

NINA MOINI: State lawmakers are on recess this week after reaching their first major legislative deadline on Friday. It's a key point in the session when bills need to clear committees to stay afloat. That means we're nearly at the halfway mark of what's already been a tense and high stakes year at the Capitol. The session began amid fallout from a major ICE surge in the state, along with renewed concerns about fraud in state programs and ongoing debates over public safety.

So what have lawmakers actually accomplished so far? And where are the biggest sticking points? MPR News politics reporter Dana Ferguson is here in the studio to walk us through it with her second report of the day for us. Thank you, Dana.

DANA You're welcome. It's good to see you, Nina.

FERGUSON:

NINA MOINI: Well, there's always so much going on. So no wonder you've got so much good reporting for us. We have a very closely divided legislature, as you know, this session. DFL Senate Majority Leader Erin Murphy told MPR News this morning she's worried about bill movement seriously slowing down as a result of that. Isn't that right? Let's take a listen.

ERIN MURPHY: The tie in the House is concerning for me in that they are moving some things. But many issues, I think, of importance to Minnesotans are lying on the cutting room table, if you will, because of the tie and not being able to move things forward. So I think the end of the session is going to be challenging.

NINA MOINI: Yeah, Dana, how is that split legislature playing out so far?

DANA Yeah, Leader Murphy alluded to it, but because of the tie, there just hasn't been a whole lot that's been able to get out of committee. And obviously, that's important because if laws are to be made, they need to get through both chambers and signed by the governor. So far, there have just been a handful that have reached that. They deal with stopping behind school buses, some emergency housing funding, and getting rid of an honorarium for Cesar Chavez that would have been tomorrow.

NINA MOINI: Mm-hm. So the session started out, like we mentioned, on the heels of this ICE surge. What has the legislature done surrounding the aftermath of the surge? You mentioned maybe some rental assistance.

DANA Yeah, there's been a lot of conversation about that, particularly in the Senate, where Democrats have a very narrow edge. They've passed a bill that would repurpose some funding to provide rent assistance. That has not passed in the tied House.

It stalled in committee, along with a number of other proposals that would give some legal options for people who are improperly detained by immigration officers, send out some help for small businesses, require some different things for immigration enforcement officers in the state as far as not masking or limiting where they can do their work. So, so far, things move in the Senate, and they come to a standstill in the House. So it'll be a lot of end of session, potentially, bargaining about what might be able to get done.

NINA MOINI: OK. Another obviously topic a lot of people are very concerned about is gun restrictions, gun safety, after the shooting at Annunciation Church and School, of course, last fall. Where do things stand there, Dana?

DANA FERGUSON: It's a pretty similar situation where we've heard these conversations around restricting firearms, high capacity magazines, and semi-automatic weapons. The Senate's moved a lot of these things forward. They're going to have an omnibus package of gun violence prevention measures that they're going to try to move forward. But on the House side, there was an effort last week on the floor to force votes on some of these proposals. And they didn't get the one Republican that Democrats would have needed to get a vote on these bills.

So a lot of it, again, really emotional testimony in committees, but not much coming forward. There has been some agreement between Democrats and Republicans about wanting more money for mental health supports, potentially reporting threats to schools, a few other ideas. But on the issue of guns themselves, there's just not been bipartisan support.

NINA MOINI: OK. We want to talk, too, about tackling fraud in the state. That seems like an area where both sides really want some movement, Dana.

DANA FERGUSON: That's absolutely right, Nina. This was an issue where at the beginning of session, it wasn't completely clear if there would be a path for an office of the inspector general bill. That's passed the Senate. It's now made it out of committee. It's got a couple more stops. But it seems as though that is something that all legislative caucuses and the governor are willing to get behind.

Some conversation about what the nitty-gritty details will be, but that is seemingly on its way. There are some other measures that would put in additional guardrails for state programs to help prevent fraud, stiffening penalties, things like that. So I think by the end of session, we'll have a package of a lot of different anti-fraud measures that gets through.

NINA MOINI: And just lastly, I mean, it is an election year, a midterm election year. I'm sure that influences how people show up and then the conversations that are had. And you mentioned in the second half or so of the session, some of the bargaining that might continue to happen or begin to happen. What are you going to be watching for, Dana, when lawmakers return from this break next week?

DANA FERGUSON: Yeah, the first part of session has been very tense. And there's been a lot of visceral anger and a lot of messaging against one another from the sides of the political parties. As some of these messaging bills get set away, one would hope that there can be a little more compromise as folks realize there is a deadline at the end of session to get things done. But I'm also a realist. There's a chance that they care more about campaigning than putting things together. So we'll have to see if folks are willing to work together or if it's more about the elections.

NINA MOINI: Mm-hm. And we know that lawmakers, many of them said and committed to not having those types of visceral conversations, just because of how much violence the state of Minnesota has experienced in the last year. But maybe things will turn in the second half here. We'll see. Thanks so much for your reporting, as always, Dana.

DANA FERGUSON: Absolutely.

NINA MOINI: That's MPR News politics reporter Dana Ferguson.