CONGRESSIONAL SCHEDULE  NEW

Despite having adjourned for the August recess, both the House and Senate were called back to session briefly this week to give final approval to two FY10 supplemental appropriations bills: one to bolster state funding for Medicaid and education, the other to beef up border security.

Both chambers are now in recess: the Senate will return on Monday, September 13 and the House on Tuesday, September 14.

BUDGET & APPROPRIATIONS

AID BILL FOR STATES RECEIVES FINAL APPROVAL  UPDATED

Within hours of final congressional approval, President Obama on August 10 signed into law a $26.1 billion aid package for states (H.R. 1586). The measure, which will provide state governments with $16.1 billion for Medicaid assistance and $10 billion to avert layoffs of public school employees, was approved in the House by a largely party-line vote of 246 to 161; two Republicans voted yes and three Democrats voted no.

When the House adjourned for its six-week summer recess on July 30, there was little expectation that the Senate would be able to pass the bill last week. But after Senate Democrats secured two Republican votes for the measure—covering its costs through a combination of tax increases and spending cuts—the bill passed by a margin of 61 to 39. House Speaker Nancy Pelosi (D-CA) then called the House back into session on August 9 and 10 to consider it. As discussed below, the House also approved the $600 million border security funding bill.

Although the funding in H.R. 1586 will not directly benefit colleges and universities, reports the Chronicle of Higher Education, it will help states fill budget gaps and avert cuts to other areas,
including education. The publication adds that state legislatures in more than half of the states have already approved budgets anticipating that Congress would provide the added funding.

In addition, the bill includes a provision to keep states from reducing their support of public K-12 and higher education. The summary of the bill available from the Senate Democratic Policy Committee says:

“In order to receive an Education Jobs Fund grant, each State must provide assurance that State spending for both K-12 and higher education (measured separately) in fiscal year 2011 will be at or above either: (1) the fiscal year 2009 level (in aggregate or per pupil); (2) the same percentage share of the total State budget as in fiscal year 2010, or; (3) for states demonstrating especially dire fiscal conditions, the 2006 fiscal year aggregate dollar level or percentage share.”

EXTRA BORDER SECURITY FUNDING APPROVED  NEW

The Senate reconvened briefly on August 12 to approve a $600 million FY10 funding bill for increased border security (H.R. 6080). The bill was approved by unanimous consent, which meant Senators did not have to return to Washington for the vote. The measure, which had been approved by the House on August 10, was signed into law today by the President.

Senator Charles Schumer (D-NY), chairman of the Senate Immigration Subcommittee, said in a prepared statement, “No doubt, we need to comprehensively reform our broken immigration system, and this plan is a first step in that process.”

EXECUTIVE BRANCH

ASSOCIATIONS REQUEST CLARIFICATION ON STUDENT HEALTH PLANS  NEW

AAU and 12 other higher education organizations yesterday sent a letter to Health and Human Services Secretary Kathleen Sebelius and White House Office of Health Reform Director Nancy-Ann DeParle requesting regulatory clarification to ensure that colleges and universities can continue to offer students low-cost, high-quality health insurance under the Patient Protection and Affordable Care Act enacted earlier this year.

The letter is a follow-up to a meeting that representatives from AAU, the American Council on Education, and several other associations had with Ms. DeParle in June. The letter asks for clarification that student health insurance plans meet the “minimum essential coverage” standard related to the new law’s individual mandate to purchase health insurance. The letter also seeks clarification about the application of certain insurance market reforms to these student health plans.

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