Required in nonresidential construction
- No requirement by state to participate

* The requirement also applies to businesses receiving certain tax incentives in Nebraska and state grants in Indiana. Certain public employers in Michigan must participate.

Sources: Migration Policy Institute and CSG Midwest

ILLINOIS HAS FIRST-IN-NATION LAW ON AI SAFETY; IOWA, NEBRASKA HAVE NEW PROTECTIONS FOR CHATBOT USERS

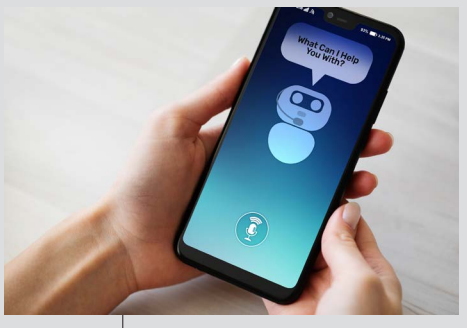
In a year marked by a flurry of activity by state legislatures on artificial intelligence, **Illinois** has adopted a first-in-the-nation requirement for the developers of advanced AI systems: undergo annual, independent third-party audits that evaluate the safety of your frontier AI models. The Artificial Intelligence Safety Measures Act (SB 315) takes effect in January.

Under this new Illinois law, developers must publicly disclose safety practices, report significant safety incidents, and maintain robust compliance processes. Their safety frameworks must include how to "manage, assess and mitigate catastrophic risks," defined in Illinois statute as the risk of a frontier AI model contributing to an incident that causes the death or serious injury of more than 50 people or more than $1 billion in property damage.

"Crucially, companies must subject those frameworks to independent audits to confirm compliance with their own standards," the New York University Stern Center for Business and Human Rights notes in its analysis of SB 315. Illinois lawmakers also established whistleblower protections for employees who raise AI safety concerns.

According to the nonprofit Transparency Coalition, during the first six months of 2026, legislatures in 27 U.S. states had passed 84 AI-related laws. Examples from the Midwest include:

- **Restrictions on the use of AI by health insurers** — Under **Iowa's** HF 2635, AI-based reviews of prior-authorization requests cannot be the sole basis for denying coverage of specific treatments, surgeries or medications. Illinois' SB 3114 requires human reviews of a health claim prior to it being "downcoded" to a lower level of reimbursement.
- **AI chatbot safeguards** — In **Nebraska**, under LB 525, young users of conversational AI chatbots must be made aware that they are interacting with an AI system (not a human). They also must be shielded from sexually explicit content and other potentially harmful interactions. Additionally, when a user (of any age) indicates self-harm or suicidal ideation in a prompt, chatbot protocols should be to respond with referrals to crisis services. Many of these same provisions also are part of a new Iowa law (SF 2417).
- **Consumer and worker protections** — New laws in Illinois prevent bots from purchasing an excess number of tickets to live events (SB 318) and prohibit AI-driven rental pricing in the housing market (SB 343). In Nebraska, it is now illegal for ride-sharing services to use dynamic pricing in the aftermath of a governor-declared state of emergency (LB 771).



49%	*% OF U.S. ADULTS WHO REPORTED IN 2026 HAVING USED AN AI CHATBOT (UP FROM 33% IN 2024)*
24%	*% OF ADULTS WHO REPORT USING AN AI CHATBOT DAILY*
48%	*% OF PEOPLE AGES 18 TO 29 WHO SAY THEY THINK AI WILL HAVE A NEGATIVE IMPACT ON SOCIETY; THAT COMPARES TO 39% AMONG AGES 30 TO 49 AND 37% FOR AGES 50 AND ABOVE*

Source: Pew Research Center (June 2026 report)

PROFILE

Wisconsin Senate President Pro Tempore

PATRICK TESTIN

‘My door is wide open’: How he learned early on to embrace collaboration, sometimes from unlikely legislative partners

For Patrick Testin, a trip to Madison to see his grandparents as a child usually came with one request: Can we see the Capitol?

His grandfather, Blair, gladly obliged. He worked right by the iconic building, as a longtime, widely respected leader of Wisconsin’s state retirement system and a nationally recognized expert on public pensions.

“We’d hop in his car and go down to the Square, and I was just enamored with that Capitol building and its beauty,” Testin says. “I knew that at some point I wanted to work there in some form or fashion. I never dreamed it would be in this capacity.”

Testin has called it his work home for 10 years, first elected to the Senate in 2016 and since becoming one of the state’s top legislative leaders. He currently serves as Senate president pro tempore.

Just as those drives with Grandpa helped spark an early interest in government, talks with Mom and Dad growing up have shaped at least part of his approach to being a legislator.

“If I didn’t talk to Democrats, I wouldn’t talk to my own parents,” Testin jokes, noting the political split in his own family.

A goal of his now as a legislator: That his colleagues, regardless of party, think of him as someone open to talking, debating and, when possible, working together on policy. “One of the approaches that I took from day one of being an elected official is to basically go door to door, introduce myself to my Democrat colleagues, and just say, ‘Look, if you have ideas you think we can work together on, my door is wide open,’” Testin says.

He reflected on this approach in a recent interview with CSG Midwest, while also discussing his views on leadership and legislating, including work on a new law that aims to improve health care access across Wisconsin. Here are excerpts.

> **When I take a look at what state legislators can do — the actual impact that we have — I think I can get more done being one out of 33 senators down in Madison as opposed to being one of 435 in the U.S. House or one of 100 in the U.S. Senate.**

Q: Since you were a child, you have had an interest in government, politics and U.S. history. What part about the job of state legislator, in particular, do you value?

A: Look at the driving forces impacting people’s daily lives — their property taxes, infrastructure, money for highways, our school system, health care. You name it.

When I take a look at that and what state legislators can do — the actual impact that we have — I think I can get more done being one out of 33 senators down in Madison as opposed to being one of 435 in the U.S. House or one of 100 in the U.S. Senate.

Q: Health care is an area where you’ve become a policy leader, serving as a committee chair and, most recently, helping get a new law passed that creates a new licensure pathway for nurses to operate independently as advance practice registered nurses (APRN). Why was that such a priority bill for you?

A: It’s really important that we look for ways to increase access in our underserved and rural communities. So this [AB 257] is one of the bills that I’m most proud of. It was a huge bipartisan win.

APRN legislation in our state has been around, in some form or fashion, for almost 15 years, but it had never gotten across the finish line. For three consecutive sessions, I was the bill’s author. The first go-around, it got vetoed by the governor. The second time around, it got vetoed again.

I was almost ready to call it off, but then we sat down with the various stakeholders and said, “Look, we have a shortage of health care providers here in the state. We have an aging demographic here in the state of Wisconsin. This is not going to get any easier. We need to get this done.”

Q: How did the third time become the charm?

A: It was a lot of long negotiations with stakeholders, plus conversations with the governor’s staff and even some of my colleagues who in previous sessions had voted against it. We made some compromises. They made some.

We found enough consensus on the work and education requirements that the APRNs will need in order to have the ability to go out and independently practice and operate at the highest level of their license, which is what we should be doing to empower all medical providers.

It was a classic example of sometimes having to look at yourself in the mirror and realize, I’m not going to get 100 percent of what I want. You’ve got to make some concessions and compromises. Both sides did.

Q: It also was an example of needing to work in a bipartisan way. Is that something you strive to do?

A: Probably one of the best pieces of advice that I was ever given came before I even took my oath of office. It was from my former colleague, Senator Leah Vukmir, who had been a longtime member. She told me, “You’re going to want to have relationships with folks on the other side of the aisle.”

What astonished me right from the start was that I became very close with people that I never thought would be the case. I had watched them on the floor, getting so fired up with speeches that left me thinking, “There is no way I’m ever going to get along with that individual.”

But then you meet them one-on-one and it’s like, “Holy cow, you’re actually a great individual, you’re a great person. I want to grab a beer with you.”

So I still hold on to that advice and pass it on to new members.

Q: Over the course of your 10 years in the Senate, what have you observed and learned about the keys to effective legislative leadership?

A: It depends somewhat on the makeup of your respective caucus and what the issue of the day is. But generally, I think a leader needs to have a clear vision and be able to clearly articulate and explain the approach to members, as opposed to just coming into a room and saying, “We are doing this, and that’s that.”

Because it’s very easy for individuals to go into their corners and just say, “Well, I’m not going to take part in any of this.” I’ve seen instances where there have been some bills that have been rather heavy lifts, and where maybe the communication wasn’t where it needed to be on the front end. Then you’re behind right away and it becomes much more difficult to get buy-in. …

Oftentimes, too, it’s about taking time to reach out to members one-on-one. There are instances where members don’t necessarily want to voice their opinions in front of everyone.

So as a leader, make your case one-on-one as opposed to putting people right on the spot, which sometimes can make it tricky to get the actual truth out of them.

Interview by Tim Anderson *(tanderson@csg.org)*

WISCONSIN SENATOR PATRICK TESTIN

- → first elected to the state Senate in 2016
- → serves as Senate president pro tempore as well as chair of the Senate Committee on Agriculture and Revenue and vice chair of the powerful Joint Committee on Finance
- → is a graduate of the University of Wisconsin-Stevens Point with a bachelor’s degree in political science
- → is a 2018 graduate of CSG Midwest’s Bowhay Institute for Legislative Leadership Development
- → resides in the Wisconsin town of Hull with his wife, Hannah
- → is an avid hunter, history buff, and Wisconsin Badger football fan

PROFILE

Michigan Representative

ANN BOLLIN

Fiscal leader reflects on changes to budget-making process — and results — over past two years

Ann Bollin says she came to Lansing eight years ago with one policy goal above all else: "Be a budget hawk." Her chance to do so took off in early 2025, when Speaker Matt Hall tapped Bollin to be chair of the House Appropriations Committee.

"It has come with a whole new level of responsibility, something that I never take for granted," she says. "You don't do it for the title or the prestige. You do it because you have a vision for wanting more accountability and transparency. And if you look at what we've done, I think we are transforming the process. Our approach to budgeting has been very different, and I'm extremely proud of that record."

Two years of spending reductions. Greater transparency and controls over legislative earmarks. More oversight of state agency spending. A new $2 billion plan to fund the state's transportation infrastructure.

Bollin points to those changes as some of the most significant accomplishments, and they all have occurred during a time of shared partisan control of Michigan's state government (Republican-led House, Democrat-led Senate and Democratic governor).

"People often hear me say, 'Where there's a will, there's a way.' " And look at what has been done here," she says.

Bollin's fiscal vision was shaped in part by her many years of service in local government. She was clerk of Michigan's Brighton Township for 16 years (from 2003 to 2018), a position she held longer than anyone else in the township's history. She administered elections and managed local finances, and regularly dealt with the impacts of decisions being made in the state Capitol.

"What goes on in Lansing doesn't stay in Lansing," Bollin says. "I went there because I saw two decisions being made at the state level that I didn't agree with. One had to do with elections, and one had to do with unfunded liabilities."

Earlier in her legislative career, a bipartisan measure (HB 4491 of 2022) became law that creates new chain-of-custody rules for drop-box ballots, requires regular updating and cleaning up of voter rolls, and allows township clerks to pre-process absentee ballots before Election Day.

State laws also have contributed to recent improvements in the level of unfunded pension debt.

Since becoming Appropriations Committee chair, Bollin has focused on overall fiscal management and improving the legislative budget process. In a recent interview with CSG Midwest, she discussed this work, what she views as the most significant advances during a time of split partisan control, and her perspective on effective legislating and leadership. Here are excerpts.

> "Our approach to budgeting has been very different, and I'm extremely proud of that record."

Q: What is your overall vision for the state budget for Michigan — what legislators should be investing in while also protecting taxpayers?

A: Infrastructure, education and public safety are really the things that we have to be mindful of. I don't think the state should be investing in things like splash pads and streetscapes. We should instead be trying to stay out of the way. The most responsive government is the government closest to the people, and in Michigan, we have somewhere around 1,600 communities, of all different sizes. Stay out of their way.

Q: You've talked about the importance of budget transparency. How do recent new rules on legislative earmarks (HB 4220 and SB 596) reflect that goal?

A: The year before I was the Appropriations chair, there were $4 billion worth of earmarks, and this year we're down to $125 million. I am extremely proud of that.

We now have in statute a very transparent, open process for those earmarks. Any legislator can bring forth a request to fund a project. It's called an LDSI, a legislatively directed spending item. But you have to submit a description of the project, the location of it, the cost, and why you think it's a good use of taxpayers' dollars.

No project can be funded unless you provide public testimony on it, and you have to submit the project 45 days before a budget is adopted. So that means no last-minute, down-under deals can be done.

Q: How have you sought to improve legislative oversight of spending by state agencies?

A: The first year, we went line by line, looking at every item. Where's the money coming from? What is it funding? And then this year we went back and did a three-year lookback at how much of that money actually was spent. And what we found out is that these budget line items were bloated.

The general practice of budgeting in the state of Michigan has been that every year we tack on 2 percent, 3 percent, 4 percent to the current year's budget. We didn't do that this year. We went back to the "as-spent" numbers, averaging them over the last three years, and took the highest number.

In doing that, we've been able to find $5 billion of areas where we could cut and make reinvestments, either straight-out cuts or make monies available to allow for other investments in what matters to people, like our roads and saving Medicaid.

Q: You're having to craft fiscal policy and pass budgets during a time of split partisan control. What have you learned along the way about working through differences in the Legislature?

A: I don't agree with everybody in my caucus, and I don't agree with everybody across the aisle. But people in those districts send those people here. I do respect that, so I make it a point to make sure that I'm listening and I'm learning from what people are saying and that I'm approachable and accessible. That certainly served me well moving into this term as the Appropriations chair, because I think I had earned the respect and trust of my colleagues.

Q: Beyond that commitment to relationship building, what advice do you give to newer legislators?

A: Number one, be true to yourself. That's extremely important: If I don't have self-respect, nobody else is going to have respect for me. Secondly, I often think of it this way. If my kids saw this on TV, what would they think of their mother? I don't want my kids to behave badly. I better not behave badly. So pack your patience and pack your manners.

And I'd also say to read all that you can. Come prepared. You'll learn something new every day. I take great pride in reading and understanding what I'm going to be voting on by doing my research and reaching out for more when I need it.

Interview by Tim Anderson *(tanderson@csg.org)*

MICHIGAN REPRESENTATIVE ANN BOLLIN

- → first elected to the state House in 2018
- → has served as chair of the House Appropriations Committee since January 2025
- → served as clerk of Brighton Township for 16 years (longest-serving clerk in the township's history)
- → is a 2019 graduate of CSG Midwest's Bowhay Institute for Legislative Leadership Development
- → she and her husband, Tim, have three children and are members of the Society of St. Vincent de Paul

REPORT HIGHLIGHTS EMERGING STRATEGIES IN STATES TO STRENGTHEN READING INSTRUCTION AND STUDENT PROFICIENCY

A new policy resource for legislators explores the myriad ways that states are seeking to strengthen literacy education, from changes in how reading is taught, to new supports for educators, to the funding of evidence-based interventions for students.

Written by CSG Midwest policy analyst Derek Cantù, "Literacy in Action" highlights notable new laws and investments; provides state-by-state data on trends in fourth-grade reading scores; and shows gaps in performance in every Midwestern state by race, ethnicity, gender and family income.

This report was produced in support of the yearlong MLC Chair's Initiative of Minnesota Sen. Mary Kunesh, chair of The Council of State Governments' Midwestern Legislative Conference in 2026. This yearlong focus on literacy aims to provide legislators with ideas to improve literacy instruction and student achievement in state education systems.

"Literacy in Action" is available at *csgmidwest.org*.

STATES UNITE: JOIN COLLEAGUES AT CSG NATIONAL CONFERENCE IN CALIFORNIA

Leaders from all three branches of state government are headed to southern California in December. Ready to join colleagues and engage in interstate, multi-branch dialogue on the many complex issues facing the states?

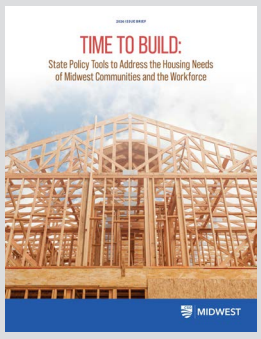
Visit *csg.org* to register and learn more about The Council of State Governments National Conference.

The event runs from Dec. 3-6 in Anaheim. As part of the conference, participants will celebrate the 250th anniversary of the founding of America and the role states have played in the history of our nation. The CSG Midwestern Legislative Conference Executive Committee will meet in conjunction with the National Conference. To learn more, contact CSG Midwest director Laura Tomaka: *ltomaka@csg.org*.

LEARN ABOUT TRENDS IN HOUSING POLICY

Across the country, state and community leaders say they need more housing. What new policies, investments and laws are being pursued by legislatures in the Midwest to address shortages and spur more housing production? A new report from CSG Midwest explores this question, and it finds several notable developments across the 11-state region. Among them:

• Establishing new state grant and loan programs, and tying this assistance to the development of "workforce housing" — homes that are affordable to workers and/or are located near planned economic development projects.



• enacting laws that aim to streamline permitting processes and incentivize local regulatory reforms.

Written by CSG Midwest policy analyst Joe Dell'Olio, "Time to Build: State Policy Trends To Address the Housing Needs of Midwest Communities and the Workforce" was produced in support of the Midwestern Legislative Conference Economic Development and Infrastructure Committee. It is available at *csgmidwest.org*.

PARTNERSHIP HELPS MIDWEST LEGISLATORS LEAD ON CHILD WELFARE, IMPROVE SYSTEMS AND OUTCOMES

Collaboration with Casey Family Programs includes policy workshop on Nov. 12-13

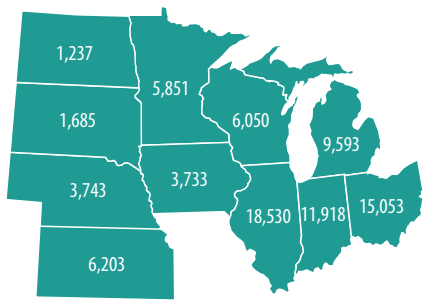
What are the elements of a well-functioning child protection agency? What state laws, programs and investments can effectively support families, protect children, and safely reduce the need for foster care?

Helping legislators explore these questions and more — with each other as well as leading national experts on child welfare policy — is the goal of an ongoing partnership between The Council of State Governments' Midwestern Legislative Conference and Casey Family Programs.

The two nonpartisan groups are hosting a series of learning opportunities through this collaboration.

Next up: A policy workshop on Nov. 12-13 in Chicago's suburbs, with travel scholarships available on a first-come, first-served basis. The link to register can be found at *csgmidwest.org*.

OF CHILDREN IN FOSTER CARE, AS OF SEPT. 30, 2024



Source: U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Administration for Children & Families

Please contact CSG Midwest's Tim Anderson about the availability of scholarships and spots in the workshop. He can be reached at *tanderson@csg.org* or 630.925.1922. The event is designed for legislators looking to lead on child welfare policy in their states, in 2027 and beyond.

Casey Family Programs is the nation's largest operating foundation focused on safely reducing the need for foster care while improving the safety and well-being of children. Its mission is to provide and improve — and ultimately prevent the need for — foster care.

This summer, Casey hosted a Learning Lab at the MLC Annual Meeting, the top gathering of state and provincial legislators from this region.

The ongoing partnership also will include future virtual learning opportunities. Additionally, through CSG Midwest's Under the Dome program, legislators have the chance to bring customized programming on child welfare policy to their states.

REP. CINDY ABRAMS IN LINE TO JOIN CSG LEADERSHIP

Midwest legislators have nominated Ohio Rep. Cindy Abrams to join the national leadership team of The Council of State Governments. The nomination must be approved by CSG leaders. That vote will occur in December during the CSG National Conference in Anaheim, Calif.

Ohio Rep. Cindy Abrams (left) is pictured here at the CSG Midwestern Legislative Conference Annual Meeting in Saint Paul, Minn., where she was nominated by legislative peers to join the national CSG leadership team. Also pictured are two members of the MLC Executive Committee: Kansas Rep. Mary Lynn Poskin (center) and Minnesota Rep. Bernie Perryman (right).

Now in her third term, Rep. Abrams is chair of the Ohio House Public Safety Committee. She came to the legislature after public service as a police officer in Cincinnati and as a member of the Harrison City Council in Ohio.

The current national leadership team consists of:

• California Assemblymember Mike Gipson, CSG national chair;

• Hawaii Gov. Josh Green, CSG national president;

• Tennessee House Speaker Cameron Sexton, CSG national chair-elect;

• Puerto Rico Senate President Pro Tempore Carlos Rios, CSG national vice chair; and

• Illinois Sen. Elgie Sims, CSG national immediate past chair.

SUCCESS IN SAINT PAUL: 80TH YEAR OF MLC ANNUAL MEETING

Thank you to the host state of Minnesota and the close to 500 people — legislators and their guests, session speakers, meeting contributors and sponsors, and more — who traveled to the capital city of Saint Paul for this year's CSG Midwestern Legislative Conference Annual Meeting. Minnesota Sen. Mary Kunesh presided over the meeting as MLC chair. She is pictured here (right) with Carey Wright during a special session on the MLC Chair's Initiative: Literacy in Action. Wright is the Maryland superintendent of schools who previously led a series of education reforms in Mississippi that led to a dramatic rise in students' reading scores.

Over the course of the meeting's four days, participants had the chance to learn, build interstate and cross-border relationships, and bring home ideas and inspiration to guide their legislative work. A full recap highlighting the meeting and its various policy sessions will be sent to Midwest legislators later this fall. The 81st MLC Annual Meeting will be held July 18-21, 2027, in Omaha, Neb.

The Council of State Governments was founded in 1933 as a national, nonpartisan organization to assist and advance state government. The headquarters office, in Lexington, Ky., is responsible for a variety of national programs and services, including research, reference publications, innovations transfer, suggested state legislation and interstate consulting services. The Midwestern Office supports several groups of state officials, including the Midwestern Legislative Conference, an association of all legislators representing 11 states (Illinois, Indiana, Iowa, Kansas, Michigan, Minnesota, Nebraska, North Dakota, Ohio, South Dakota and Wisconsin) and the Canadian province of Saskatchewan. The provinces of Alberta, Manitoba and Ontario are MLC affiliate members.

SELECT GROUP OF NEWER MIDWEST LEGISLATORS GAINS NEW SKILLS, INSIGHTS AND CONNECTIONS AT 2026 BILLD PROGRAM

For the 31st time, a bipartisan group of lawmakers early in their legislative careers came together for the Bowhay Institute for Legislative Leadership Development (BILLD). A signature program of The Council of State Governments' Midwestern Legislative Conference, BILLD provides an opportunity for participants to grow together; network with peers; and advance skills that help them in their service to their states, provinces and constituents.

Thirty-eight Fellows were selected to participate via a competitive application process. They came from the 11 states and four Canadian provinces of the CSG Midwestern Legislative Conference.

THE VALUE OF BILLD

The increased demands and pressures of legislative service make programs such as BILLD more important than ever.

Over the course of five days, this year's Fellows participated in a series of interactive workshops on legislative oversight, protecting legislative institutions, and the role of the judiciary. Other sessions focused on collaboration, conflict resolution and communication, as well as on policies such as state budgeting, criminal justice and U.S.-Canada relations.

Learn more about this year's Fellows in the insert included in this edition of *Stateline Midwest*.

2026 BILLD CLASS OF LEGISLATORS

Row 1: IL Rep. Lisa Davis, IN Sen. La Keisha Jackson, OH Rep. Beryl Brown Piccolantonio, SK MLA Kim Breckner

Row 2: NE Sen. Margo Juarez, MN Rep. Anquam Mahamoud, WI Rep. Margaret Arney, AB MLA Jennifer Johnson, MN Rep. Kimberly Hicks, MN Sen. Ann Johnson Stewart, WI Rep. Sequanna Taylor, OH Rep. Jodi Salvo

Row 3: MN Rep. Keith Allen, WI Sen. Sarah Keyeski, IL Rep. Tracy Katz Muhl, MB MLA Jennifer Chen, OH Rep. Rachel Baker, MI Rep. Emily Dievendorf, ON MPP Alexa Gilmour, SD Rep. Keri Weems

Row 4: IA Rep. Dan Gehlbach, OH Rep. Kevin Ritter, SK MLA Jamie Martens, IL Rep. Yolonda Morris, MI Rep. Morgan Foreman, SD Rep. Eric Emery, IA Sen. Kara Warme

Row 5: NE Sen. Dunixi Guereca, ND Sen. Ryan Braunberger, IN Rep. Cory Criswell, KS Rep. Suzanne Wikle, IL Sen. Chris Balkema, KS Rep. Dawn Wolf

Row 6: ND Rep. Nels Christianson, SK MLA Barret Kropf, ND Rep. Ty Dressler, IN Rep. Ethan Lawson, IA Rep. Brett Barker

> **[It] is a phenomenal opportunity. Beyond the relationships you build with colleagues from around the Midwest, the Fellowship challenges you to take a deeper look at who you are as a leader and a legislator.**
>
> *– Rep. Jodi Salvo, Ohio, 2026 BILLD graduate*

CSG BILLD

ABOUT THE PROGRAM

Held every year, the Bowhay Institute for Legislative Leadership Development is designed for legislators in their first four years of service.

2027 PROGRAM: TIMELINE

December 2026
Application available

April 2027
Application deadline

May 2027
BILLD Steering Committee meets to select the 2027 Fellows

August 27-31, 2027
BILLD program is held in Madison, Wis.

Questions about the program? Contact CSG Midwest program coordinator Adam Diersing *(adiersing@csg.org)*

BILLD: FOR LEGISLATORS, LED BY LEGISLATORS

The CSG Midwestern Legislative Conference BILLD Steering Committee guides this premier leadership institute for Midwest legislators, including the application process, the yearly selection of BILLD Fellows, and programming and fundraising. Led by a four-officer team, this committee is a bipartisan group of legislators from across the Midwest. The committee roster is available at *csgmidwest.org*.

BILLD STEERING COMMITTEE OFFICERS

Rep. Jarrod Ousley
Kansas, Co-Chair
BILLD Class of 2018

Sen. Amy Sinclair
Iowa, Co-Chair
BILLD Class of 2016

Sen. Wendy DeBoer
Nebraska, Co-Vice Chair
BILLD Class of 2019

Sen. Susan Manchester
Ohio, Co-Vice Chair
BILLD Class of 2022

> **An opportunity to learn skills, knowledge, and have time to reflect on the best way to show up to lead as a legislator.**
>
> *– Rep. Kim Hicks, Minnesota, 2026 BILLD graduate*

CONGRATULATIONS TO NEW CLASS OF TOLL FELLOWS

CSG Midwest celebrates the achievement of the 12 Midwestern leaders – representing all three branches of state government – who completed CSG's Henry Toll Fellowship program this summer.

This year's class includes four BILLD graduates: Kansas Sen. Mike Argabright and Ohio Rep. Christine Cockley, both from the BILLD class of 2025; Wisconsin Sen. Brad Pfaff, class of 2023; and Illinois Rep. Justin Slaughter, class of 2021.

Row 1: Greg Walklin, executive director, Nebraska Public Service Commission; Wisconsin Sen. Brad Pfaff; Ohio Rep. Cindy Abrams; Ohio Rep. Christine Cockley; Jason Rosensweig, senior policy advisor, Illinois Department of Human Rights; and Anne Hanson, deputy secretary, Wisconsin Department of Administration

Row 2: Ryan Rollison, chief of staff, Behavioral Health Division of the Illinois Department of Human Services; Kansas Sen. Michael Argabright; Illinois Rep. Justin Slaughter; Illinois Sen. Laura Ellman; Judge John Sandy, Iowa Court of Appeals; and Hunter Roberts, secretary, South Dakota Department of Agriculture and Natural Resources

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CSG EVENTS

Policy Workshop for State Legislators: Building Better Outcomes for Child Welfare

November 12-13, 2026 | Wheaton, Illinois

Contact: Tim Anderson ~ *tanderson@csg.org*
630.925.1922 | *csgmidwest.org*

Midwest Interstate Passenger Rail Commission Annual Meeting

November 16-28, 2026 | La Crosse, Wisconsin

Contact: Laura Kliewer ~ *lkliewer@csg.org*
630.925.1922 | *miprc.org*

CSG National Conference

December 3-6, 2026 | Anaheim, California

Contact: *registration@csg.org*
859.244.8000 | *csg.org*

CSG Midwestern Legislative Conference Annual Meeting

July 18-21, 2027 | Omaha, Nebraska

Contact: Cathy Malloy ~ *cmalloy@csg.org*
630.925.1922 | *greatlakeslegislators.org*

Bowhay Institute for Legislative Leadership Development (BILLD)

August 27-31 2027 | Madison, Wisconsin
Note: Applications will be available in early 2027

Contact: Adam Diersing ~ *adiersing@csg.org*
630.925.1922 | *csgmidwest.org*

CSG Midwestern Legislative Conference Virtual Events for Legislators & Staff

Visit *csgmidwest.org* to find dates of upcoming webinars and view recordings of past webinars on public policy, professional development and leadership training.

STATELINE
MIDWEST

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