



Newsletter From Rep. Kenneth B. Ferguson District 64

February 22, 2019

Week 6 of 2019 Regular Session



Close to 200 bills have been signed into law as we close the 6th week of the 2019 Regular Session.

One of the bills signed by the Governor this week was SB152, An Act Restoring Arkansas Families. It is now Act 189.

This legislation reforms the juvenile justice system by requiring judges to use a validated risk assessment. Judges will be provided with information about the juvenile's home life, mental health needs, and school needs.

Legislators along with every agency working with juveniles in the state have been working on this comprehensive legislation for 6 years.

The assessment tool created by the legislation has been used in a pilot program in the 20th Judicial District. A juvenile judge testified in the Judiciary Committee that since using the assessment, the district has seen an over 50% reduction in the number of children sent to juvenile detention centers. They have also seen a 42% reduction in the number of youth committed to DHS custody and a 35% reduction in cases filed by the prosecuting attorney's office.

Act 189 also creates plans for diversion options using community providers. And it redirects savings from incarcerating youth to community based services.

This legislation had unanimous support. The vote in the House was 95-0. The Senate vote was 35-0.

Another piece of legislation signed this week was Act 190.

This legislation was brought forward through recommendations by the School Safety Commission last year.

This legislation repeals the Public School Student Services Act and creates what is called the School Counseling Improvement Act.

It requires schools to develop and implement a comprehensive school counseling program that ensures services are coordinated in a manner that provides comprehensive support to all students. Schools must regularly review the program.

To ensure services are being delivered it requires school counselors to spend at least 90% of his or her time providing direct or indirect services to students. Only 10% of a counselor's time can be spent on administrative duties such as testing.

The Governor also signed into the law the tax cut plan passed by the House last week. The Act to Create the Tax Competitiveness and Relief Act of 2019 (Act 182) reduces the top tax rate from 6.9% to 5.9% over the next two years.

Next week, the House is expected to address highway funding and begin hearing testimony about proposed constitutional amendments.