

Canada – United States
Inter-Parliamentary Group
Canadian Section



Groupe interparlementaire
Canada – États-Unis
Section canadienne

Report of the Canada–United States Inter-Parliamentary Group)

Council of State Governments National Conference

Raleigh, North Carolina, United States of America

From December 6 to 9, 2023

Report

Delegation Members and Staff

From 6-9 December 2023, Senator Michael MacDonald, Co-Chair of the Canadian Section of the Canada–United States Inter-Parliamentary Group (IPG), led a delegation of parliamentarians at the Council of State Governments (CSG) National Conference in Raleigh, North Carolina. Senator Sharon Burey, Senator Julie Miville-Dechêne, the Hon. David McGuinty, M.P. and Mr. Simon-Pierre Savard-Tremblay, M.P. comprised the delegation of parliamentarians, accompanied by Lyla Malow, association secretary, and Marie Dumont, advisor, to the Canadian Section of the IPG.

The Objectives of the Canada–United States Inter-Parliamentary Group

The IPG aims to find points of convergence in respective national policies, to initiate dialogue on points of divergence, to encourage the exchange of information and to promote better understanding among legislators on shared issues of concern. Members of the IPG's Canadian Section meet regularly with their U.S. federal counterparts, and also attend meetings of state governors and legislators. In attending CSG National's Annual Meeting, members of the Canadian Section engaged with U.S. state senators and representatives, as well as provincial counterparts.

Conference Activities

The 2023 CSG National Conference offered numerous sessions about different public policy issues affecting the United States and Canada, as well as leadership workshops to provide legislators with skills development. Delegates participated in sessions that included such topics as communications during crises, the substance use crisis, government procurement, election security, property insurance in the context of a changing climate, strengthening democracy, the Inflation Reduction Act and combatting disinformation. These topics are explained in further detail below.

State Strategies to Respond to the Substance Use Crisis

Devin Lyall, Executive Director, Wilkes Recovery Revolution

- In 2021, there were more than 100,000 deaths in the United States from drug overdoses.
- People who are in recovery from substance abuse issues can contribute effectively to the workplace if they are supported.
- People with lived experience of substance abuse issues should be included in policy-making decisions about the issue and should be able to work in the recovery space.

Jay Chaudhary, Director of Division of Mental Health and Addiction, Indiana Family and Social Services Administration

- Indiana's behavioural health system has many issues, including that it is understaffed and underfunded with a non-transparent financing system. The speaker contended that the system is not responsive to the communities needs and is reactive rather than proactive.
- A study from Brookings demonstrates that while 67% of people with substance use disorders are men, approximately 76% of substance use disorder clinicians are women. Men will be part of the solution to treating substance use disorders.
- To help address the stigma surrounding substance use treatment, people who are part of the behavioural health workforce should be venerated and celebrated.

Marie Williams, Commissioner of Mental Health and Substance Abuse Services, Tennessee

- In 2021, more than 385,000 Tennessean adults were estimated to have a serious mental illness, and more than 1,139,000 Tennessean adults were estimated to have a substance use disorder.
- Tennessee, among many other U.S. states, has seen increases in the number of drug overdoses.
- To address the issue of the substance abuse crisis, programs in Tennessee include the following:
 - Treatment courts, which have increased in number from 49 a decade ago to the present 92. According to the speaker, three quarters of participants who complete a program assigned under the state's treatment court improve their employment and housing situation.
 - Creating Homes Initiative, which provides funding to support local agencies that provide housing opportunities.
 - Substance Abuse Prevention Coalitions, which are community-based initiatives to address issues such as binge drinking, tobacco use, and various drug uses. Tennessee funds 46 such coalitions.
 - Project Rural Recovery, which provides 10 underserved rural counties with access to two mobile substance use treatment clinics.
 - Certified Peer Recovery Specialists, who are more than 1,200 people who have lived experience of substance abuse and provide supervised peer support to people with substance abuse issues.
 - Regional Overdose Prevention Specialists, which is a program that trains people on addition, addresses stigma with seeking treatment and distributes naloxone. The program has documented that its interventions have saved more than 66,000 lives since October 2017.

Innovation Classroom: The Function of State Procurement

Shaquasia Barksdale, Partnership Coordinator, and Josh Descoteau, Cooperative Portfolio Manager, National Association of State Procurement Officials

- An objective for state procurement agencies should be to maximizing the power of the purse through public procurement core values. This session focused on tools for states to develop these core values and processes to achieve these core values.
- There is a general view that public procurement is a slow process. However, there is a responsibility for state procurement officials to be good stewards of taxpayer money and protect against corruption and collusion in politics.
- Public procurement is as the forefront of who gets decided to be eligible for state programs that focus on social responsibility, for example programs for small businesses and sustainability initiatives. Accordingly, the outcomes of public procurement decisions can affect small businesses and local organizations directly.
- There are different methodologies that allow for transparent and competitive for public procurement processes, such as requests for quotes, invitations to bid, requests for proposals etc.
- In contrast, problematic processes include the following such issues: piggybacking, which involves using an existing contract to acquire the same products or services at the same or lower price, without seeking additional bids for a contract; and sole sourcing, whereby two or more providers are able to provide the product or service, but one provider is chosen over the others.
- Public procurement can have ripple effects in the community. For example, public sector buyers can use procurement to improve working conditions by requiring products to be made with strict labour standards. Requiring environmental standards for goods purchased, and having conditions to require the support of social enterprises and small businesses are other ways that public procurement can benefit the community.

Steps States are Taking to Prepare for the 2024 Election

Molly Woon, Elections Director, Oregon Secretary of State

- Oregon has implemented several electoral reforms that have contributed to its success in achieving some of the highest voter turnout rates among all states. For example, Oregon is a state that conducts its voting entirely by voting by mail, and it is the first state to have implemented such a system.
- Staffing is a large issue in elections work. Recently, there has been a lot of turnover and retirement among workers. Staffing levels are below what they were ten years ago.
- While staffing remains an issue, the level of requests for public records from the public has increased significantly in recent years, requiring staff to respond to these requests.
- State election offices will have a big emphasis on ensuring that cyber security is a priority during the 2024 general elections.

Tom Hicks, Commissioner, United States Election Assistance Commission

- The U.S. Election Assistance Commission is a federal agency that was established 20 years ago. It offers many tools and resources to support states with administering elections. Initiatives and supports under this agency include the following:
 - Election Official Security Resources, which offer information on how to report threats and respond to challenges;
 - Election Assistance Commission Toolkits, which includes resources such as a book of best practices for election officials and an artificial intelligence toolkit;
 - Poll Worker Recruitment Days, which are outreach days in advance of elections that encourage people to seek employment as poll workers; and
 - Election Supporting Technology Evaluation Program, which evaluates the security and accessibility of certain election-supporting technologies.

Paul Pate, Secretary of State, Iowa

- Iowa was ranked within the top three states for effective election administration.
- Maintaining public confidence in elections is critical for a thriving democracy.
- In this era of misinformation, states must be offensive and defensive in addressing the issue. For example, Iowa's "Check the Source" campaign aims to provide information to citizens about election information that is trusted and verified.

The Impact of Extreme Weather on the Property Insurance Market

Donald Hornstein, Professor of Law, University of North Carolina School of Law

- Some private insurance companies have pulled back insurance coverage from fire and flood-prone areas in California, Florida and Louisiana, which demonstrates the need for alternative insurance providers.
- Non-profit insurance models can fill this gap. In North Carolina, a non-profit wind and hail insurer has successfully replaced private insurers. According to Dr. Hornstein, the non-profit insurer has received no lawsuits and has met 98% of its payouts.

Casey Tingle, Director, Louisiana Governor's Office of Homeland Security and Emergency Preparedness

- Louisiana has a large coastline that is vulnerable to natural disasters such as hurricanes. Because it is a working coast, relocating people from the coast to inland areas is not a viable option to address these vulnerabilities.
- More than 20 insurers in Louisiana have declared insolvency, which led to a 100% increase in the number of policies that needed to be met by the state's insurer of last resort. The insurance claims process has been litigious.

Joe Stanton, North Carolina Department of Public Safety's Division of Emergency Management, North Carolina

- Disaster mitigation efforts in North Carolina, such as improved building codes and removing trees that are close to buildings, has helped to reduce the number of declared disasters in the state.

Vicki Schmidt, Insurance Commissioner, Kansas

- Households that have experienced the effects of a natural disaster may struggle to meet some of the requirements to file an insurance claim, for example filing a claim online is difficult if you have lost your home. Policy-makers must consider these obstacles when designing the requirements to file insurance claims.
- Insurance commissioners have the responsibility to regulate the insurance industry for the state. Kansas is among a total of 11 states in the United States that have an elected insurance commissioner.

A Discussion on Strengthening Democracy

Steven Olikara, President, Bridge Entertainment Labs

- With the aim of building bridges among political opponents, it “is not rocket science, it is harder than that.”
- Implementing a mandatory national service of some sort, be it military or otherwise, could help to give citizens a sense of common ground. This would provide citizens with an obligation to greater society that could foster stronger communities.

Norman Ornstein, Emeritus Scholar, American Enterprise Institute

- Approximately 70% of Americans live in 15 U.S. states, which means that approximately 30% of the population elects about 70% of U.S. Senators.
- A recommendation to address this regional influence at the U.S. Congress is to enlarge the House of Representatives and change the electoral system. Instead of having single member districts, multimember districts with ranked ballots could better represent the views of a state and appeal to more voters.
- The voting process should be made to be a pleasurable and convenient experience. Rather than being held on a Tuesday, voting should occur on Veterans Day, a holiday that could increase turnout and serve to honour veterans.

Combatting Disinformation

Luke Matthews, Anthropologist, RAND Corporation

- In researching six years of the trendline of vaccine misinformation, we can observe that disinformation becomes successful when it becomes misinformation.

- According to the Cybersecurity and Infrastructure Security Agency, “disinformation is information that is deliberately created to mislead, harm or manipulate a person, social group, organization or country.”
- The ways in which experts communicate information to the public affects the way such information is received. It is possible to inoculate the public from disinformation. Techniques include the following:
 - acknowledge mistakes that were made in the past; and
 - improve the way in which uncertainty is communicated – for instance, the effectiveness of the COVID-19 vaccine should have been communicated better.

Alexander Nelson, Senior Manager, Strategy and Analysis, Logically AI

- With tools like Generative Artificial Intelligence (AI) and online translators, malign actors can develop disinformation cheaply, and require less expertise to do so.
- On social media platforms, it is easier for malign actors to deploy disinformation.
- Disinformation can negatively affect all parts of society, including with elections, public safety, public health and the environment and natural disasters. For example, disinformation following the recent Hawaii wildfires stated that they had been caused by a “weather weapon.”
- States have a role in identifying, analysing and addressing the issue of disinformation. New AI technology can help states to target this issue.

Optimizing the Inflation Reduction Act and the Infrastructure Investment and Jobs Act for Your State

Caroline Sevier, Managing Director, Government Relations and Infrastructure Initiatives, American Society of Civil Engineers

- The American Society of Civil Engineers’ 2021 Report Card for America’s Infrastructure gives the United States a cumulative infrastructure grade of “C-” and suggests that there is a US\$2.59 trillion investment gap to meet U.S. infrastructure needs.
- The Infrastructure Investment and Jobs Act is a massive historic investment in infrastructure spending. However, with rising construction costs, there are still many challenges.
- New spending on infrastructure should be inclusive and designed for everyone in society.

United States Supreme Court Update

Lisa Soronen, District of Columbia

- There are several upcoming U.S. Supreme Court cases on topics such as gun rights, free speech and the role of federal agencies that may have a pivotal impact on U.S. society.

- In recent years, the Supreme Court – which has three judges considered to be “liberal” and six judges considered to be “conservative” – has made some bold decisions on issues such as abortion, guns, gay rights, and affirmative action, which are issues that the average American citizen can understand.
- U.S. state legislatures have introduced more than 200 pieces of legislation concerning online content moderation over the past session. State laws that prevent social media companies from disallowing certain viewpoints from their platforms have been of interest to the courts.

Concluding Remarks

Once again, the CSG National Conference allowed members of the Canadian Section of the IPG to engage with legislators and other stakeholders from across the United States. Attending the sessions provided members the opportunity to gather information on many topics of importance to Canadian parliamentary business, including strengthening democracy, combatting disinformation and election security. For members of the Canadian Section, the various CSG Conferences offer important opportunities to engage with U.S. senators and representatives.

Respectfully submitted,

Hon. Michael L. MacDonald, Senator,
Co-Chair,
Canada–United States Inter-Parliamentary
Group

Hon. John McKay, P.C., M.P.,
Co-Chair,
Canada–United States Inter-Parliamentary
Group

Travel Costs

ASSOCIATION	Canada-United States Inter-Parliamentary Group
ACTIVITY	Council of State Governments National Conference (CSG)
DESTINATION	Raleigh, North Carolina, United States of America
DATES	From December 6 to 9, 2023
DELEGATION	
SENATE	Hon. Sharon Burey Hon. Michael L. MacDonald Hon. Julie Miville-Dechêne
HOUSE OF COMMONS	Hon. David McGuinty Simon-Pierre Savard-Tremblay
STAFF	Lyla Malow Marie Dumont
TRANSPORTATION	\$ 9,145.22
ACCOMMODATION	\$ 8,053.02
HOSPITALITY	\$ 0.00
PER DIEMS	\$ 2,288.37
MISCELLANEOUS	\$ 6,454.91
TOTAL	\$ 25,941.52