

Governor's Column – 04/21/02

We're working hard to protect the 650,000 Mississippians who need their health care covered by Medicaid. We will fight to keep people in nursing homes, to provide prescription drugs and free-standing dialysis, and all the other optional services threatened by the lack of funding for the next fiscal year. This issue is part of the larger problem of escalating health care costs and access to medical treatment in every community.

On April 12, the Legislature returned to debate this issue. The House of Representatives quickly acted to remove restrictions on the delivery of health care and offer flexibility in the management of the program.

Some good work was done that day in the House, but without agreement from the Senate we are back to square one. With the knowledge that we can't afford to let this problem linger, I will be calling a special session to address the issue once again.

There are two main points for consideration by the Legislature. First and foremost is the adequate funding of the Medicaid program. As the cost of health care rises, not just in Mississippi but nationwide, we are forced to direct more of our own resources toward meeting this need.

We are in a national recession, and Mississippi's own economic condition is not healthy, either. Revenue collections have not met the estimates. Jobs have been lost and, with them, health insurance. In these situations, Medicaid is the program that steps in to fill the void.

At the same time the Medicaid rolls are expanding, we must continue to provide for our seniors, disabled and children. These Mississippians depend on this program for their most basic health care needs, and I will not allow those needs to go unmet.

Second, the Medicaid problem isn't limited to Mississippi. A vast majority of the states are not meeting their revenue estimates, and the effect on programs like Medicaid can be devastating. There's a way out of this problem, but it's going to take planning, cooperation, and a shared commitment to reaching a solution.

One thing that will not be part of the solution is a tax increase. If we set priorities and shape the budget to meet those priorities, we can do the work we need to do.

I have offered solutions to the Legislature. During the 2002 session, I offered three different proposals for Medicaid. With those plans receiving little consideration, I have asked simply for a reasonable appropriation and the flexibility to manage the program more effectively and efficiently.

Mississippi's Medicaid program is the most legislatively micro-managed program in the nation. Medicaid Executive Director Rica Lewis-Payton has more than 18 years experience in the health care field, and legislators have praised her knowledge and expertise with the issues.

She should have the flexibility to restructure Medicaid, and to make changes and negotiate with recipients and providers. She should not have to ask for legislative approval every time she sees an opportunity to make something work better.

The solution for the Medicaid problem is there, and it needs to be agreed on when we come together again. Time is running short. Next to our Medicaid dollars, it's the one thing we can't afford to waste.