

News From The States

EVENING WRAP

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By [Sean Scully](#)

It's Friday before a long weekend (at least for some people). Let's celebrate with another edition of the popular game show "Politicians Behaving Badly."



The Big Takeaway

Since at least the Watergate Era, the main question politicians don't like to have to answer is "What did you know?" Followed closely in unpopularity by "And when did you know it?"

But that's exactly where Ohio Gov. Mike DeWine finds himself lately as his pick for the state's top energy regulator faces a state indictment on corruption charges, on top of a similar federal indictment from last year, [the Ohio Capital Journal reports](#).

DeWine has already said that appointing former energy lobbyist Sam Randazzo was a "mistake," but he's always insisted that he thought he was a qualified and appropriate choice when he named him to the position in 2019, shortly after DeWine took office.

But the new state indictment suggests that there were already signs that Randazzo had nefarious ties with Akron-based FirstEnergy, which is at the center of a bribery case that landed former House Speaker Larry Householder behind

bars on a 20-year sentence for corruption.



*Hey, it SEEMED like a good idea at the time, OK?
(Photo by Graham Stokes for Ohio Capital Journal)*

The details get pretty complicated, but the stripped-down version is that prosecutors allege Randazzo was getting money from FirstEnergy for years in exchange for helping to boost customers' rates in his role as general counsel to the Industrial Energy Users of Ohio, a nonprofit trade organization. Later he used his position as chair of the Public Utilities Commission of Ohio to push for a \$1.3 billion bailout of FirstEnergy, designed to prop up their two nuclear plants.

Prosecutors say FirstEnergy had paid about \$60 million in bribes, including a \$4.3 million payment to Randazzo, before he was chair of the PUC.

DeWine said that he didn't know about the payment or the bribery scheme, but he considered Randazzo's experience with the Industrial Users nonprofit and closeness to FirstEnergy a mark of experience.

"Governor DeWine knew of Mr. Randazzo's relationship to FirstEnergy as a paid consultant prior to the Governor's appointment of Mr. Randazzo," Press Secretary Dan Tierney told the Capital Journal. "As we have previously stated,

Mr. Randazzo was appointed due to his expertise and having represented many sides of utility rate issues, having represented both utilities as well as large ratepayers (in) whose interest it is to pay as little as possible for utilities.”

The new indictment, however, says a senior DeWine aide with close ties to FirstEnergy knew about the \$4.3 million payment, which was negotiated with Randazzo after DeWine aides had discussed his pending appointment with FirstEnergy officials.

“A former aide gave DeWine [a dossier](#) reporting shady financial connections between Randazzo and FirstEnergy on Jan. 28, 2019,” the Capital Journal writes. “But Tierney said that (Chief of Staff Laurel) Dawson never told the governor about the \$4.3 million payment before DeWine nominated Randazzo to chair the PUCO on Feb. 4, 2019.”

An interesting tidbit from the indictment is a note from a FirstEnergy lobbyist to company executives about the best way to talk to the new governor.

“Explain things like he doesn’t know anything about it — and be surprised when he does,” the lobbyist wrote. “Sometimes he knows what you’re talking about. Sometimes he doesn’t. Sometimes he does and pretends he doesn’t.”



We wouldn't want this thing to, you know, blow up like a mushroom cloud or anything.

In Utah, meanwhile, legislators stopped short of impeaching state Board of Education member Natalie Cline, but they did condemn her in an unprecedented (though largely meaningless) censure resolution this week, [the Utah News Dispatch reports](#).

Cline sparked outrage last week when she wrongly questioned the gender of a 16-year-old high school athlete. In a since-deleted social media post, Cline implied that the girl's unfeminine appearance meant she might be transgender. The student's parents said the implication led to harassment and threats to both the family and her school.

Both chambers of the legislature passed a resolution Thursday condemning Cline's post, with just two dissenting votes in the House. Gov. Spencer Cox quickly signed it, the News Dispatch writes, issuing a statement that the "vast majority of Utahns agree Natalie Cline's behavior was unacceptable."

"I've spoken with the student's parents and I'm heartbroken for this family," Cox said. "We agree with the actions of both the State Board of Education and Legislature, and we hope the voters will hold her equally accountable this fall."

Cline, who is running for a third term, hasn't responded to reporters' requests for comment, but on Facebook, she has been somewhat less than contrite, calling the censure "election interference."

The Board of Education has already censured Cline and stripped her of committee assignments and other powers, but only the legislature had the power to remove her.

They did not do so, saying that impeachment would simply elevate Cline's comments and retraumatize the family (which had, by the way, asked for the legislature to impeach her).

"If this body goes through impeachment, this blows up like a mushroom cloud on a national stage," [House Speaker Mike Schultz, R-Hooper, said](#). "The hate that you're seeing directed towards that family right now, then becomes national. ... And it's not fair to the family."

In Minnesota, the state Department of Human Services is facing questions

after several longtime contractors were caught up in a bribery scandal related to misuse of pandemic-era food program funding for kids. In fact, about half of the people charged in the food program case also happen to have separate DHS contracts.

The latest revelation, [the Minnesota Reformer reports](#), is that a man named Gandi Y. Mohamed, 43, was indicted by federal prosecutors, who say he and his family companies siphoned off more than \$1 million from the Feeding Our Future child nutrition program.

According to DHS records, Mohamed is also the founder of a personal care provider for seniors with disabilities. The state has paid him nearly \$49 million since 2016.

DHS says it has not found fraud in the contracts with Mohamed and other indicted contractors, but officials are reevaluating the department's relationship with those people.

"As stewards of taxpayer dollars, DHS continues to apply a diligent and methodical approach to reviewing and taking appropriate actions regarding any new indictments," DHS said in a statement Thursday.

Sen. Jim Abeler, R-Anoka, ranking Republican on the committee that oversees DHS, said lawmakers are watching.

"If it were me, I'd do a strict audit of the last five years of this man's business," Abeler said. "People who are dishonest in one area may tend to be dishonest in another. We have to be absolutely sure."

And when did you know it:

- [More than two dozen Oregon lobbyists work for both sides on climate change, report finds](#)
- [\(Georgia\) Fulton DA delivers fiery testimony against Trump, co-defendants quest to disqualify her](#)
- [\(Montana\) Cascade County selects former Realtor CEO as new elections administrator](#)



Also Trending

We've said it before: in an ideal world, the government would help those who need help the most. But this, clearly, is not an ideal world.

In Alaska, officials say they know of around 3,000 students who are homeless, and that probably grossly understates the number. It could be as high as 6,000.

But the state has so far only spent about half of the \$2.3 million the federal government has sent to help, part of an \$800 million program nationwide. If the state doesn't spend the remaining money by September, it will be lost, [the Alaska Beacon reports](#).

“Essentially, the crises in public education that we're seeing today are very much driven to a certain extent by homelessness, and particularly when it's not addressed,” said Barbara Duffield, executive director of advocacy group SchoolHouse Connection, in urging lawmakers to take advantage of the money before it's gone.

U.S. Sen. Lisa Murowski, R-Alaska, was instrumental in getting the money in the 2021 American Rescue Plan Act. This week, she too urged lawmakers to figure out how to spend the remaining money.

“Do we need more time? Extensions of time can be more problematic,” she said. “But this is something that I think for Alaska is worth fighting for.”



*"There aren't enough social workers in the state," a panel of Nevada lawmakers were told.
(Photo by Getty Images)*

In Nevada, the Aging and Disability Division says that nearly a quarter of its key staff positions are unfilled, [the Nevada Current reports](#). That means the state is less able to provide support and oversight for long-term care homes for people with disabilities and special health challenges.

“The majority for the teams that have the largest vacancy rates are social workers, which continues to be an ongoing challenge for our division,” Jeffrey Duncan, the agency manager for the division, told lawmakers at a hearing this week.

The ombudsman office, which handles complaints, has a 44% vacancy rate, he reported.

Officials said the root of the problem is poor salaries. The private sector, and even county social service agencies, pay better than the state.

“The other thing is quite simple: there aren’t enough social workers in the state,” said Carrie Embree, who oversees the state Office of Consumer Health Assistance.

Lawmakers said the news suggests that Nevada can't serve its booming population of older residents.

"I look at the staffing vacancies and some of the other things brought to our attention, I'm not so sure we are ready for that," Democratic State Sen. Pat Spearman said.



*Mason and Bentley Williams lost their mom, dad and baby brother in an April 13, 2021, crash in Missouri.
(Photo courtesy of Cecilia Williams)*

But sometimes lawmakers actually do something to protect the most

vulnerable. Lawmakers in three states — [Kentucky](#), [Tennessee](#) and [Texas](#) — have already passed laws making drunken drivers who cause a fatal accident pay child support for kids who lose one or both parents. Other states are considering similar measures, [Stateline reports](#).

This year so far, Stateline reports, specific proposals have been introduced in at least a dozen states: [Arizona](#), [Florida](#), [Hawaii](#), [Iowa](#), [Indiana](#), [Missouri](#), [New Jersey](#), [South Carolina](#), [South Dakota](#), [Washington](#), [West Virginia](#) and [Wisconsin](#).

Advocates and victims say supporting the grieving families is the least the drivers could do to make up for the devastation they have caused.

“The toughest challenge is that no matter how hard we try, we will not be enough for these children,” said Cecilia Williams, a Missouri woman with custody of her two grandkids who were orphaned by a drunken driver. “Because those kids lost a part of them as well. They lost mom and dad, and there’s nothing that can fill that void. ... But this legislation is a start.”

Comforting the Afflicted:

- [Funding for Wyoming’s suicide lifeline might fare better this session](#)
- [\(Nebraska\) Blood asks Pillen to respond to ‘worsening’ violence, worker safety at state psychiatric hospital](#)
- [\(Kentucky\) Anti-hunger advocates condemn bill to close ‘wildly abused loopholes’ in SNAP](#)



From The Newsrooms

Government and Politics

- [Kansas weighs legalizing death penalty by hypoxia after Alabama execution](#)
- [Indiana National Guard Texas deployment to cost \\$7 million](#)
- [3 South Carolina colleges could split \\$120M to educate students for jobs at nuclear laboratory](#)
- [Division within Michigan GOP on display at some county conventions Thursday](#)

Health Care

- [\(Maryland\) Abortion care and transgender health care are 'parallel struggles' in 2024 legislation](#)
- [\(Florida\) Abortion-rights advocates slam bill establishing personhood at conception in wrongful death suits](#)
- [Kansas House's child support bill invites scrutiny of meanings between lines of written text](#)
- [Ohio Democrats unveil numerous gun safety bills likely to be shot down by GOP-led legislature](#)

Education

- [\(New Jersey\) Challenge to Rutgers vaccine rules fails on appeal](#)
- [\(Missouri\) How to help kids traumatized by Kansas City Super Bowl parade mass shooting](#)
- [\(Utah\) Microschools are poised to be recognized as businesses with no location restrictions](#)
- [\(Louisiana\) New workgroup wants to save teachers' time in classrooms](#)



One Last Thing



*Franklin Armstrong and Charlie Brown in "Snoopy Presents: Welcome Home, Franklin," now streaming on Apple TV+.
(Courtesy Apple TV+)*

The beloved cartoon Peanuts is hoping for a bit of a do-over.

The strip, created by the late Charles Schultz, introduced its first Black character, Franklin, in 1968 in a move considered progressive for its day.

But what came off as progressive in those days hasn't necessarily aged well. Particularly troublesome to modern sensibilities is a 1973 Thanksgiving-themed TV special in which Franklin was depicted sitting separately from the white characters at the table.

So today, Apple TV+ is debuting "[Snoopy Presents: Welcome Home, Franklin](#)," telling Franklin's origin story. It includes a retelling of the way Franklin met Charlie Brown — he retrieves Charlie's beach ball that is blowing away — [the Associated Press reports](#).

And yes, this time the Peanuts gang invites Franklin to sit next to them at the Thanksgiving table.

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