

Governor's Column – 04/07/02

In government, a good bit of time and energy is spent on trying to find common ground. As we near the end of the 2002 legislative session, we can say we've found some of that common ground.

As part of the executive budget recommendation offered in January, proposals were laid out to achieve our priorities for jobs, education, public safety and health care. In the end, the Legislature met our suggestions for the Mississippi Development Authority. They met our recommendations for the teacher pay raise and the Adequate Education Program. They met our requests for funds to ensure the safety and security of our people.

However, the failure to fully fund the Medicaid program is going to have a devastating effect on the health care system in Mississippi. By underfunding the program by \$120 million, we are going to lose matching funds from the federal government and our people are going to lose almost \$500 million worth of health care services.

More than half a million Mississippians rely on Medicaid for their prescription drugs. Over 50,000 children are enrolled in the Children's Health Insurance Program (CHIP). Thousands of senior citizens live in nursing homes across the state. The decisions on what programs to cut will affect them all.

We are going to have to make cuts, and those cuts are going to hit close to home. Nursing home residents are at risk. Individuals who need help paying for prescription drugs may not get the drugs they need. The impact on health care providers will be felt statewide.

It's a tragedy that could have been avoided.

The Medicaid issue is not new. In the executive budget recommendation for the current fiscal year, it was noted that Medicaid would be facing a financial shortfall without swift action. And, during the 2002 session, I offered two proposals to address those problems, proposals that were quickly rejected without serious study.

The impact of the loss of nearly \$500 million in health care services will be felt in a wider arena as well. Anytime that much money is pumped into the economy, the ripple effect of jobs and increased spending has an even greater effect on our state. The revenue collections for the current fiscal year are evidence enough that we desperately need every possible dollar flowing through our economy.

A couple of weeks ago, I wrote about the “Acme blueprint” from the old Road Runner cartoons. In every cartoon, using the Acme blueprint was a recipe for disaster. We’ve been handed an Acme blueprint for Medicaid, and the result in real life will be the same as in the cartoons – someone will get hurt.

The people who need our help the most – our elderly, our disabled and our children – deserve a better blueprint. They need us to find some more common ground.