

State agencies aim to boost their funding

Tulsa World, (Tulsa, OK)

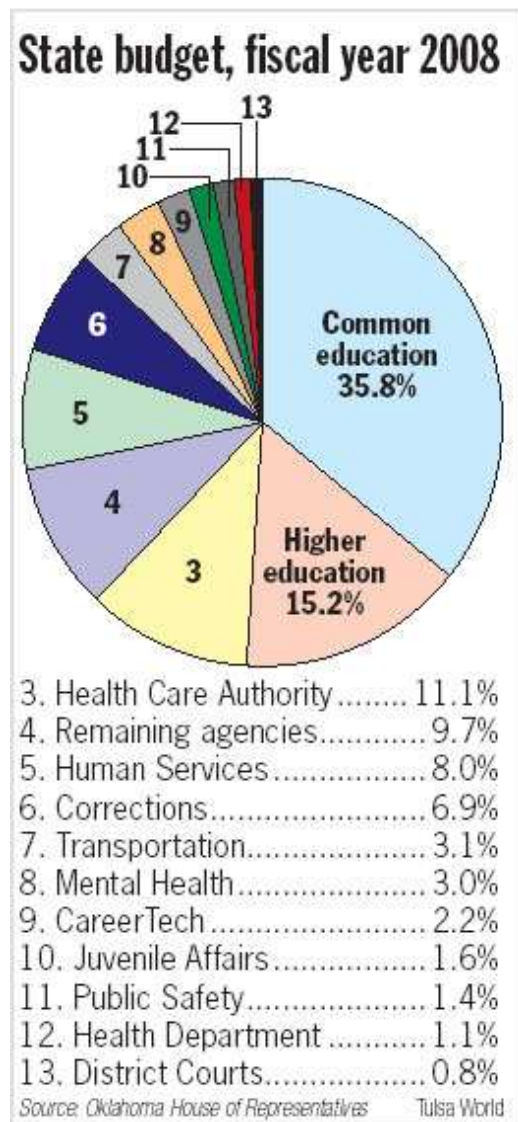
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By Angel Riggs

They will ask the Legislature for extra money to cover increasing costs.

OKLAHOMA CITY -- State agencies will look to lawmakers in this year's legislative session for funding aimed at upgrades and curbing increasing operational costs.



They also will concentrate on becoming more efficient.

Several agencies will ask lawmakers for critical additional funding to help mitigate multimillion-dollar increases in the costs of employee benefits, mainly health insurance and retirement.

Oklahoma's 12 largest state agencies received more than \$6.2 billion in appropriations in this fiscal year, accounting for slightly more than 90 percent of the state's budget.

Lawmakers will work on the next state budget during the legislative session that starts Feb. 4.

Corrections: The prison system is likely to remain a hot topic in the Legislature with the release this month of an audit confirming that the Department of Corrections is as efficient as possible but is still overcrowded, underfunded and understaffed.

The agency will work this session to secure a \$25.7 million supplemental appropriation for private prison space, Director Justin Jones said. The department had a net growth of 712 inmates during the last fiscal year, and it is projected to have additional net growth this year.

"Our goal is to get out of the supplemental cycle," Jones said, noting that could take several years to accomplish.

The agency will also ask lawmakers to approve a \$336 million bond package that would provide more than 2,000 secure beds, plus upgrades and repairs at state prisons.

Education: This receives the largest percentage of the budget. In fiscal year 2008, common and higher education combined received slightly more than \$3.5 billion, about 50 percent of the budget.

State Superintendent Sandy Garrett said that securing operations funding for schools would remain the priority this year as increased fuel and utility costs continue to be a major problem for schools.

Also, she said, efforts to bring teachers' salaries to the regional average will continue. Garrett will also continue her time reform initiative, which calls for adding five instructional days to the school calendar, fewer interruptions to the school day and more time-on-task for students.

"We can't ignore the fact that our kids don't have the time to learn this expanded curriculum," she said.

Human services: The Department of Human Services will seek funding to keep up with demand for several programs, including the Advantage program, which provides in-home services for residents who are eligible to receive Medicaid and nursing home care, DHS Director Howard Hendrick said.

The agency will also seek more funding for its child welfare and child support enforcement divisions, which have seen a decline in federal financial support.

Health: The Health Department will work to make "Oklahoma 100 percent smoke-free," by repealing exemptions on indoor smoking, said Kevin Pipes, the agency's chief of policy. The agency will also work with the Fit Kids Coalition to increase time for fitness activities in school and provide fitness screenings for children.

Tourism: Capital improvements remain the priority for the Department of Tourism and Recreation. Director Hardy Watkins said that nearly 14 million people are expected to visit Oklahoma's state parks this year. They'll notice a lot of Balance = 20.0 pts upgrades and work, especially to cabins, playgrounds and boat ramps, he said.

"We have been very successful in the last two legislative sessions, particularly with being able to secure and protect funds to help improve capital aspects of the parks," he said.

During the next three years, all 388 of the state's cabins are to get makeovers, complete with environmentally friendly furnishings and repairs, he said.

The agency will continue to seek capital improvement funds. However, the department will also look for "general administrative support," aimed to help it take a more businesslike approach to budgeting and become as efficient as possible.