

The 2021 Legislative Session: Weeks Two-Three (January 17 – January 30)

Once a bill is written, its formal consideration requires the signature of one or more legislators. With these “sponsors” (and the one signing first as “prime sponsor”), the bill is introduced. Depending on the subject matter, it’s then referred to a [standing committee](#) for further review. Whether a bill gets a public hearing and is voted on by that committee is largely a decision of the committee chair.

Although a bill can be introduced at any time during session, if it is to continue towards becoming a law, it must be voted out of the committee to which it is originally referred by Feb. 15 — the deadline under the legislature’s self-imposed “[cutoff calendar](#).”

Comments on proposed legislation are welcome any time following a bill’s introduction, but typically begins in earnest if and when a committee schedules it for public hearing. Among the bills heard within the past two weeks:

- [HB 1091](#) – **Clean fuel standards.** Dr. Ashlin Mountjoy, co-chair of the Public Health Committee, submitted written testimony on behalf of WAFP in support of this legislation as a way to improve health, reduce racial disparities, and address the threat of climate change. The bill has now been approved by the House Environment & Energy Committee and is before the House Appropriations Committee.
- [HB 1095](#) – **Exempting COVID-19 relief funds from state taxes.** This bill is before the legislature at the request of the State Department of Revenue. It has already passed the House and is expected to quickly pass the Senate with little, if any, opposition.
- [HB 1152](#) – **Restructuring public health.** Intended to improve the efficiency and help “depoliticize” the state’s public health system, there is also concern that this bill will leave many in local public health without a voice, and their residents less well-served. Dr. Mountjoy is among the stakeholders on an ad-hoc work group convened by Rep. Marcus Riccelli (D-Spokane) and Sen. June Robinson (D-Everett) to work on this bill and [HB 1110](#).
- [HB 1181](#) – **Preventing suicide among veterans and military members.** Part of this bill as introduced would mandate that primary care providers query patients as to their military or veteran status and provide certain follow-up. In testimony WAFP objected generally to the placement of a practice standard into statute, and to the uncertain way in which this one in particular was written. Rep. Tina Orwall (D-Des Moines), the bill’s prime sponsor, agreed to amend the bill to remove the mandate.
- [HB 1196](#) – **Audio-only telemedicine.** Current law requires health plans to reimburse for telemedicine but explicitly excludes audio-only telephone. Covered during the pandemic under an emergency order of the insurance commissioner, this bill would remove the statutory exclusion. WAFP is supporting the legislation in collaboration with WSMA.
- [HB 1368](#) – **Additional COVID-19 relief.** This is an agreed-upon bill being fast-tracked through the legislative process. Money is directed to education, housing, and other economic

assistance, and health care. Included is \$618 million for public health and \$6 million for grants to rural health clinics, federally qualified health centers, and free health clinics.

- [SB 5155](#) – **Prejudgment interest on tort claims, including malpractice.** WAFP is among a large group, including WSMA and WSHA, opposing this bill. It would considerably increase costs associated with adverse judgements — for physicians who are party to the suits and for the health care system more broadly.
- [SB 5246](#) – **Increasing Medicaid rates for primary care providers.** A similar rate increase passed the legislature in 2020 but was vetoed by Gov. Jay Inslee due to the uncertain fiscal impact of COVID-19. WAFP testified in strong support again this year, using the opportunity to highlight the value of primary care and the need to otherwise increase primary care investment. Any rate increase will ultimately be determined in deliberations over the state’s 2021-23 operating budget.

WAFP will also be opposing [SB 5222](#), which is set for public hearing on Monday, Feb. 1. It requires health insurers to reimburse advanced registered nurse practitioners at the same rate as physicians for the same services. Testimony will be given by WAFP past president Dr. Jeremia Bernhardt.

As with any legislation, there are several options for any WAFP member wishing to reinforce with legislators the Academy’s position on these bills. Among the easiest is the online form developed by the legislature which allows anyone to weigh in with just a few clicks. Links to this form, and other information about contacting legislators, is available [here](#).