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# The Daily Review



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## Pa. lawmakers spend millions of tax dollars on private lawyers but often don't reveal why

**BY ANGELA COULOMBIS**  
Spotlight PA

**BY SAM JANESCH**  
The Caucus

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HARRISBURG — The Pennsylvania legislature spent nearly \$10 million during the last two years on private lawyers but routinely shielded the purpose of those expenses, hiding which lawmakers and their staffs required representation — and why, according to a new investigation.

A review of thousands of pages of legal invoices and engagement letters from 2019 and 2020 by The Caucus and Spotlight PA shows the cases ranged from public records fights to secret personnel problems to attempts to overturn last year's presidential election.

In many instances, Republicans and Democrats in both chambers blacked out the reason for hiring lawyers, flouting case law that requires them to make public those critical details. Other records were so vague it was impossible to identify the reason for the representation.

With near-limitless taxpayer dollars at their disposal, legislative leaders can fund all types of legal battles, defending themselves and colleagues against alle-



Commonwealth Media Services

Election-related legal costs are only expected to grow in the Senate, where the top Republican, Jake Corman, is leading an effort to conduct a controversial review of last year's presidential contest.

**SPOTLIGHT PA**  
spotlightpa.org

gations of wrongdoing, advancing their political interests, and going on the attack against their political opponents. The decisions on which lawyers to hire, and at what rate per hour — sometimes as high as \$750 in the time frame reviewed — are made behind closed doors by leadership, without input from colleagues and, unlike many state contracts, with virtually no oversight by a third party. Many of those same lawyers are also generous campaign donors, the investigation found.

The expense records pro-

vide a window into both the small and large political fights prioritized by top leaders, from harassment cases to the \$1.2 million cost for election matters in 2020 — a running tab that is about to skyrocket again as GOP leaders in the Senate embark on another review of President Joe Biden's win in the state.

"The public's right to know with respect to these sorts of records is incredibly high," said Gunita Singh, a staff attorney at the Reporters Committee for Freedom of the Press, a nonprofit that works on First Amendment and open records cases. "There's tremendous public interest in scrutinizing how these individuals tasked with representing our interests are conducting themselves

... including how they're spending our tax dollars."

The Pennsylvania legislature — one of the largest and most expensive in the nation — has fought to hide details of how it spends tax dollars on legal matters. In the Senate, records for a handful of matters were redacted to the point of not disclosing any information at all about their purpose. In the House, it was worse: Roughly half of their engagement letters were redacted.

Democrats in the House and Senate did not return requests for comment. Republican legislative leaders defended their use of outside counsel, saying lawyers on the legislature's payroll, whose roughly \$200,000

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Review Photo/MATT HICKS

Towanda Elementary School Principal Laura Steele (second from left) and Special Education Director Jennifer Cronin (second from right) are pictured while proposing a new emotional support classroom in the elementary school during Monday's school board meeting. Looking on are Secretary Cheryl Vaughn and Academic Affairs Principal Joel Spinney.

## Cost savings, additional benefits eyed with elementary emotional support classroom idea

**BY MATT HICKS**  
Editor-in-Chief

TOWANDA — Towanda Area School District officials are pushing for school board approval of an emotional support classroom in the elementary school they say could save the district money and provide a better learning experience for those who currently receive this support service through BLaST Intermediate Unit 17.

According to Business Manager Brian Driscoll, the district spent \$396,000 for 24 students who used the service at some point during the previous school year. Elementary Principal Laura Steele and Special Education Director Jennifer Cronin anticipate serving up to 15 students through the local classroom. Driscoll, who budgeted for an additional teacher and aide in the proposal, said the district would break even with serving at least six students locally. With serving between 10 and 15 students, he said, "I could see it cutting our bill in half for sure." Steele anticipated utilizing current aides to further support the classroom.

Cost savings weren't the only benefit that administrators referenced while outlining the proposal to the school board Monday. "Right now I have several students who were placed and are at risk to return, which is a cycle

that we see," Steele said. "These students go out there, they do really well, but when they come back we haven't had the mechanism to fully support them and prevent placement. We're hoping with this classroom in the elementary school they say could save the district money and provide a better learning experience for those students to become over time behind in their academics."

This is something Cronin said she witnessed firsthand while working at the BLaST North Campus site over the past six years. She also noted that the site has less support in the form of top teachers and social workers than when she was there, and is unable to provide specials such as music, art, computer science, or physical education like they can in Towanda.

Steele said a different curriculum is utilized at BLaST to accommodate the students the organization serves in various school districts, which can create a rift when students have to transition back to Towanda's curriculum.

"When they come back after missing out on our curriculum, they end up in a different place academically than the students we have here," Steele explained, while also highlighting the additional learning time these students will receive without

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## Canton EMA developing Code Red sign-up event

**BY PHILIP O'DELL**  
Staff Writer

CANTON BOROUGH — An in-person sign-up clinic for code red alerts is being developed for Canton residents who do not have access to computers.

EMA Coordinator Brett Neely spoke at the Canton Borough Council meeting on Monday and said that flyers are available to be distributed and that the next step will be to place a specific date and time on them.

The John A. Mosser Canton Borough Municipal Building will be the site where people can sign up for the Code Red alerts.

Neely proposed the idea of a sign-up clinic after a local resident said that the EMA's phone number should be advertised in a way that senior citizens can see it.

On the proposed option of placing code red information into utility bills, Seeley said the Towanda Municipal Authority no longer places mailings in envelopes because they place their annual reports online now.

Neely said he would speak with Canton Borough Administrator Amy Seeley about establishing a

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Review Photo/PHILIP O'DELL

A sign-up clinic for code red alerts at the John A. Mosser Canton Borough Municipal Building was discussed at the borough's council meeting on Monday.

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**WEATHER**  
Partly sunny  
72 55  
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**DEATHS**  
There are no obituaries in today's edition.  
Visit www.thedailyreview.com and click on the link to Obituaries for tributes and other features

**QUOTE OF THE DAY**  
"Pain is temporary. Quitting lasts forever."  
— Lance Armstrong

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