

Sarah Eckhardt

The 89th Legislative Session – Capitol Update 2026

Friends and neighbors,

Every two years for a hundred and forty days, communities as far apart as those in the Panhandle and the Rio Grande Valley, to those as close together as our neighborhoods here in Central Texas, send representatives to the Pink Dome on Congress Avenue. Regardless of the differences between these communities, legislators must find common ground to stand on. That is what our shared prosperity has been built on and what will ensure that as we work together, we can achieve better outcomes for Texans into the future.

As your Senator, and in every role I have served you in previously, I strive toward a government that is effective, efficient, and treats everyone fairly, with minimal intrusion on the way you choose to live your life. **Although these values we hold in common were challenged this Session, a lot was delivered for the residents of District 14.**

We left the regular Session with a strong budget for Texas, making use of our multi-billion dollar surplus to deliver overdue investments in water, public education, and energy. We also sent \$51M of state revenue back to homeowners to give them relief on property taxes, including up to \$200,000 for homeowners over 65. **This budget gave me hope, but also cause for caution as the federal government's current fiscal posture leaves critical services Texans rely on every day vulnerable to gaps.** 30% of our state's budget comes from the federal government and without serious state investment, our agencies will struggle to address the growing unmet need.

I wish less time had been spent on issues designed to divide us and more time was used addressing substantive solutions to pressing issues like our state's unusually high rate of maternal mortality; our outstanding number of children who go hungry and without seeing a doctor during their primary growing years; rising insurance rates as Texas faces increasingly extreme weather; and the fact that housing remains out of reach for so many in our community.

In these pages, I hope to show you what we got done together—and also show where there is more work to be done.

In this newsletter and in the community, your voice matters in the conversation about our future. **Your feedback and recommendations will help guide the work my office pursues in the interim and as we prepare for the next Legislative Session.** As always, you can also contact my office for assistance with state agencies and issues. We use every interaction as an opportunity to learn from you and deliver sustainable progress for our community. **I can't do this work without you.**



Take care and talk again soon,

Senator Sarah Eckhardt
State Senate
District 14



Legislative Overview

EDUCATION



Before passing a single dollar of funding to public schools, the Legislature passed Senate Bill 2—which I strongly opposed—establishing a statewide private school voucher program. An initial allocation of \$1 billion dollars over two years, funded by taxpayers, will be disbursed by the Comptroller's office. Budget experts anticipate the fund will grow to \$4 billion by 2030. Qualifying families can receive between \$2,000 and \$30,000 for private school tuition or homeschool-related expenses. **This initial allocation is estimated to serve a potential of just 100,000 students from Texas' 5.5 million student population. Those students will be served by a one-time allocation of \$8.3 billion in funding found in House Bill 2.** Even with this funding, many districts will have to rely on local property taxpayers to make up for funding shortfalls, even as HB 2 provides funding for teacher pay raises, special education reforms, and other programs.

Private schools which receive voucher dollars will not be subject to the same accountability measures as public independent school districts or charter schools, nor do they guarantee a high quality education for every family as they retain the ability to pick and choose their students. SB 2 fails to meet the high expectations of the Texas Constitution, which contains no obligation to fund a private education system but instead to ensure free public education for every Texas child. **Public schools are the single greatest tool we have to enable upward economic mobility, foster community, and prepare students for success in the workforce after they leave the classroom.**



Senator Eckhardt reviews legislation from her Senate desk

care including inducing labor and managing a miscarriage, multiple healthcare organizations expressed strong concerns that this legislation could create a chilling effect on access to these life saving drugs similar to that experienced after the Texas' near complete abortion ban in 2022. Combining mifepristone and misoprostol is an FDA-approved method for ending a pregnancy has been affirmed as safe by nearly four decades of peer-reviewed scientific research, with a less than one percent risk of serious complications from a medication abortion and a 93-99% effectiveness rate.



Senator Eckhardt speaking at a press conference for felony voting rights with Representative John Bucy, III and advocates

JUSTICE



Judicial Conduct Reform. The 89th Legislature took a close look at judicial power, passing SJR 27, also known as Proposition 12 which Texans recently voted into law. This amendment to the state constitution makes significant changes in the appointment of the members of the State Commission on Judicial Conduct, the state agency that investigates judicial misconduct. The Governor now appoints seven of the Commission's thirteen members, up from five, and the Texas Bar no longer appoints any members. Three of the Governor's appointees will serve six year terms, two will serve four year terms, and two will serve two year terms. Critics argue that by concentrating more of this particular appointment power in the Executive branch the Judiciary is opened up to political interference that could violate the Separation of Powers doctrine that is foundational in both the United States and Texas Constitutions. Another important bill was SB 293, which provides judges across the state with a long-overdue 25% salary increase. The increase in compensation comes with strings attached: an increase in reporting and additional causes for judicial discipline. **Although supportive of judicial pay increases, I voted against this bill in the Senate.**

Barriers to Justice. Texas has one of the largest prison populations in both the nation and the world, meaning barriers to reentry affect millions of people across the state. Senate Bill 1080 takes an important step toward reducing barriers for formerly incarcerated individuals to pursue occupational licenses. It also ensures that licensing boards take a more tailored approach when responding to certain crimes—rather than imposing overly harsh, blanket penalties. These barriers to licensure often serve to extend the punishment past the point at which they have successfully served the term of their sentence. **Clearing this path is an important step toward the restorative justice system our community seeks.**

PROPERTY TAXES



With voter approval of Proposition 14, the Legislature has now increased the school homestead exemption to \$140,000. For individuals who are disabled or over 65, the exemption is now \$200,000. This is a dramatic increase in response to the dramatic number of Texans whether homeowners or renters, who are housing-cost burdened. The 89th Legislature also advanced an amendment, which voters approved in November, to increase the business personal property tax from \$2,500 to \$125,000. This will level the playing field so small businesses are not overly tax-burdened, and ensures Texas remains an attractive place to do business.

HEALTHCARE



Texas' abortion ban—effective in 2022 after the overturning of *Roe v. Wade*—made performing an abortion a felony punishable by life in prison and a fine of at least \$100,000. For the past three years, physicians have feared performing medically necessary abortions because they believed the law did not grant them explicit legal protection to do so. Physicians were only allowed to perform an abortion if the situation was "life threatening." This subjected many women to avoidable life-long complications to their organs and reproductive systems. **As a remedy, the Legislature passed Senate Bill 31.** This bill provides limited legal clarification to hospitals and providers that the narrow exception created for physicians includes instances where not acting would pose a threat to a woman's major bodily functions, and clarifies that action can occur before that threat is imminent.

During the Second Special Session, the Legislature also criminalized the provision of abortion-inducing drugs through the passage of House Bill 7. While this bill created a medical-use exception for mifepristone and misoprostol, two drugs that are considered foundational to OBGYN



In August 2025, Senator Eckhardt led a field hearing on the state of reproductive rights in Texas alongside US Congressman Lloyd Doggett, Representative Donna Howard, and Austin Mayor Pro Tempore Vanessa Fuentes. Attended by members of the public, the hearing platformed several Texans who have suffered complications under the Texas abortion ban.

Special Sessions of the 89th Legislature

The Texas Constitution authorizes the Governor to call the Legislature into special sessions of no more than 30 days, during which time lawmakers may only take up bills the Governor places on the agenda. In recent years, special sessions have been called to address issues left unresolved during the regular session.

After the regular session, the Governor vetoed Senate Bill 3, which would have banned all THC products in Texas. I agreed with the Governor's veto. I voted against the legislation during the regular session. While supporting commonsense regulations on the hemp and cannabis industry in Texas to protect minors, an all-out ban infringes on the ability of adult Texans to make their own choices. The Governor placed THC regulation near the top of the first-called special session agenda, alongside 17 other items, and ordered the Legislature to convene on July 21, 2025. Ultimately, after two special sessions, the issue was left unresolved by the Legislature as the chambers deadlocked on regulatory and criminal provisions of the legislation. The Governor has since issued an executive order directing state agencies to begin rulemaking that would ban minors from accessing THC products and establish basic regulations on the retailers.

Before the first special session could begin, historic flooding struck Central Texas, claiming the lives of 137 Texans, including 27 children at Camp Mystic. The floods caused in excess of \$18 billion in damage. The Legislature heard from those directly impacted by the flooding, from the leaders of Kerr County to families left to pick up the pieces with limited resources. The Legislature responded by passing bills to



Senator Eckhardt debating Senator Phil King on redistricting during second special session



Senator Eckhardt speaking to parents of Heaven's 27 ahead of final passage of SB 1 during second special session.

improve safety standards at youth camps and RV parks (SB 1 and HB 1), along with funding siren installation in rural counties impacted by the flooding (SB3). In the coming Legislative Sessions, more work remains to better prepare for future disasters, including taking up recommendations outlined in the Texas Flood Plan, developed by the Texas Water Development Board at the request of the Legislature in 2023 in the aftermath of Hurricane Harvey. The Flood Plan was published in December 2024 and offers a range of solutions that should be at the top of our list of future considerations for the next session. We should also consider ensuring a clear chain of command during disasters that includes regional emergency managers through the Texas Department of Emergency Management.

Among the other items the Governor added to the agenda for the special session following the floods was mid-decade redistricting.

The US Constitution leaves the responsibility of drawing congressional maps to state legislatures, although Article I, Section 2 specifies that this redrawing must occur at least once per decade when a federal Census takes place to ensure roughly equal population for each district across the country. This was part of the rational design emphasized by the members of the Constitutional Convention to ensure the House of Representatives would continuously reflect the diversity of backgrounds, views, and issues of people across the country.

Today, mid-decade redistricting is rare, usually taking place only in response to the specific orders of a federal court applying provisions of Voting Rights Acts to provide relief for voters who may have been disenfranchised. I strongly opposed this mid-decade redistricting. After two special sessions (the first scuttled by the House of Representatives' inability to count a quorum of members present), the maps passed the Legislature and were signed into law by the Governor. On November 18, 2025, a three-judge panel ruled against the State of Texas and ordered the maps enjoined from use in the 2026 midterm elections because they constitute an illegal racial gerrymander under the Voting Rights Act. Instead, maps passed by the Legislature in 2021—themselves under litigation—are to be used in the 2026 election, pending the outcome of an appeal of the decision from the State of Texas to the US Supreme Court.

Future Considerations

The Texas Legislature has incredible potential to address far-reaching goals, but this can only occur through persistent engagement by Texans. Here are a few of my priorities that I will be focusing on throughout the interim and during the next legislative session.

EMERGENCY PREPAREDNESS

After Hurricane Harvey, the Legislature directed the Texas Water Development Board to work with regional leaders to develop the state's first-ever State Flood Plan. Released at the end of 2024, the Plan found that approximately 21% of Texas land is located in the floodplain, including more than 6,000 hospitals, emergency medical services, fire stations, police stations, and schools. Despite an abundance of data-driven, community-reviewed recommendations, the Plan was largely ignored this Session.

More than 2.4 million Texans live and work in a floodplain. They deserve assurances that the state is prepared for the next extreme weather disaster. This would include adopting Plan recommendations such as up-to-date flood risk maps and minimum management standards in those floodplains. We should also return to efforts begun this Session to establish statewide standards for local leaders in a disaster, pulling together a statewide Mass Fatality Operations Response Team, and standardizing emergency communications equipment through an Interoperability Council. And, with millions of Texans lacking broadband internet access, we can ensure they receive emergency communications by deploying the billions of dollars set aside for the Texas Broadband Infrastructure Fund.

AFFORDABILITY

Many Texans struggle to make ends meet while wages have stagnated across the state, including the state minimum wage being stalled at just \$7.25 an hour. As automation and artificial intelligence change the labor market, Texans would benefit from job and career training programs which help them access better-paying jobs. We must also contend with the rising cost of childcare across Texas. With more than 2 million children under the age of 5, there is only enough capacity at state-licensed childcare facilities to provide half of them with daycare.

Closer to home, the rising cost of housing has outpaced the income of most people in Travis county, whether renter or homeowner. With Texas behind on housing construction by more than 300,000 units, reducing the barriers to construct homes is one remedy to bring down costs for everyone. Another is for the state to open more pathways for the 41% of Texas families making under \$50,000 who are cost-burdened by housing. Texas invests just \$25M per year in affordable housing dollars, less than Oklahoma provides for its Houston-sized population of just four million. Yet another burden on Texas homeowners is the rising cost of home insurance. Texas has the sixth-highest premiums in the country, rising by 19% in 2024. As extreme weather from floods and fires to tornados and hurricanes increase in severity, many national insurers are refusing to cover Texans, leaving them with higher premiums and less protection when disaster strikes. The Texas Department of Insurance is in a position to remedy this situation if the Legislature moves to approve or deny

Future Considerations continued

premium increases above 10%.

The state must pay its fair share in healthcare, criminal justice, and public education to ensure that costs aren't passed onto local governments and taxpayers. Refusing to do its part imposes an even greater burden on Texans and exacerbates the disparities between the richest and poorest Texans across our state.

WATER

Texas is projected to be the most populous state in the nation by 2045. The needs of Texans today and in the future threaten to be compromised by drought, aging infrastructure, and the encroachment of new industries on local water supplies. While Texas voters recently approved an investment of \$20 billion over the next 20 years to upgrade existing water infrastructure, from new water supplies to wastewater management, some experts indicate as much as \$154 billion will be needed to meet our Texas-sized need.

Here in Central Texas, bodies of water like Lake Travis and Barton Springs represent the beating heart of our communities. They are sourced by rivers and aquifers across our state, and their future depends on continued good stewardship spurred by incentives and conservation measures. We must also maintain a focus on stewardship of our rivers and aquifers, the vital source of all our water. Everyone, from data centers to homeowners, could do more to reduce water use, and the Legislature must look at mechanisms to incentivize this shift.

RECAPTURE

All Texas students deserve a high-quality education that is equitable, regardless of the district they attend. Austin ISD is the leader in recapture dollars sent to the State of Texas, sending \$770 million in 2024-2025—more than four times the next-highest district. In school finance, recapture, or “Robin Hood,” seeks to achieve equity across school districts by taking “excess” funding from wealthy school districts and redistributing those dollars to low-income districts. This law is the result of a ruling in the 1990s by the Texas Supreme Court, which found significant disparities between wealthy and low-income districts, thereby violating the Texas Constitution’s guarantee “for an efficient system of public schools.”

While recapture isn't going away any time soon, we can and should look for ways to improve this system. One option would be a discount for districts that submit recapture payments early. This is a win-win for the state, because with early receipt of payment, interest on the funds can accrue, and districts can retain a sizable portion of dollars that are desperately needed at home. Another option would be to add a **cost-of-living index for district funding**, so employee salaries match the cost-of-living wherever they work. This would enable districts to retain talent and keep their communities whole as they provide quality education to students across the state.

PUBLIC SAFETY

Public Defenders. Texas is struggling to uphold the constitutional rights of the people accused of crimes who cannot afford an attorney. Because maintaining a public defender’s office is cost prohibitive, these offices are rare across the state. Texas largely relies on the private criminal defense bar to fill the gaps in many rural communities because of the high cost associated with maintaining a public defender’s office. As a result, the financial burden of providing defense attorneys falls primarily on counties rather than the state. There are approximately 80 public defender offices across Texas, with many having been established just in the last twenty years.

Upholding the constitution should be a priority for state lawmakers, and ideally the state could use a small percent of its budget to ensure funding for public defenders’ offices. During this Legislative Session, Texas had an opportunity to strengthen its indigent defense and fund building out the infrastructure needed to better serve rural communities. Unfortunately, most of the legislation aimed at supporting indigent defense failed to become law. In the next session, it will be a priority of mine to see more funding committed to this critical and constitutionally required area of the justice system.

Barriers to Justice. Texas has one of the largest prison populations in both the nation and the world, meaning barriers to reentry affect millions of people across the state. These barriers include challenges in obtaining basic identification documents, securing stable housing, accessing education, finding consistent employment, and addressing mental health or substance-use issues. Any period of incarceration, whether a few days in county jail or a multi-year prison sentence, can be profoundly disruptive. Expanding diversion programs and community-based alternatives to incarceration offers a way to reduce incarceration rates without compromising public safety. Doing so benefits individuals and families while also saving Texas taxpayers money. Ideally, the

Legislature can look to successful diversion programs in places like Travis County and the City of Dallas as models for statewide reform—finding common ground that leads to fewer prison sentences while keeping every Texan safe.

HEALTHCARE

Maternal Mortality. Nationally, Texas ranks near the bottom in its maternal mortality rate following a 56% rise in deaths from 2019 to 2022 — far outpacing an 11% rise nationwide in the same time period. This troubling trend maps across lines of racial disparity, with Black women in Texas 2.5 times more likely to die from pregnancy and childbirth than white women. The Legislature’s attempt to remedy this situation in SB 31 (“The Life of the Mother Act”) did not go far enough. It does not include protection for physicians addressing a full range of impairments to bodily function, nor does it completely protect them from civil penalties in all cases. This could function as continuing restriction on a doctor’s ability to act. Furthermore, SB 31 bill does nothing to allow physicians to perform abortions if a pregnancy is diagnosed with fetal anomalies, or if the pregnancy is the result of sexual assault or incest.

The Legislature also failed to make meaningful progress on Texas’ infant mortality rate, which is slightly higher than the national average at 5.8 infant deaths per 1,000 live births, compared to 5.6 nationally. This statistic varies widely by community, reflecting economic and racial disparities in healthcare and food access. Texas also suffers from a shortage of obstetrics and gynecology physicians, with a 16% decrease in the number of applicants to OBGYN residency programs. Texas also suffers from severe gaps in healthcare data collection.

These glaring issues can be overcome through study, investment, and accountability for partners throughout state government. Among the proposals which I brought forward this Session, would raise again in the future, include a study to determine the need for future inpatient psychiatric treatment beds to combat our statewide competency restoration waitlist crisis. Additionally, we should be tracking heat-related deaths in state facilities to close widening gaps in health outcomes. Data in Texas should also be collected across rural and urban divides, language barriers, and racial categories to ensure our state can adequately prepare for all challenges Texans are facing.

Mental Health & Substance Abuse. Texas consistently ranks as one of the states in the country with the lowest per-capita funding for mental health services. 246 of 254 counties are wholly or partly designated as “mental health professional shortage areas.” **Texas also remains the state in the nation with the highest uninsured population overall.**

All Texans deserve access to mental health, and treatment cannot be viewed as less serious or important than other health needs. The state continues to make progress on this front by increasing funding for **Children’s Community Mental Health, Community Mental Health Grants, and Mental Health State Hospitals.** However, significant barriers persist. The state should continue increasing funds for mental health services, invest in the mental health workforce pipeline, and cut red tape that makes it harder for providers to accept insurance.

Substance abuse also continues to be a significant challenge in Texas. We are trending in the wrong direction, with the state’s **drug poisoning deaths increasing more than 75% in the past five years.** This Session, funding decreased for Substance Abuse Services and Adult Community Mental Health programs. Next session, my focus will be on improving the state’s partnership with local governments by supporting local diversion programs to connect individuals to treatment, and decriminalizing fentanyl test strips.



Senator Eckhardt stands with constituents for a legislative advocacy training day.

LEGISLATIVE ACCOMPLISHMENTS



MAJOR ACCOMPLISHMENTS

This Legislative Session, over 11,000 bills were filed. Of that number, only about 30% passed. Nevertheless, many policies can move forward via other mechanisms, including budget riders, amendments, or rule changes.

Here are some important things our office accomplished in the 89th Legislative Session.

SB 365 (Academic Fresh Start). Current law allows undergraduate students seeking to reenroll in college to waive their previous academic record if their coursework was completed 10 or more years ago—a **fresh start**. SB 365 amends the Education Code to authorize a postsecondary institution to choose to additionally disregard academic course credits or grades earned by an applicant between 5 and 10 years before the starting date of the semester in which the applicant seeks to enroll.

So far fourteen colleges across Texas have adopted the policy with more coming online every week. The early adopters include the University of Houston System, University of North Texas System, Howard College in San Angelo, Blinn College in Brenham, and even out in Nacogdoches at Stephen F. Austin University, among others.

HB 1105 (EMS Tuition Exemption). Amends the Education Code to provide for a tuition and laboratory fee exemption for a student of a public institution of higher education who is enrolled in one or more courses offered as part of an emergency medical services curriculum and is employed as a paramedic by a political subdivision of the state.

HB 2415: Officer Lewis “Andy” Traylor Memorial Highway

House Bill 2415 amends the Transportation Code to designate a portion of Farm-to-Market Road 969 in Travis County as the Senior Police Officer Lewis “Andy” Traylor Memorial Highway, in addition to any other designation.

SCR 4: Designating Pflugerville as the Trail Capitol of Texas

Pflugerville has the highest number of public trails per capita in Texas. They boast 71.2 miles of public trails, with over 94% of residents living within half a mile of a trail. With this designation, Pflugerville can officially promote itself as a community with abundant trails and a strong connection to the outdoors.

SCR 5: Renaming the gymnasium for the Texas School for the Deaf after Robert Rives

Founded in 1856, the Texas School for the Deaf (TSD) is the oldest continuously operating public school in Texas. Mr. Rives was the first-ever alumnus to graduate from and return to TSD as an educator, starting the first TSD football team and teaching for 42 years.

LEGISLATION IN FOCUS

Budget Wins:

The Senate Finance Committee adopted a budget rider to rightsize funding for Marbridge Villa. This will bring in nearly \$4 million in state and federal dollars over the next biennium, so Marbridge can continue to serve individuals with developmental disabilities in our community.

Critical Defense:

Religious Freedom. Although the law requiring the 10 Commandments to be posted in every classroom was ultimately passed, more than a dozen school districts are challenging its constitutionality in court. Part of their argument references the amendments I offered on the Senate floor to allow for the posting of other religious documents. A government that values one religious denomination over all others is in direct conflict with our Constitution.

Local Attacks. I am of the firm belief that because local governments are most directly accountable to their electorate, they should largely be left to operate as they deem most appropriate. Nevertheless, each legislative session, lawmakers from other parts of the State seek to undermine the will of the voters in our community. **Fortunately, some of the most overt attacks on the City of Austin and Travis County failed** thanks to teamwork with our local leaders and state representatives in our delegation. **Legislation blocked includes:**

- ★ Overturn Project Connect
- ★ Preempt an aquifer storage and recovery project
- ★ Dissolve the City of Austin and make it a district under state control
- ★ Imposing restrictions on the flow of Congress Avenue
- ★ Prohibit the establishment of public banks
- ★ Remove protections for Ashe-juniper trees.

All of these bills failed to account for the interests and specific needs of our community.

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USEFUL LINKS

- Tax Assessor - <https://tax-office.traviscountytx.gov/>
- Voter Registration - <https://vrrequest.sos.texas.gov/VoterApplication/ConfirmStatusEN>
- DPS Driver's License - <https://www.dps.texas.gov/section/driver-license>
- Passport/District Clerk - <https://www.traviscountytx.gov/district-clerk/passport>

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Sarah Eckhardt
TEXAS STATE SENATOR



Meet Your Senator

With deep roots in Austin and Travis County, Senator Eckhardt has dedicated her life to public service for two decades.

After receiving an LBJ School Master of Public Affairs and law degree from the University of Texas at Austin, Senator Eckhardt worked for eight years as an Assistant Travis County Attorney. In 2006, she was elected to represent Precinct 2 on the Commissioners Court, and in 2014 was elected as Travis County Judge.

With her leadership, Senator Eckhardt addresses the major issues that face Travis County residents. She works to ensure that our community is effective, efficient, fair, and minimally intrusive – focusing on the real challenges Texans face.