

JOBS

In the face of a national recession, we have had unprecedented success in creating high-quality, good-paying jobs for the people of Mississippi. Since I took office, 21,519 Mississippians – from Gautier to Guntown, from Vicksburg to Meridian – are now working in jobs that provide them and their families with a sense of safety and security. Our efforts in job creation resulted in over \$6.5 billion in investments in the state of Mississippi.

However, we still face many challenges. We've lost some good companies and good jobs. The announcement last week of the closure of the Burlington operation, with the loss of 850 jobs, was a particularly hard hit for Clarke County, with an unemployment rate of over 15 percent. It is estimated the rate will climb to more than 20 percent as a result of this plant closure.

When this happens, we react aggressively and quickly. We created a rapid response team for economic development emergencies. They react to a plant closing the way MEMA reacts to a natural disaster. They've been there in Jackson County and Winston County. Bob Rohrlack, the Mississippi Development Authority and I will be there for the people of Stonewall and Clarke County as well. Bob, we're glad to have you back in Mississippi.

We continue our efforts to bring jobs to Mississippi. Tonight, I will be in Webster County to meet with local officials, to work with them to bring jobs to their community – or to save them – as I've done in DeSoto County with 300 jobs, in Scott County with 300 jobs, in Monroe County with 200 jobs and in Jeff Davis County with 150 jobs.

While visiting Bosnia, I watched local children playing in the snow – many with torn and tattered shoes on their feet, some with no shoes at all. I remembered a time, in the not so distant past, where our families struggled as well to feed and clothe their children. Many of you know first-hand what I'm talking about. The work we do to bring jobs to Mississippi is about much more than just statistics. It is about food on the table and a warm bed at night. It is about opportunities for our children and their parents. It is about self-respect, self-confidence and a sense of security.

Mississippi is no stranger to tough times; and, like those Mississippians before us, we will not – we cannot – we shall not – fail in our mission. We should re-double our efforts to promote the promise and potential of our great state and our people.

Jobs are so important to our people that we must not do less than our best.

Because of the national economy, many people do not have the opportunity to work. We do. We cannot stop fighting for jobs. If we have to work longer, if we have to work harder, that's what we must do.

No, now is definitely not the time to back off on our investments in jobs.

MEDICAID

Medicaid is so much more than another government agency. It means health insurance for our children, elderly and disabled. The success of Medicaid is evidenced by the enrollment of 87,000 new recipients in the past year. In January of 2000, less than 600 children were enrolled in the Children's Health Insurance Program. Today, that number is nearly 50,000.

No child in our state will be denied health care. Healthy children go to school ready to learn. Mississippi's children deserve every opportunity to make the most of their God-given talents.

Eighty percent of the residents of nursing homes depend on Medicaid for essential and vital care. We're not just talking about numbers and statistics here. We're talking about our parents and our grandparents.

Medicaid does all of this for the people of our state on only seven percent of our budget, and with astonishingly low administrative costs of four percent. Medicaid is, without a doubt, the best bargain in state government.

I want to commend this Legislature for its efforts to expand Medicaid services. We should take pride in knowing that more of our people are receiving health care. The role of Medicaid is to ensure a healthy Mississippi, one ready to compete at all levels. Anything less is unacceptable.

For the well-being of our people, our good work must not be less than our best.