

COMMITTEES:  
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## THE SENATE OF TEXAS



**LOIS W. KOLKHORST**

STATE SENATOR  
DISTRICT 18

### **FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE**

March 9, 2021

### **Senator Kolkhorst Drafts Statewide COVID-19 Pandemic Response, Calls for Transparency and Legislative Oversight**

AUSTIN - With a year passing since the COVID-19 pandemic began in Texas, State Senator Lois W. Kolkhorst (R-Brenham) as Chair of the Senate Committee on Health & Human Services has filed a legislative package to improve the state's COVID-19 pandemic response, calling for more transparency and increased legislative oversight for any future event.

"One year ago, the first case of the novel coronavirus (COVID-19) was reported in Texas. Lawmakers and the public alike have watched as government agencies responded with sweeping statewide policies to reduce the impact of the virus. Sometimes these measures struggled to find the right balance between public health and our individual rights," said Kolkhorst. "We must now utilize the lessons learned over the past year to improve the state's response to any future health event. That means increasing transparency and public oversight. This legislative package will deliver more public access and accountability for our elected officials at the local and state levels, so that every Texan is more involved in the decision making process," said Kolkhorst.

#### *SB 966 & SB 967--Increasing Oversight*

SB 966 establishes a new legislative oversight board to be used when any "public health disaster" is declared. The Legislative Public Health Oversight Board must provide legislative approval for the continuation of a public health disaster past the current statutory limit of 60 days. This places more oversight with those elected directly by the public, rather than exclusively in the hands of unelected agency bureaucrats.

SB 967 offers similar oversight at a local level, requiring the approval of locally elected officials (municipal or county) to grant permission for a local public health authority to continue past the first initial eight days from when an order is issued.

#### *SB 968, SB 969 & SB 970--Improving Pandemic Response and Data Transparency*

Good public policy decisions require good data. That's why SB 968 modernizes and streamlines our state's response to any future public health disaster or emergency. The bill requires new planning and preparation requirements, defines the expected roles of health and disaster related agencies during a pandemic, and clarifies the specific and limited powers of the Commissioner of State Health Services. The bill also establishes a new "Office of Chief State Epidemiologist" to better coordinate and facilitate our state's preparedness and response to infectious diseases.

Similarly, SB 969 provides increased transparency for the data that is both reported to the state, and by the state. The bill requires the Department of State Health Services (DSHS) to ensure that all data is reported electronically, and delivered in a timely and accurate manner. Further, the bill directs DSHS to establish a "quality assurance division" and ensure that critical data is always reported to the public. To streamline and speed up the flow of vital information, the bill also requires DSHS to standardize the sharing of information needed during a disaster response.

To increase efficiency before the next health disaster strikes, SB 970 repeals defunct programs, unfunded mandates and useless reporting requirements that are currently required of the DSHS. By repealing these requirements, SB 970 will free up DSHS resources to better focus on the mission of improving and protecting public health and keeping the public informed. ###