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Agency Briefs: CSI Annual Report Released; OHFA Modifies Foreclosure Program; OSU Raises Ticket Prices; AG; ODMHAS; ODJFS; OAC; ODPS; U.S. DOL

The 2012 Annual Report of Ohio's Common Sense Initiative, released Friday by [Lt. Gov. Mary Taylor](#), examines the application of the new CSI review process for state rules that impact businesses, as well as efforts to address regulations that affect job creation in Ohio.

According to the [report](#), CSI reviewed more than 1,500 proposed rules last year, with overall rule filings down by nearly half from their historical average. This reduction shows that CSI was successful in establishing a process to review the effects of agency rules on Ohio businesses, as agencies were forced to follow a formal process and justify business impacts for the first time, Ms. Taylor's office asserted.

Aside from this, CSI's accomplishments in working with businesses to resolve regulatory issues are also outlined in the report.

"There is still a lot of work to do, but 2012 was a watershed year for state government in Ohio," said Ms. Taylor in a statement. "Through CSI, we have sent the message that before proposing regulations that impact Ohio's job creators, agencies must reach out to those businesses and ensure that the purpose justifies the impact."

Launched in 2011, CSI aims to overhaul the state's regulatory policies in an effort to make Ohio more "business friendly." Overseen by Ms. Taylor, CSI examines the regulatory system to weed-out excessive rules that inhibit job creation.

Housing Finance Authority: More Ohio homeowners who face trouble meeting their mortgage payments can now take advantage of the state's foreclosure prevention program, which has expanded its eligibility requirements and benefits, the Ohio Housing Finance Authority announced Friday.

Changes to the program, known as [Save the Dream Ohio](#), include an increase in the maximum benefit amount per household to \$35,000 for homeowners using more than one program, as well as an increase in the maximum annual household income to \$112,375 for eligible homeowners.

Likewise, household liquid assets, excluding retirement funds, no longer go into program eligibility determination.

OHFA Executive Director Doug Garver said the program has already distributed upwards of \$105 million to nearly 9,000 homeowners. These changes, he said, will allow Save the Dream Ohio to help even more struggling Ohioans.

Funding for the program comes from \$570.4 million allocated by the U.S. Department of Treasury's Hardest Hit Fund, which benefits 18 states.

Save the Dream Ohio includes programs for: mortgage payment assistance, rescue payment assistance, modification with contribution assistance, homeownership retention assistance, lien elimination assistance and transition assistance.

Attorney General: In an effort to crack down on synthetic drug sales in Ohio, law enforcement officials served five search warrants in three counties Friday, AG Mike DeWine announced.

The warrants, served in Clark, Montgomery and Guernsey counties, came after investigations found synthetic marijuana being sold in three stores.

"We gave business owners fair warning that if we found synthetic drugs in their stores that there would be consequences, and now we are following through with that promise," Mr. DeWine said in a statement.

Last year, Mr. DeWine's office sent letters to retailers outlining the risks of selling synthetic drugs.

Local law enforcement partnered with officials from the AG's Bureau of Criminal Investigation Friday to serve warrants at Clark County-based Quality Food Market in New Carlisle and its owner's Montgomery County home. The owner was arrested and charged with three felony counts of trafficking a controlled substance, the AG's office reported.

Officials also served two separate warrants in Guernsey County at Bubby's Drive Thru in Byesville and at Party Time Carryout and its owner's home.

AG DeWine said drugs found through these investigations included packaging that indicated they were being marketed towards children.

"We need to do everything we can to protect our families, and that is why we decided to take this action one step further and file civil lawsuits against those involved," he said.

According to the AG's office, the lawsuits filed against the three businesses allege that the business owners and businesses "engaged in unfair, deceptive and unconscionable acts" for selling illegal drugs as if they were legal products.

Nuisance abatement actions were also filed against the businesses in an effort to shutter the stores for one year.

Ohio State University: OSU's Board of Trustees voted Friday to approve a number of staffing, construction and fiscal matters, including the Athletic Council's recommendation to increase ticket prices and fees.

Under the price changes, non-premiere football game tickets will go up by \$9, per game, for the public and \$2, per game, for students in 2013.

The board also moved to approve the option to make either two home football games "Premier Games," which would put ticket prices between \$79 and up to as much as \$125 and \$150 per game, or designate one game as such with tickets up to a maximum of \$175. This pricing, however, would not affect student tickets.

Also increasing under the changes are men's basketball tickets and golf membership dues and green fees.

Mental Health & Addiction Services: Prior to [Gov. John Kasich](#)'s unveiling of the new biennium budget, Director Tracy Plouck will host a webinar briefing on the proposals regarding the future Department of Mental Health and Addiction Services.

The hour-long budget briefing is scheduled to begin Monday at 3:30 p.m. Participants must [register](#) for the webinar.

Job & Family Services: Ohio households with annual incomes below \$60,000 can take part in free tax preparation and filing at Ohio Benefit Bank locations across the state on Saturday.

Part of the state's first "Free My Refund Day," an effort to make free tax available to working families, trained counselors will help filers identify credits they can claim and assist them prepare and file returns.

ODJFS Director Michael Colbert said the event presents Ohioans with access to both free tax preparation services, as well as education about other programs they may be eligible for.

Arts Council: State residents and visitors can now pick-up a copy of the OAC's 2013 Ohio Arts Festivals & Competitions Directory for information on upcoming events where they can exhibit their work or partake in the arts community.

The directory contains information on arts and crafts festivals and competitions occurring throughout the year. It is available by mail or at various tourist and travel centers throughout Ohio.

Public Safety: The Ohio State Highway Patrol's Columbus District Office of Investigative Services is looking into suspicious phone calls being made to residents living in Knox and Morrow Counties.

According to DPS officials, the phone calls, which solicit money to help combat impaired driving violations, are being made by individuals who claim to represent the Ohio State Highway Patrol. They warn that the highway patrol does not seek donations from private citizens and urge Ohioans who receive these phone calls to not provide any personal information.

U.S. Department of Labor: The national unemployment rate remained "essentially unchanged" at 7.9% last month, despite the addition of 157,000, according to [initial figures](#) released by the DOL's Bureau of Labor Statistics Friday.

Industries that saw job growth in January include: retail trade, construction, health care, and wholesale trade. Meanwhile the transportation and warehousing industries saw a drop in employment.

Although slightly higher than December's 7.8% rate last month's unemployment fell lower than that from January 2012, which was recorded at 8.3%.

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