

Lalani's Legislative Letter

88th Legislative Session Update

Greetings!

The final day of the session was Monday, May 29th and is known as sine die, Latin for “without day,” meaning that the legislature is adjourning indefinitely with no day set to reconvene. Under normal circumstances, the legislature would not meet again until the start of the 89th Texas Legislative Session in January, 2025. Governor Abbott called an immediate Special Session to deal with property taxes and border security issues. While the special session means my staff and I continue to be very busy, I wanted to take the time to share an update on how the legislative session went for HD 76.

First, I would like to say thank you for your support through out the session. This has been one of the most remarkable experiences of my life. The best and most important part of it is serving all of you.

Remember this is your Capitol. You are the most important part of what happens here. Come and see it, get involved, make your voice heard.

Blessings,

Rep. Suleman Lalani, M.D.

Serving HD 76 & Texas in 8 Bullet Points

During the 88th Legislative session, Team Lalani accomplished:

- **2 Budget Riders** on the Appropriations bill
- **Authored 57 individual pieces of legislation** and jointly authored, co-authored, sponsored, or co-sponsored **another 96 pieces of legislation**
- **36 pieces** of legislation sent to the **Governor's Desk** for signature, with **all 36 bills signed into law** with **effective dates**
- Assigned to three committees: **Higher Education, Natural Resources, and Resolutions Calendars**

- Caucus Leadership Positions: **Steering Committee** of the House Democratic Caucus; **Founding member** of the Asian American Pacific Islander Caucus and co-recipient of the **AAPI Caucus “Freshman Legislator of the Year” Award**
 - Other Caucus Memberships: **Technology and Innovation Caucus**, Texas Energy and Climate Caucus, Texas Water Caucus, Women’s Health Caucus
 - Tangible legislative successes on all personal legislative priorities, including healthcare, education, mental health, and technology, except common sense firearm policies. Used my position to amplify the voices of all those calling for the policies Texans want and need to end the personal tragedies and public health crisis of gun violence
 - Championed and defended diversity and the rights of all Texans, holding up HD 76 as a model of what Texas could be
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The Texas Budget at a Glance

The only legislation that the Texas Legislature is constitutionally required to pass each session is the General Appropriations Bill. It is always known as **HB 1**. Under the budget agreed upon by the 88th legislature, the state will spend \$144 billion over the next two years. Remember, this legislative session occurred while Texas enjoyed an unprecedented budget surplus. Despite my best efforts, and the best efforts of so many of my colleagues, the legislature could have done much more for Texas and Texans than it did.

The following is a brief highlight (and admittedly low points of this session’s budget):

Higher Education: The legislature created the \$3 billion Texas University Fund, which is good for the University of Houston - Sugar Land, and allocated \$628 million for community college financial reform, which is good for Houston Community College, Texas State Technical College, and Wharton County Junior. As part of their funding, public colleges and universities agreed to freeze tuition through 2025, which is good for everybody. Finally, reflecting my personal and professional familiarity with health care, I introduced a rider to **HB 1** allocating \$5 million for the **Family Practice Residency Program**, helping Texas retain general practitioners and primary care physicians. It’s a small amount, but it is a start.

Public Employee Compensation: Texas ranks 30th in state employee salaries and 40th for teacher retirement benefits, neither of which is something to be proud of. The 88th legislature did somewhat well for the first group and rather less well for the second. State employees will receive a 5% pay raise each of the next two fiscal years. Retired teachers will receive a one-time payment of either \$7,500 or \$2,400, depending on their age. If approved by voters, they will also receive a one-time cost of living increase of 2-6%. This is better than nothing but, again, with a record budget surplus we should have done better taking care of those who take care of us.

Public Education: This was a notably bleak spot in the budget, seeing no significant new appropriations for our children, our teachers, or our schools. The basic allotment remains at \$6,160 per student which, at a time of concerning inflation, means the legislature effectively cut school funding. The only notable new appropriations for public education this session come not from **HB 1** but from **HB 3**, which gives schools \$10 per student and a flat \$15,000 for campus security.

Mental Health: Texas ranks last in mental healthcare. Fortunately, 2023 was the year when state government started getting serious about mental health. **HB 1** includes more than a quarter billion dollars for various initiatives such as community mental health grants, increasing capacity and offsetting rising costs for state-supported living

centers and mental health hospitals, establishing mobile youth crisis outreach teams, and expanding programs for at-risk children. Texas could have done more and needs to do more, but this is progress.

Maternal Health: *HB 1* provides \$75.4 billion to enable the Texas Medicaid Program to extend postpartum coverage to 12 months. Texas has a problem with maternal health and maternal mortality. A broader, more systemic approach is needed to truly change that, but this is a genuine step in the right direction.

Property Tax Relief: The legislature allocated \$17.6 billion for property tax relief. The special session has delivered additional relief by adjusting the funding mechanism for public schools to shift burden away from local property taxes and onto the state. While relief is welcome, this also raises concerns because the state government has a track record of not taking seriously its constitutional obligation to adequately fund public schools.

Energy, Environment and Climate: *HB 1* allocates more than \$2 billion for various water infrastructure and flood prevention projects. In the face of our state's rapidly growing population and economy as well as the challenges of climate change, this is less than needed but is still helpful. In response to ongoing concerns regarding the Texas electrical grid, a \$5 billion Texas Energy Fund will be created to spur new electric generation and power plant development. As with the special session's property tax relief, this otherwise positive development comes with long term concerns. Elevating politics over technological and economic trends, the fund cannot be used for projects related to renewable energy, batteries, or emissions capture.

Laloni Budget Riders: In addition to the rider providing additional funding for the *Family Practice Residency Program*, I also was able to provide a funding line in *HB 1* that would facilitate Texas's participation in the *Strategic National Stockpile for Health Emergency Preparedness*. When federal funding comes available, my rider gives Texas the option to pull that funding down to create a stockpile of medical items, such as PEP and pharmaceuticals as preparation, against future pandemics, health crises, or natural disasters. It does this by creating the necessary administrative and regulatory framework to enable our state to secure federal matching funds for creating and maintaining such a stockpile.

Other riders that I filed that did not make it into *HB 1* include:

- Adding \$5 million to expand GME slots
- Adding \$10 million to the Physician Education Loan Repayment Program
- Adding \$1 million to the Rural Resident Physician Grant Program

This trio of budget riders highlight my commitment to better health care in Texas by working to encourage the physicians we educate in our medical schools to stay and practice here in Texas.

My Legislative Priorities

Before the beginning of the legislative session, I identified five areas as my personal legislative priorities: healthcare, sensible firearm policies, education, mental health, and technology. I am proud that I was able to deliver something in each area which I believe will make a difference for HD 76 residents.

Healthcare: As a physician, I've seen the consequences of violence against healthcare workers and know it impacts not only the workers themselves but their ability to care for Texans. I was proud to be a joint author of *HB 3548* and sponsor its Senate equivalent, *SB 840*. These bills make assaulting on-duty hospital personnel a 3rd degree felony. I amended *SB 840* to include property that hospitals own or lease, such as parking lots, sidewalks, and garages.

When I came to the Texas House, I was determined to make a difference in the way Texans access healthcare. I accomplished this with a couple of different pieces of legislation. First, I filed **HB 1144**, otherwise known as the **Texas Way**. This bill would expand Medicaid in a way that makes sense for Texas. And while it didn't receive a hearing this session, I am more determined than ever to work on the issue during future sessions.

I also became coauthor on **HB 12**. This piece of legislation would allow people who have given birth to keep their Medicaid benefits through the first 12 months post-partum. Texas remains the state with the highest rate of maternal mortality in the nation and this bill would help to give new mothers the start they deserve.

Lastly, I worked with other members on **HB 54**, which increases the amount of social security income Medicaid residents of long-term care facilities receive for personal needs. This bill matters not only for public health but for the personal dignity of our Texas seniors. While Texas needs to do better at controlling the costs of long term care, bills such as this one are an important part of the equation, too.

Sensible Firearm Policies: This session, I filed six common sense gun bills which would have more closely monitored the sale and transfer of firearms, prohibited sex offenders from being able to purchase firearms, protected children from accessing firearms, and penalized those giving children access to firearms. Sadly, even in a session that saw the one year anniversary of the Robb Elementary shooting in Uvalde, the Allen Outlet Mall shooting, and other mass shootings around the country, none of my bills received a hearing. Texans deserve better. I know I am doing the right thing, What I hear from constituents and read in poll numbers only confirms it. I will continue fighting for common sense gun legislation.

Education: I authored, jointly authored, or sponsored several pieces of legislation which will have a positive impact on education and higher education. **HB 5330** increases Fort Bend ISD students' access to Houston Community College and expands the Houston Community College System to make it more accessible to those students. **HB 4005** also increases accessibility as well as affordability of higher education by creating the Texas Competency-Based Education Grant Program for competence-based education and workforce programs, giving Texans an opportunity to translate their real world experience into college credit. **SB 294** helps keep Texas students safe by expanding the types of medications which can be kept on public school campuses to treat respiratory illnesses such as asthma.

HB 1212 prohibits a public school district, from requiring documentation from a clergy member or other religious leader in order to excuse a student's absence from school for a holy day. It also requires a school to accept a note from a parent as acceptable documentation for such an absence. This is especially important as Texas expands its diversity and many Texans celebrate religious holidays other than the traditionally excused ones. I am proud to joint author this legislation and am happy to announce it has been signed by the Governor and is effective for this coming school year.

In addition to this bill, I also coauthored **HB 1883**, which ensure that exams such as the STAAR test and end-of-course exams are not scheduled on dates of holy days or periods of observation. Testing dates are routinely scheduled on religious holy days, putting certain students in the position of having to choose between practicing the traditions of their faith, such as fasting and prayer, or scoring well on high-stakes exams. This bill passed unanimously from the House and Senate and now is sitting on the Governor's desk for signature.

I joint authored **HB 104** which would provide loan repayment assistance to nursing students who opt to work in one of the many long-term care facilities in Texas. As life expectancy for Texans continues to grow, it is incumbent upon us to make sure that we have the workforce to meet the growing needs. This bill did not advance, but rest assured, I will continue to work on this important issue.

Lastly, I was honored to support public school teacher pay raises by coauthoring **HB 1548**. This bill would have provided a \$15,000 a year pay raise for teachers across Texas. It is imperative that we compensate teachers for their work in a way that is meaningful. Texas cannot continue to underfund on teacher salaries. Like many other

efforts in the House to raise educator pay scales, this one failed. However, every time a raise came on the floor for a vote, I voted to increase wages. I will always side with educators on this issue.

Mental Healthcare: As I have said, Texas has a major mental healthcare problem, caused in part by lack of access to services which is, in turn, driven by a shortage of providers. I was proud to sponsor ***SB 532*** creating the Mental Health Loan Repayment Assistance Program. As the name suggests, the program helps keep mental health professionals in Texas by providing assistance paying student loans in exchange for recipients practicing in Texas for 3 years. I also amended ***SB 532*** to include a requirement that new student campus tours at public colleges and universities must include a stop at the campus's mental health clinic. This ensures students have the knowledge they need before a mental health crisis occurs.

Technology: Technology advances so quickly it is difficult for laws to keep up with new uses and misuses. I did my part to keep the 88th legislature on top of what Texans want and need. ***HB 2060*** creates an appointed AI Advisory Council to oversee the growth and regulation in Artificial Intelligence in Texas. Understanding how fundamental AI will become to our state's economy and workforce, I amended this bill to require a study be conducted which would allow the Texas Workforce Commission to create a training program for the use of Artificial Intelligence. ***SB 768*** protects Texans from cyber crime and fraud by shortening the timeline in which companies must notify the Attorney General and consumers after a data breach involving personal data.

I authored ***HB 4897***, which cracks down on the deceptive practice of online impersonation also known as "catfishing". This bill was voted out of the House. It didn't advance in the Senate due to time running out on the session. I will make this a priority next session.

Standing for All Texans

HD 76 is the most demographically diverse district in the state. Because of our diversity and how proud I am of it, I couldn't stand idly by while the dignity and rights of so many Texans were denigrated or attacked. I knew I had an obligation in this regard. Diversity is not only one HD 76's defining characteristics, it is a key source of our strength, and I am honored to represent you here in Austin.

In addition to standing up for the rights of all Texans and for diversity and inclusion, my position on the Resolutions Calendars gave me a special opportunity. Through resolutions and proclamations, this committee creates a record of the importance and good work of different communities, groups, and organizations for Texas.

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Whenever possible, I used this position to celebrate and advance the great diversity of HD 76, Fort Bend County, and Greater Houston. Some of the organizations and events that I officially recognized from the House floor:

Hypertrophic Cardiomyopathy Awareness Day, Texas Muslim Capitol Day, Exchange Club Day, Desi Day of Action, Pakistan Day at the State Capitol, Ramadan, Nowruz, Alzheimer's Association Advocacy Day, World Autism Day, Eid al-Fitr, Emgage Texas Emerging Leaders Program, Mother's Day, Father's Day, Sindhi Saqafat, Fort Bend County Day at the State Capitol, Bangladesh Day, the Ibn Sina Foundation, Lunar New Year, Rise AAPI Day at the Capitol, Sikh Baisakhi and ALS Awareness Month, BAPS Day of Service, and Nepalese Day.

The list is long and distinguished. I am honored to have had a part in recognizing these organizations, programs and to honor holidays important to so many in HD 76.

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