

News from GATES...

Georgia Association of Training, Employment and Supports



THE GATES PORTAL

2011 Session Primer



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First of all let's set the stage with all the new players that are now onboard with Governor Nathan Deal's administration and new legislators. Every statewide elected official is new. Commissioner Mark Butler now heads the Labor Department. Governor Deal, Commissioner Butler, other constitutional officers and the entire legislature were sworn in on Monday, January 10th as required by the State Constitution. The extreme weather conditions this week made for a tough transition. The legislature only convened again on Wednesday to hear the State of the State address from the Governor. They are now adjourned until January 24th. During MLK break there will be budget hearings, which I will get to in a moment. We will also see many new staffers throughout state government and in the legislature. Not everyone has been put into place yet. But the top directors across state government have been named. Brad Douglas has been replaced at DOAS with Sid Johnson who previously headed up the Governor's Office of Consumer Affairs. For those who work with Behavioral Health, Dr. Frank Shelp will remain the Commissioner. David Cook, former MAG Executive Director, takes over the Department of Community Health and Clyde Reese takes over from BJ Walker at the Department of Human Services. Reese was serving as the interim director at DCH.

The legislature saw a lot of new faces elected to office. The majority of the House and Senate stayed with the Republican Party, however the composition did tilt further to the right side of the aisle. The Senate now has 36 Republicans and 20 Democrats. Senator Tim Golden switched

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Special
Announcements



**State Use
Council Meeting
Thursday, Jan. 27
Atlanta**

**GATES Board
Meeting
Friday, Feb. 4
RING - Gainesville**

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to the Republican Party after the election. Senator Tommie Williams will retain Speaker Pro Tem and Senator Chip Rogers will move into the Majority Leaders roll. Senator Doug Stoner takes the helm as Minority Leader for the Democrats. The big change is the decision making power, it has now shifted from the Lt. Governor to a committee of eight Republican Senators. This is similar to when the Republicans took control of the Senate in 2003 and stripped then Lt. Governor Mark Taylor of his powers. The committee will be making all the appointments of chairs and committee assignments. They will also be the force that shapes the debate. Lt. Governor Cagle will still be able to direct legislation to various committees and serve as presiding officer unless Senators Williams or Rogers want to take control of the floor debate.

On the House side we saw a few seats change before the election but many more Democrats switched after. The current count is 114 Republicans, 63 Democrats and 1 Independent. There are two seats up for election in February which lean Republican. That would leave the Republicans 2 seats shy of a super majority. The House reelected Representative David Ralston as Speaker, Representative Jan Jones as Speaker Pro Tem and voted as new Majority Leader Representative Larry O'Neal. The Democrats elected Representative Stacy Abrams as Minority Leader.

The biggest issue facing advocates is really who their legislature is now. You can log on to the newly designed General Assembly website at www.legis.ga.gov to find who is representing you now. But don't get too comfortable because this will change with reapportionment this year to be implemented in the 2012 elections.

The legislature will be grappling with some pretty big issues this year. The first and most important to all of us is the Budget. The Governor's budget attempts to address the continued struggle in the economy by taking \$27.5 million out of the FY 2011 Amended Budget and asking all state agencies to cut about 4%. Many agencies were holding this amount back so it looks like in most cases it will be the cut we finally see. In FY 2012 the Governor must account for the over \$1 billion loss in federal stimulus money. He is making a very conservative revenue estimate that assumes a 3.75% increase in revenue while directing a 7% decrease in spending by state agencies. Part of this is to take about 14,000 state jobs off the books and not fill them. Of the 14,000 there may be 200 people who actually lose their job when all is said and done.

The other big issues will be Education, Georgia Tax Structure, Immigration and Transportation. A Tax Committee met over the summer and fall and has recommended some pretty big changes to the tax structure in Georgia. This includes reducing the income tax from 6% to 4%, reducing the corporate income tax, while putting a 4% tax back on groceries and including taxes on services not currently taxed in Georgia. In the Governor's address he began by singling out Public Safety as his top priority. And of course the legislature will spend a lot of time grappling with a redistricting plan that will pass the test at the US Department of Justice. I believe looming over everyone's head will be

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the economy and how Georgia moves below a 10% unemployment rate. Commissioner Butler is also dealing with the depleted resources of unemployment insurance.

So we begin the session with fresh faces, the same difficult issues and a fragile economy. The House must still assign many committee chairs and positions, begin the budget discussions and approach a potential new tax structure. The Budget Hearings will be begin Tuesday, January 18th at 10:30am with the Governor's address. It will conclude at noon on Thursday, January 20th with a review of the Labor budget by Commissioner Butler. If you would like to listen in you may be able to do so on your computer at the General Assembly website (www.legis.ga.gov). Currently we are seeing a little over \$300,000 cut in the Amended FY 2011 and FY 2012 budgets in the Voc Rehab contract line item. However, details have not been released yet on how that all breaks down.

We will need your advocacy and attention more than ever this year as we attempt to educate new legislators, a new administration and the citizens of Georgia on the crucial work GATES members perform with a tremendous positive outcome for people with disabilities and their families throughout the state.

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Call for Information

THE PORTAL is a communication tool for GATES and GATES members. If you have stories about your organization, staff announcements, program descriptions, or other information you want to share with other GATES members, please send the info to Charles Hall, chall@asginfo.net



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