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Budget hearings to focus on healthcare, education

MICHAEL R. WICKLINE
ARKANSAS DEMOCRAT-GAZETTE

The state's Medicaid, corrections and education programs are expected to be among the key issues during the Arkansas Legislative Council and Joint Budget Committee's budget hearings for state agencies that started Tuesday, legislative leaders said.

Budget hearings for state agencies are scheduled to run until Oct. 29 in advance of the Arkansas General Assembly's regular session that starts Jan. 11. During budget hearings, lawmakers pepper officials of state agencies with questions about their operations and make recommendations on the agen-

cies' spending authority for lawmakers to consider in the regular session.

State Sen. Josh Bryant, R-Rogers, who is a co-chair of the Joint Budget Committee, said Gov. Sarah Huckabee Sanders "wants controlled spending" and "not to have major increases."

Among other things, lawmakers will want to know "where do we have room for tax cuts," he said in an interview.

House Democratic leader Andrew Collins of Little Rock said Tuesday that healthcare, education, filling gaps from federal budget cuts, adjusting to the executive branch pay plan implemented in July 2025 and the budget process will be the major issues of the budget hearings.

The budget hearings for the state Department of Corrections are scheduled for Oct. 14, for the state's colleges and universities on Oct. 15, for the Department of Education on Oct. 28, and the Department of Human Services on Oct. 29, according to the General Assembly's website.

Sanders, a Republican, is scheduled to release her proposed general revenue budget for fiscal 2028 on Nov. 6, three days after the general election in which she seeks reelection to her second four-year term. Fiscal 2028 begins July 1, 2027, and ends June 30, 2028.

In the fiscal session that adjourned in late April, the Legislature enacted a

general revenue budget for fiscal 2027 totaling \$6.7 billion — an increase of about \$211 million from fiscal 2026. Fiscal 2027 started July 1, 2026, and will end June 30, 2027.

In the special session during the first week of May, the Legislature and the governor enacted a two-tenths of a percentage point reduction in the state's top individual and corporate income tax rates that the department projected will reduce state general revenue by about \$191.8 million in fiscal 2027 and \$144.8 million in fiscal 2028.

Following the Trump administration's rejection of Arkansas' request to extend the federal waiver authorizing

its Medicaid expansion program for an additional five years, Arkansas has asked for a two-year extension of the program to allow legislators to create and implement a replacement for the program.

Under what was originally known as the private option, Arkansas buys coverage for expansion enrollees through private insurance plans, with the state Medicaid program paying the premium and providing additional payments that reduce or eliminate enrollees' out-of-pocket expenses for medical care.

The state's options for the Medicaid expansion program may include
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Garland County Election Commission Chairman/Elections Coordinator Gene Haley, left, tests one of the more than 100 touchscreen devices Wednesday that voters will use to mark their ballots in the Nov. 3 general election. (The Sentinel-Record/Thomas Buckman)

Garland County tests election equipment as early voting nears

DAVID SHOWERS
THE SENTINEL-RECORD

The Garland County Election Commission tested voting equipment Wednesday in advance of the Nov. 3 general election.

Arranged in rows and columns, the 112 touchscreens, which will be used for the 13 days of early voting that starts Oct. 19 and on election day, filled the Election Commission Building.

Poll workers tested them for accuracy, making sure the machines correctly interpret what the voter is marking on the screen. The dozens of scanners that will tabulate the vote were also tested, making sure their counts were accurate.

Monday is the deadline under the state election code for county election boards to test their equipment and conduct a public

test. A touchscreen and scanner were set up for public demonstration Wednesday, but Election Commission Chairman/Elections Coordinator Gene Haley said people rarely take the opportunity to see how the equipment works.

The machines came from the county's participation in the program piloting new equipment from Election Systems and Software, the Omaha-based company the state selected as its election services vendor ahead of the 2016 elections. Haley said ES&S has reprogrammed the equipment a few times over the last decade.

"There really isn't anything better on the market," he said. "We looked at other vendors. Most of them are going to a similar look."

He has called the touchscreens ballot

marking devices, often describing them as a "fancy ink pen."

"All it does is mark the ballot," Haley said Wednesday.

Allowing voters to see a hard copy of their selections before they cast their ballot sets them apart from the ES&S iVotronic machines the county conducted elections on prior to 2016. Prone to problems such as overheating, the iVotronics' limitations were blamed for extended wait times in the May 2014 preferential primaries. They also did not allow voters to see a hard copy of their choices prior to casting their ballot. They county had more than 50 iVotronics.

"Now they get to verify what they print before they cast their ballot," Haley said of the voter verified audit trail the county's

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Mountain Pine School District Superintendent Tish Reed speaks with The Sentinel-Record during an interview in her office on Aug. 25. The Mountain Pine School Board voted unanimously Tuesday to place Reed on paid administrative leave and appoint Dana Janush as interim superintendent. (The Sentinel-Record/Brandon Smith)

Mountain Pine board places Reed on paid leave, names interim superintendent

BRANDON SMITH
THE SENTINEL-RECORD

The Mountain Pine School Board placed Superintendent Tish Reed on paid administrative leave Tuesday night and appointed Dana Janush as interim superintendent, but board members have not publicly said what led to the decision.

The board took the action after spending about 35 minutes in executive session during a special called meeting to discuss the superintendent's contract.

When members returned to open session at about 7:25 p.m., they unanimously approved a motion placing Reed on administrative leave effective immediately. The board then appointed Janush, the district's director of federal programs, interim superintendent, also effective immediately.

No reason for Reed's leave was given during the public portion of the meeting, and board members held no discussion of the decision before adjourning.

Board President Clayton Miller told *The Sentinel-Record* in a text message Wednesday that the board
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Audubon Society president talks bird conservation ahead of festival

FELISHA BUTLER
THE SENTINEL-RECORD

The inaugural Birding Festival of the South kicks off today and Ron Kew, president of the Garland County Audubon Society, detailed the public's role in bird conservation at the Hot Springs National Park Rotary Club meeting on Wednesday.

Prior to Kew's program, Bill Solleder, marketing director for Visit Hot Springs, told Rotarians that registrants from 30 states are attending the festival, which is sponsored by Oaklawn.

Kew said he is impressed with the birding festival's sold-out status, but some members of the local Audubon society were not convinced the event would be a success in the beginning

since Hot Springs is not home to an unusual bird species.

"It's not just people who are knowledgeable about birds," Kew said of the festival's keynote speakers, "but they've got people that could entertain in different ways. They've got people that are musicians, that sing about birds. They work with the documentary film festival to have some films about birds."

"So they took, what I think, was a negative and that we don't have the great birds like they had in the Biggest Week in American Birding, but they made it so there's going to be enough entertainment that people would want to come."

Preceding Bridge Street
See **ROTARY**, Page 3A



Ron Kew, president of the Garland County Audubon Society, speaks to the Hot Springs National Park Rotary Club on Wednesday at DoubleTree by Hilton Hot Springs. (The Sentinel-Record/Felisha Butler)

Trump Medicare rebate excludes millions, draws criticism as a political stunt

FATIMA HUSSEIN
THE ASSOCIATED PRESS

WASHINGTON — President Donald Trump says his administration will make one-time payments of \$90 per person to help more than 20 million Medicare enrollees pay for their Part B premiums. It will cost about \$2 billion.

Less than one-third of all Medicare recipients are eligible for the payments, which are expected to be sent out this week. Not eligible are roughly 35 million Medicare Advantage enrollees, millions of other people with disabilities and low-income Medicare recipients.

The election-year promise that the Republican president made over the weekend comes as the Nov. 3 midterms are fast approaching, with the cost of living and healthcare expenses among the top issues for voters.

Some questions and answers about the payouts:

WHO WILL BENEFIT?

Some 20.8 million people in the original Medicare Part B who are living in the United States, not receiving premium assistance from Medicaid or not paying an in-

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