



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: Representative Jennifer Fiddler, Alabama

PANELISTS: Representative Vince Mangold, Mississippi
Troy Romero, State Director of Louisiana, USDA

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

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

Transportation Institute

Representative Margie Wilcox, Alabama

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 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



Southern Legislative Conference
THE COUNCIL OF STATE GOVERNMENTS

2026

Policy Sessions & Government Staff Tracks Agenda

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

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.

MODERATOR: Lieutenant Governor Ghazala Hashmi, Virginia
PANELISTS: Representative Jeremy Gray, Alabama
Jason Schlafer, Executive Associate Athletic Director/
Chief Revenue Officer, University of Kentucky,
Senator Beth Mizell, Louisiana

GOVERNMENT STAFF TRACK 1

Saturday, July 11 | 2:30–3:30 PM

What Census Data tell us about changes in the US South

Five years after the 2020 Census, new data continue to show how the South is changing. As planning for the 2030 Census begins, the American Community Survey and other Census Bureau data provide insight into demographic, economic, and geographic trends across Southern states. This session explores migration, aging populations, housing demand, workforce dynamics, and changing urban-rural relationships, and examines how these trends affect budgeting, housing, childcare, workforce development, and services for older adults. Through data and visualizations, attendees will gain a regional perspective on the policy challenges and opportunities created by demographic change, with opportunities for discussion and audience engagement.

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

LEARNING LAB PRESENTED BY CVS

Saturday, July 11 | 2:30–3:30 PM

CVS Air Response

CVS Air Response enhances healthcare access, emergency response, and community resilience through advanced medical logistics, rapid deployment of lifesaving resources, and disaster support. By connecting healthcare networks and delivering critical aid when and where it's needed, we help improve outcomes, strengthen public safety, and support communities in times of need.

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 ^{CLE}

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 but not limited to burnout, education costs, and workforce development bottlenecks. While this shortage can be felt throughout the nation, the South, and particularly rural communities, 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. 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
PANELISTS: Senator Stephen Meredith, Kentucky
Representative Butch Parrish, Georgia

LEARNING LAB PRESENTED BY CHILDREN'S ALLIANCE, NECCO, NOSAC, AND SAFY

Sunday, July 12 | 9:30–10:30 AM

Insuring Care: How Liability Insurance Costs Can Impact Foster Care

Foster care providers across the country are facing growing challenges in securing affordable liability insurance coverage. Rising premiums, reduced coverage availability, evolving underwriting practices, and increased litigation have created financial and operational pressures for organizations delivering critical child welfare services. This Learning Lab will examine current trends in the liability insurance market, explore factors driving these changes, and discuss how providers and policymakers are responding to ensure continued access to foster care services.

GOVERNMENT STAFF TRACK 2

Sunday, July 12 | 9:30–10:30 AM

Finding and Evaluating Data to Inform the Policy Making Process

Legislative staff are often asked to find reliable data quickly to inform policy decisions. This session explores how to define policy questions, identify credible sources, assess methodology and limitations, and weigh tradeoffs among



Southern Legislative Conference
THE COUNCIL OF STATE GOVERNMENTS

2026

Policy Sessions & Government Staff Tracks Agenda

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

data options. Participants will discuss working with imperfect information, avoiding misuse or overstatement, and clearly communicating findings, assumptions, and uncertainty. Attendees will leave with practical tools for applying sound judgment and transparency in legislative service.

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 PLENARY LUNCHEON

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
Representative Ashley Hudson, Arkansas
Jeb Duke, Senior Vice President, Medicaid Division Leader, Humana

LEARNING LAB PRESENTED BY AEP

Sunday, July 12 | 2:00–3:00 PM

Powering Growth: Why Economic Development Matters for Electric Rates

Explore how strategic growth can enhance energy affordability while strengthening state competitiveness. This panel will bring together Kentucky leaders to discuss their collaboration on the Commonwealth's economic development strategy, with a focus on the energy landscape and the resulting benefits for residents.

LEARNING LAB PRESENTED BY ARNOLD VENTURES

Sunday, July 12 | 2:00–3:00 PM

From Data to Dollars: How Tennessee and Kentucky are Rewarding Credentials that Work

As states face growing pressure to demonstrate the return on investment of higher education, Tennessee and Kentucky are leading the way with performance-based funding reforms that align credentials with workforce needs and economic mobility. Legislative leaders and policy experts will walk attendees through the policy levers available to state lawmakers, the data infrastructure needed to track credential value, and how to build the bipartisan coalitions that make reform possible. Whether your state is just beginning to explore outcomes-based funding or looking to accelerate existing efforts, this session offers a practical roadmap for change.

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: **Representative Adline Clarke**, Alabama
Senator Missy Irvin, Arkansas

POLICY SESSION 7

ENERGY & ENVIRONMENT

Sunday, July 12 | 2:00–3:00 PM

Peak Power: How States Are Planning to Ensure Adequate Baseloads^{CLE}

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,



Southern Legislative Conference
THE COUNCIL OF STATE GOVERNMENTS

2026

Policy Sessions & Government Staff Tracks Agenda

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

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: Representative Todd Hunter, Texas
PANELIST: Speaker Pro Tempore Pat Marsh, Tennessee
Clay Scofield, CEO and President, Energy Institute of Alabama
Emily Stipe, Director of Federal and Political Affairs, Vistra Corp.

GOVERNMENT STAFF TRACK 3

Sunday, July 12 | 2:00–3:30 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: Cindy Kadlec, Majority Legal Counsel, House of Representatives, Missouri
PANELIST: Richard Olsen, Legislative Administrator, West Virginia
Trey Walpole, Legal Counsel, South Carolina
Jasmine Williams, Legislative Analyst, Licensing and Occupations, Legislative Research Commission, Kentucky

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.

PRESENTER: Jennifer NeToi Claiborne, Partnership for Public Service

POLICY SESSION 8

AGRICULTURE & RURAL DEVELOPMENT

Sunday, July 12 | 3:30–4:30 PM

Eminent Domain ^{CLE}

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: Senator Sandy Crawford, Missouri
PANELISTS: Representative DeAnn Vaught, Arkansas
Mary Pat Regan, Commissioner and Vice Chair, Kentucky Public Service Commission

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 ^{CLE}

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, 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: Senate President Pro Tem, David Givens, Kentucky
PANELISTS: Delegate Paul Krizek, Virginia
Lucy Dadayan, Principal Research Associate,



Southern Legislative Conference
THE COUNCIL OF STATE GOVERNMENTS

2026

Policy Sessions & Government Staff Tracks Agenda

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

Urban-Brookings Tax Policy Center

Jared Walczak, Senior Fellow, Tax Foundation

Representative Beth Camp, Georgia

LEARNING LAB PRESENTED BY CASEY FAMILY PROGRAMS

Sunday, July 12 | 3:30–4:30 PM

Safe at Home: Strategies to Prevent Child Abuse and Neglect

An interactive discussion exploring research, data, and practical approaches to supporting child safety, family stability, and positive outcomes for children and families. Participants will examine strategies related to kinship care, timely permanency, and cross-sector partnerships that strengthen family and community supports.

LEARNING LAB PRESENTED BY GLOBAL MEDICAL RESPONSE

Sunday, July 12 | 3:30–4:30 PM

Funding the Front Line: State Policy Solutions for Emergency Medical Services

This session will explore key challenges facing EMS systems, including workforce shortages, reimbursement gaps, and growing financial pressures. Panelists will discuss state and legislative strategies to strengthen system sustainability, modernize funding approaches, and support innovation in emergency care delivery across urban and rural communities.

SUPREME COURT UPDATE ^{CLE}

Monday, July 13 | 9:00–10:30 AM

The Supreme Court continues to issue decisions that shape how states govern, regulate, and respond to emerging challenges. This session will provide an engaging overview of some of the Court's most notable recent cases, highlight broader legal and policy trends affecting state government, and preview major issues on the horizon.

**PRESENTER: Ilya Shapiro, Director of Constitutional
Studies**, Manhattan Institute

LEARNING LAB PRESENTED BY PEW CHARITABLE TRUSTS

Monday, July 13 | 9:00–10:00 AM

Building the Market for Recycled Plastic in the South through Recycling Market Development

It is estimated that the 15 CSG South member states landfill an estimated \$3 billion worth of plastic each year. That's

nearly half of the total value of landfilled plastics in the US. This panel will discuss learnings from across the Southeast about how states could seize this opportunity by building on existing infrastructure and solidifying end markets through recycling market development.

MODERATOR: Isabel Jarrett, Senior Manager, Plastics, The Pew Charitable Trusts (District of Columbia)

PRESENTERS: Senator Shane Reeves, Tennessee State Senate (Tennessee)

Megan Daum, Vice-President of Sustainability, American Beverage Association (District of Columbia)

Anna DeLage, Recycling Market Development Manager, South Carolina Department of Commerce (South Carolina)

Emily Tipaldo, Program Manager, Market Development, Association for Plastic Recyclers (South Carolina)

POLICY SESSION 10

ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT, TRANSPORTATION, & CULTURAL AFFAIRS

Monday, July 13 | 9:00–10:00 AM

Colleges and Innovation Hubs ^{CLE}

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: Delegate Lindsey Dougherty, Virginia

Shannon Allen, Innovate Alabama

Jeff City, Ed.D., University of Florida Innovation Academy

LEARNING LAB PRESENTED BY AMAZON WEB SERVICES (AWS)

Monday, July 13 | 2:00–3:00 PM

Delivering Tomorrow from Above: State Economic Opportunities in Air and Space

Explores how the space industry, broadband, air logistics, and drone delivery are unlocking economic opportunities for rural and underserved Southern communities. The session will highlight how next-generation connectivity enables precision farming, small business growth, and reliable internet



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THE COUNCIL OF STATE GOVERNMENTS

2026

Policy Sessions & Government Staff Tracks Agenda

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

access in areas that lack broadband options today. Attendees will hear real-world examples of how bridging the digital divide drives job creation, agricultural innovation, and global competitiveness for local entrepreneurs. The session also showcases how infrastructure investments in air and space are positioning Southern states as hubs for logistics and connectivity innovation.

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 ^{CLE}

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: **Cory Koedel, Ph.D., Professor of Economics and Public Policy**, University of Missouri
Melissa Wainwright, Ed.D., Multi-Tiered System of Supports Coordinator, Kentucky Department of Education
Emily Morton, Ph.D., Lead Research Scientist, NWEA
Holly Coy, Chief of Staff, Office of the State Superintendent of Public Instruction, Virginia Department of Education

POLICY SESSION 12

ENERGY & ENVIRONMENT

Monday, July 13 | 2:00–3:30 PM

Data Centers: Beyond 101 ^{CLE}

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.

PRESENTERS: **Delegate Michael Feggans**, Virginia
Senator Danny Verdin, South Carolina
Dan Diorio, Vice President, State Policy Data Center Coalition

GOVERNMENT STAFF TRACK 6

Monday, July 13 | 2:00–3:30 PM

Beyond the Roadway: Building Trust Through Strategic Public Engagement and Stakeholder Communications

Transportation agencies must do more than deliver infrastructure projects—they must build trust, transparency, and lasting relationships with the communities they serve. This session explores the Pennsylvania Turnpike Commission’s strategic public engagement approach and how it communicates with legislators, local officials, stakeholders, customers, and the public through consistent messaging and meaningful dialogue. Attendees will learn how the Commission has shifted from traditional outreach to a proactive, relationship-driven model that strengthens partnerships, supports major infrastructure initiatives, addresses community concerns, and enhances organizational credibility. Through real-world examples and lessons learned, participants will gain practical strategies for building effective stakeholder engagement programs, fostering public confidence, and adapting communications to meet evolving expectations.

PRESENTERS: **Leslie Gervasio, Director of Communications**, Pennsylvania Turnpike Commission & National Association of Government Communicators
Kelli Roberts, Chief Strategy and Communications Officer, Pennsylvania Turnpike Commission

LEARNING LAB PRESENTED BY JP MORGAN CHASE

Tuesday, July 14 | 10:30–11:30 AM

A Policy Framework for Financial Literacy, Fraud Prevention, and Resident Protection

Fraud and scams impact families, businesses, and older adults in every community. As technology evolves, so do financial threats. Learn practical strategies to strengthen financial literacy, raise awareness, and support efforts that help protect residents from financial exploitation.

LEARNING LAB PRESENTED BY ELI LILLY AND COMPANY

Tuesday, July 14 | 10:30–11:30 AM

Obesity Care at a Crossroads: State Policy Choices That Shape Health, Budgets, and Workforce

Obesity continues to present significant public health and economic challenges across Southern states, contributing to higher rates of chronic disease, increased healthcare spending, and workforce impacts. Emerging treatments and evolving care models are creating new opportunities – and new policy questions – for states seeking to improve health



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2026

Policy Sessions & Government Staff Tracks Agenda

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

outcomes and expand access to care. This panel will provide legislators with data, policy perspectives, and practical insights on obesity trends, treatment options, coverage considerations, and the broader implications for state healthcare systems and workforce participation across the South.

GOVERNMENT STAFF TRACK 7

Tuesday, July 14 | 10:30 AM–12:00 PM

AI in Practice: 101 & Lessons

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.

PRESENTERS: Doug Robinson, Executive Director, National Association of State Chief Information Officers (NASCIO)

COMMITTEE SITE VISITS

Tuesday, July 14 | 11:00 AM–4:00 PM

Hagyard Equine Medical Institute

Participants will visit Hagyard Equine Medical Institute, one of the nation's leading equine veterinary hospitals, to gain firsthand insight into Kentucky's signature horse industry and the specialized veterinary care required to support large animal health. The tour will highlight the intersection of agriculture, equine economics, and veterinary medicine. Discussion topics will include workforce and veterinary shortages in rural and agricultural communities, large animal care infrastructure, animal health regulations, and the economic impact of the equine industry on Kentucky and the Southern region. Attendees will also learn about the unique operational and policy needs associated with caring for large animals and supporting agricultural producers.

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