



2014: Platte Institute Year In Review

By Dick Clark

At the close of 2014, Nebraskans can look back on a year with several key public policy victories. On several significant fronts, proposals to expand government were defeated, and proposals to improve government operations moved forward. Much has also been accomplished to set the stage for future reforms, in 2015 and beyond.

The Platte Institute was actively engaged in policy work in 2014, and the response has been thrilling. Platte Institute community events drew numerous concerned citizens in Omaha, Lincoln, Kearney, Norfolk, and Grand Island. Hundreds of elected officials, legislative staff, industry representatives, educators, school administrators, and others participated in day-long Platte Institute policy summits in June and September.

The Platte Institute's education summit, "K-12 Education Reform: From Start to Finish," featured speaker panels filled with distinguished innovators in education from all across the United States. Starting with early childhood and covering issues all the way through college and career readiness, the panels presented a variety of perspectives on how to make better education policy. Keynote speaker and celebrated educator Dwight Jones reminded many teachers in the room what it is that inspired all of them to work in education to begin with: the difference that can be made in the lives of the students they serve.

In September, the Platte Institute held its annual legislative summit in Lincoln. Entitled "Get Nebraska Fiscally Fit," program attendees heard from lunch keynote speaker Greg Glassman, founder of CrossFit, and from an assortment of economists, legislators, entrepreneurs, and educators. Derrell Bradford, from the New York Campaign for Achievement Now, spoke on disruptive innovation and the power of school choice. An assortment of presentations and panel discussions focused on pressing current issues in Nebraska, including Medicaid reform, the minimum wage, and workforce development. The event featured several speakers on state tax policy.

The legislative summit was also the venue for Platte Institute CEO Jim Vokal's announcement of the [Strong Roots Nebraska](#) tax reform plan for the 2015 legislative session. Strong Roots Nebraska proposes steadily lowering state income tax rates, freezing and reexamining local property taxes, and ultimately delivering tax relief to all taxpayers at all income levels.

The incremental approach to tax relief means avoiding pressure on vital public services while reducing the overall tax burden on families and businesses in the state. Thousands of Nebraskans have joined this tax reform effort, with over six thousand helping to spread the word on social media and nearly five thousand joining a live Strong Roots Nebraska virtual town hall event via telephone.

This year also saw unprecedented media attention for the Platte Institute's policy efforts. In addition to countless newspaper articles discussing the work of the Platte Institute, sixteen Platte Institute editorial columns were published in newspapers across the state. Institute staff made more than forty appearances on radio and television programs and testified at nearly two dozen public hearings.

More than half of those public hearings were before legislative committees at the Nebraska Legislature. Platte Institute experts weighed in on a broad range of issues including corrections reform, Medicaid expansion, the income tax, the inheritance tax, charter schools, and government transparency. Medicaid expansion was defeated a second time, and legislators who cast the deciding votes cited the same arguments that had been made in Platte Institute reports. Modest tax relief bills were also successful, though there is still much work to be done to achieve comprehensive tax reform in Nebraska. The *Lincoln Journal-Star* credited the Platte Institute¹ for being ahead of the curve in recognizing the need for corrections reform in one of a series of institute policy reports and other publications on criminal justice concerns. Key corrections reform bills supported by Platte Institute testimony were signed into law by Governor Dave Heineman after enjoying broad support from legislators from across the political spectrum.

None of the accomplishments of the Platte Institute would have been possible without the generous support of private donors who chose to contribute to the organization's mission with their valuable time and hard-earned dollars. As the Platte Institute strives this new year to achieve significant tax relief through the Strong Roots Nebraska tax plan, this voluntary support from people concerned about Nebraska will continue to be the crucial fuel that powers the Platte Institute's important work.

From the Platte Institute staff to the thousands of hard-working Nebraskans that make our efforts possible, thank you — now let's get back to work!

¹ "Editorial: A model for prison treatment system." *Lincoln Journal-Star*. December 9, 2014. [URL: http://journalstar.com/news/opinion/editorial/editorial-a-model-for-prison-treatment-system/article_e255c306-8677-55d7-8df3-a7322107f626.html]