



Southern Legislative Conference
THE COUNCIL OF STATE GOVERNMENTS

2026

Policy Sessions & Government Staff Tracks Agenda

CENTRAL BANK CONVENTION CENTER | JULY 11–15, 2026 | KENTUCKY

Session topics and times are subject to change.

POLICY SESSION 1 **AGRICULTURE & RURAL DEVELOPMENT**

Saturday, July 11 | 2:30–3:30 PM

State Solutions: Insurance Plans for Farmers

Insurance costs for farmers have been rising at a rapid rate due to changing weather patterns and increasingly complex coverage systems. Of the billions of dollars of crops and rangeland lost due to weather events in recent years, only about half were covered by federal crop insurance. With ongoing changes in federal spending, along with larger farms disproportionately benefitting from federal insurance programs, there has been increasing discussion about state-level solutions to insurance programs that cover crop loss and price fluctuations. This session will explore what options states might have to support such programs and the legislation that may be necessary to create them.

MODERATOR:

PANELISTS:

POLICY SESSION 2 **HUMAN SERVICES & PUBLIC SAFETY**

Saturday, July 11 | 2:30–3:30 PM

From Incarceration to Care: Strategies for Behavioral Health Support in Criminal Justice Reform

Approximately 37 percent of individuals in state prisons and 44 percent of individuals in local jails have a history of mental illness. Across the nation, jails and prisons are falling into a holding pattern while people await mental health services, causing a bottleneck effect in processing cases and ensuring individuals receive the necessary and appropriate care. This session will examine the strategies that states across the South have implemented, including methods for diverting individuals with behavioral health needs from the criminal justice system. Panelists will discuss the logistics and outcomes of actionable policy solutions, including co-responder teams, mental health crisis stabilization units, and care improvement during and after incarceration. The session will highlight how these different policy frameworks aim to simultaneously enhance public safety and public health outcomes, while also alleviating the pressure of overcrowding on local jails and state prison systems by connecting high-need individuals to appropriate support services.

MODERATOR: Senator Brice Wiggins, Mississippi

PANELISTS: Representative Kim Moser, Kentucky

Representative Laura Budd, North Carolina

Hannah Wesolowski, Chief Advocacy Officer,

National Alliance on Mental Illness

POLICY SESSION 3 **ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT, TRANSPORTATION & CULTURAL AFFAIRS**

Saturday, July 11 | 2:30–3:30 PM

Beyond the Gas Tax: The Future of Transportation Funding

Across the Southern region, state gas tax rates range from \$0.20 per gallon in Oklahoma and Texas to \$0.416 per gallon in Virginia. States have historically relied on these revenues as a primary source of funding for transportation infrastructure and maintenance. As hybrid vehicles, electric vehicles, and other alternatives become more common, fuel tax revenues have become less predictable, while infrastructure investment and maintenance needs continue. This session will examine alternative funding mechanisms and emerging approaches to financing transportation infrastructure and will outline considerations policymakers may evaluate as they assess long-term funding strategies in their states.

MODERATOR: Senator Larry Grooms, South Carolina

PANELIST: Brianne Glover, J.D., Texas A&M

Transportation Institute

GOVERNMENT STAFF TRACK 1

Saturday, July 11 | 2:30–3:30 PM

Census & ACS Insights

Using Data to Shape Policy in the South while the next decennial Census is still ahead, data from the 2020 Census and the American Community Survey (ACS) continue to provide valuable insights for states. This session examines key demographic and population trends across the South and considers how these patterns may inform planning, resource allocation, and policy discussions. Presenters will share examples of how data is being used across the region and offer practical considerations for incorporating data into policy development and decision-making.

PRESENTERS: Greg Wilson, Ed.D., Associate Director,

Carl Vinson Institute of Government

Taylor Hafley, Demography and Economic Analysis Unit

Manager, Carl Vinson Institute of Government

POLICY SESSION 4 **EDUCATION**

Saturday, July 11 | 2:30–3:30 PM

Play Ball v. Study Hall: The Changing Landscape of Collegiate Athletics and Higher Education Finances

Collegiate athletics is big business in the South, with the projected value of collegiate athletic programs totaling more



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than \$13.3 billion in the Southeastern Conference alone in 2023. While states have played catch-up in recent years in a policy arms race over name, image, and likeness – or NIL – legislation, the recent \$2.8 billion antitrust court case settlement in House v. NCAA will lead to an unprecedented era of revenue sharing, furthering the steps towards professionalization of certain collegiate sports. Additionally, the changing competitive landscape has even led individual schools as well as athletics conferences to consider investments from foreign sovereign wealth funds or private equity firms, raising major questions. However, in an era of declining enrollment and funding challenges, these changes necessitate a significant reform movement better delineating between the academic funding and mission of higher education and the business-driven side of major collegiate athletics. Panelists at this session will discuss the legal, financial, and practical considerations policymaker should consider in this new world of collegiate athletics.

PANELIST: Representative Jeremy Gray, Alabama

POLICY SESSION 5 HUMAN SERVICES & PUBLIC SAFETY

Sunday, July 12 | 9:00–10:00 AM

Hometown Heroes: How States are Incentivizing Physicians to Practice in Rural Communities

It is estimated that by 2036, the U.S. will face a physician shortage of nearly 86,000. The shortage can be attributed to several variables, including burnout, education costs, and workforce development bottlenecks. While this shortage can be felt throughout the nation, the South, and particularly rural communities, where many of which are already classified as medical deserts, will bear the brunt of the resulting healthcare scarcity. Though 20 percent of Americans live in rural areas, only 10 percent of physicians practice in rural areas. Several states in our region have sought to implement policies that could encourage physicians to practice in rural areas and establish long-term residence residences. This policy session will explore the impact of policies like education funding supports and broader health care workforce development strategies as well as look ahead at potential new strategies for addressing this issue.

MODERATOR: Senator Brice Wiggins, Mississippi

PANELIST: Senator Stephen Meredith, Kentucky

GOVERNMENT STAFF TRACK 2

Sunday, July 12 | 9:30–10:30 AM

Data Use and Integrity: What You Can Use vs. What You Should Use

In an era of abundant data, legislative staff must make informed choices about which data sources to rely on and how to present them responsibly. This session examines the distinction between data that is technically accessible and data that is appropriate, credible, and ethical to use. Participants will discuss how to evaluate data trustworthiness, avoid misuse or misinterpretation, and guide members toward reliable sources. The session reinforces professional judgment as a cornerstone of legislative service.

PRESENTER:

POLICY PLENARY

Sunday, July 12 | 12:00–1:30 PM

Medicaid at a Crossroads: State Strategies for Coverage, Cost, and Workforce in a Changing Federal Landscape

Southern states are navigating a complex Medicaid environment shaped by evolving federal policy signals, rising enrollment and costs, workforce shortages, and increasing pressure on rural health systems. While states share common challenges, their policy responses differ significantly. This plenary brings together legislative leaders to examine how Southern states are approaching Medicaid financing, eligibility policy, workforce participation strategies, and program sustainability – while balancing fiscal responsibility and access to care.

MODERATOR: President Robert Stivers, Kentucky

PANELISTS: Senator Jim Burgin, North Carolina

Senator Kay Kirkpatrick, Georgia

POLICY SESSION 6 ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT, TRANSPORTATION & CULTURAL AFFAIRS

Sunday, July 12 | 2:00–3:00 PM

Reimagining Tourism in The South

Southern states are reexamining their tourism strategies as they attract visitors from across the nation and around the world to experience the region’s events, attractions, and convention centers. State leaders are adapting marketing and promotion strategies to respond to changing traveler preferences and are evaluating how statewide destination marketing organizations are funded and structured. This



session will highlight emerging trends and innovative practices in tourism development and promotion, while outlining considerations for policymakers as they address long-term visitor expectations, workforce needs, and infrastructure demands.

MODERATOR: Delegate Gary Howell, West Virginia
PANELISTS: Senator Drew Echols, Georgia
Representative Adline Clarke, Alabama

POLICY SESSION 7 ENERGY & ENVIRONMENT

Sunday, July 12 | 2:00–3:00 PM

Peak Power: How States Are Planning to Ensure Adequate Baseloads

With energy demand expected to increase by 50 percent over the next 25 years, states are looking at what types of production facilities can be deployed quickly, cost effectively, and widely enough to ensure a smart distribution of power. Utilities in several states are focusing on a trifecta of natural gas, solar, and battery storage, as the former two present the cheapest cost-per-megawatt ratio over a 25-year period. However, not all states are well-equipped to deploy natural gas and solar. This session will therefore give an overview of power production options different regions of the South are considering, with special attention to costs and timelines.

MODERATOR:
PANELIST:

GOVERNMENT STAFF TRACK 3

Sunday, July 12 | 2:00–3:00 PM

Understanding Authority and Process: Constitutions, Statutes, Rules and Traditions

Legislative authority is shaped by multiple layers, including constitutions, statutes, chamber rules, customs, and traditions. This session unpacks how these elements interact and how staff can navigate them effectively. A key focus will be on communicating facts and constraints to members in a way that is respectful, non-directive, and supportive of informed decision-making. Participants will gain tools to explain complex institutional realities without creating tension or misunderstanding.

MODERATOR:
PANELISTS:

GOVERNMENT STAFF TRACK 4

Sunday, July 12 | 3:30–4:30 PM

How to Build Credibility in a Modern World

Credibility is one of the most valuable assets legislative staff possess – and in today’s environment, it is closely tied to the ability to remain neutral, manage conflict, and help move issues toward resolution. While staff may not have a vested interest in a specific policy outcome, they play a critical role in facilitating productive dialogue and keeping the legislative process moving. This foundational session explores what credibility looks like in practice for legislative staff, with a focus on professionalism, trust, communication, and the staff role as a neutral mediator.

MODERATOR:
PANELISTS:

POLICY SESSION 8 AGRICULTURE & RURAL DEVELOPMENT

Sunday, July 12 | 3:30–4:30 PM

Eminent Domain

As the push for more transmission infrastructure and energy-related pipelines continues, rural communities and large-plot landowners are looking for assurances on the right to their land. Eminent domain allows the government to take private land for public use, but many at the state level are looking to ensure this practice does not go too far. This session will give an overview of current eminent domain factors, trends, and state-level laws in order to inform policymakers about an issue that affects many in rural areas.

MODERATOR:
PANELISTS:

POLICY SESSION 9 FISCAL AFFAIRS & GOVERNMENT OPERATIONS

Sunday, July 12 | 3:30–4:30 PM

Race to Zero: Tax Burdens and Competitiveness in the South

Southern states are accelerating efforts to reduce – or even eliminate – individual income taxes as a strategy to boost competitiveness, attract investment, and retain talent. This session examines the tools policymakers are using,



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including rate cuts and structural reforms, as well as revenue diversification and taxpayer relief. Speakers will unpack what's working, the trade-offs between budgets and services, and the implications for growth relative to peer states. Attendees will leave with practical takeaways and metrics to evaluate tax competitiveness in their own states – particularly surrounding hot topics such as property taxes, social media and digital taxes, and the debate over incentives.

MODERATOR:

PANELISTS: **Delegate Paul Krizek**, Virginia
Lucy Dadayan, Principal Research Associate, Urban-Brookings Tax Policy Center
Jared Walczak, Senior Fellow, Tax Foundation
Representative Beth Camp, Georgia

SUPREME COURT UPDATE

Monday, July 13 | 9:00–10:30 AM

Guns, religion, gender identity, and police shootings – it has been just another term at the U.S. Supreme Court! This session will cover all the big cases for states and state legislatures and how the SCOTUS decisions can impact our Southern states.

PRESENTER:

POLICY SESSION 10 ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT, TRANSPORTATION & CULTURAL AFFAIRS

Monday, July 13 | 9:00–10:00 AM

Colleges and Innovation Hubs

Colleges and universities across the Southern region are expanding their roles in economic development by partnering with philanthropic organizations, community stakeholders, and development agencies to establish and support small business incubators. Through these initiatives, institutions strengthen technology transfer, support workforce development pathways, and facilitate collaboration between academic institutions and industry. This session will examine how selected institutions structure and operate incubator programs, how they engage entrepreneurs and local communities, and the policy considerations states may evaluate when supporting university-based innovation ecosystems.

MODERATOR: **Delegate Gary Howell**, West Virginia

PRESENTERS: **Shannon Allen**, Innovate Alabama

Delegate Lindsey Dougherty, Virginia

POLICY SESSION 11 EDUCATION

Monday, July 13 | 2:00–3:30 PM

A Class A Day Keeps the Doctor Away: The Debate Over Changing School Calendars

From four day school weeks in rural communities to year-round options to arrest the “summer slide,” education leaders are rethinking the traditional school year calendar for K-12 students seeking to balance staffing needs with academic outcomes. This session will feature a hearty debate over the benefits and unintended consequences of shifting calendars down – such as with the four-day school week – or extending – such as with yearlong schooling – as well as the consequences of virtual learning days.

PRESENTERS:

POLICY SESSION 12 ENERGY & ENVIRONMENT

Monday, July 13 | 2:00–3:30 PM

Data Centers: Beyond 101

Legislators are familiar with the often-discussed topics surrounding data centers, namely the challenges they bring, such as energy and water usage. However, though there appears to be an appetite for conversation, few states have passed legislation addressing these challenges. To showcase potential policy approach, this session will focus on states that have introduced such legislation and discuss what lessons can be drawn from these experiences.

GOVERNMENT STAFF TRACK 6

Monday, July 13 | 2:00–3:30 PM

Communicating Complex Information Clearly and Neutrally

Government staff regularly translate complex, technical, or time-sensitive information for elected and appointed officials who must make decisions quickly and under pressure. This session focuses on practical techniques for communicating clearly, concisely, and neutrally. This session will feature a hearty debate over the benefits and unintended consequences of shifting calendars down – such as with the four-day school week – or extending – such as with yearlong schooling – as well as the consequences of virtual learning days. without advocacy or oversimplification. Participants will learn how to structure briefings, memos, and verbal explanations so that key facts, assumptions, and trade-offs are clear and trustworthy. Using real legislative scenarios, the session will emphasize clarity, tone, and framing



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when conveying uncertainty, constraints, or competing interpretations. The goal is to strengthen staff credibility and support informed decision-making while maintaining professional boundaries.

PRESENTER: Leslie Gervasio, Immediate Past Chair,
National Association of Government Communicators,
Pennsylvania

GOVERNMENT STAFF TRACK 7

Tuesday, July 14 | 10:30–12 PM

AI in Practice: 101 & Lesson

Building on the AI 101 session, this practitioner-led discussion moves from theory to application. An experienced AI practitioner will walk through real-world projects, demonstrating how AI tools have been implemented, where they have added value, and where challenges or limitations emerged. The session will emphasize lessons learned, governance considerations, and practical takeaways for legislative staff evaluating AI use cases.

COMMITTEE SITE VISITS

Tuesday, July 14 | 11:30–4:00 PM

INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS FORUM

Tuesday, July 14 | 12:00–1:30 PM

Global Trends, State Impact: Security Considerations for Southern States

Global security is no longer a distant, federal-only concern – it is directly shaping the economic stability, infrastructure resilience, and public safety priorities of Southern states. From supply chains and energy to cybersecurity and geopolitical competition, global dynamics are increasingly influencing state-level decision-making. This session will explore how these trends – particularly rising geopolitical tensions and competition with China – impact key state responsibilities, including ports, military communities, economic development, and technology infrastructure. This discussion will connect global dynamics to practical, state-level impact.

MODERATOR: Joshua Burgin, Founder, Alliance for
Global Security

PANELISTS: Representative Daniel Alvarez, Florida
Leslie Alessandra, Director of Investigations,
Plutonian Group

COMING SOON!