

From: "Lisa S. Mader" <lisa.s.mader@usm.edu>
To: "Sherry Vance" <SVANCE@mississippi.org>, "Lynne W. Jeter" <lynne@thewritingdesk.com>, "Becky Gillette" <bgillette@bellsouth.net>, <dmitchell@godwin.com>, "Donna Ritchey" <dritchey@godwin.com>, "Sidney Bellard" <sbellard@i-55.com>, "Scot Slay" <SSlay@ECD.Org>, "Bob Pierce" <Bob.Pierce@usm.edu>, "Richard C. Giannini" <richard.giannini@usm.edu>, "Bradley G. Bond" <bradley.bond@usm.edu>, "Pamela P. Smith" <Pam@ihl.state.ms.us>, "Brautigam, Kurt R." <KRBRAUTI@southernco.com>, <cphillips@theADP.com>, "Charles M. Mayo" <cmayo@ocean.otr.usm.edu>, "Charles McCormick" <Charles.McCormick@usm.edu>, "Clotee Lewis" <Clotee@ihl.state.ms.us>, "Cracchiolo, Mary" <MCRACCHIOLO@beaurivage.com>, "Craig Denson" <CDENSON@mississippi.org>, "'Doty Dr. Harold'" <harold.doty@usm.edu>, "Elliott Pood" <elliott.pood@usm.edu>, "Rex Gandy" <Rex.Gandy@usm.edu>, "W.Lee Pierce" <W.Pierce@usm.edu>, <S.L.Steen@usm.edu>, "Ed Morgan" <emorgan@landacontracting.com>, "Elizabeth Kirkland" <ekirkland@msbusiness.com>, "Frances Karnes" <Frances.Karnes@usm.edu>, <gcocke@mbmc.org>, "gswoope" <gswoope@megagate.com>, "Hansen, Will" <WHansen@mhagroup.com>, <jared.loftus@usm.edu>, <jbass@godwin.com>, "Jennifer Griffin" <jgriffin@etv.state.ms.us>, "Jim Borsig" <jborsig@biloxi.ms.us>, "John Porretto" <jporretto@ap.org>, "Kelly Riley" <kriley@governor.state.ms.us>, <mboyd@governor.state.ms.us>, "Kelly, Rex E." <REKELLY@southernco.com>, "Lee Ann MAYO" <LMAYO@governor.state.ms.us>, <LeighAGreg@aol.com>, "'Mark Goodman'" <mark.goodman@usm.edu>, "Mathew A. Cox" <Mathew.Cox@usm.edu>, "Mick Bullock" <mick.bullock@usm.edu>, "Myron Henry" <myron.henry@usm.edu>, "'Panton, Ken'" <kpanton@earthlink.net>, "Paul Gallo" <PGallo@Telesouth.com>, "RDeRocker" <RD@dc-intl.com>, <RobertChannell@mbmc.org>, "Rocky Prior" <Rocky.Prior@usm.edu>, <ALeslie@trustmark.com>, "Sean McGee" <sean.mcgee@bxs.com>, "Sidney Gonsoulin" <Sidney.Gonsoulin@usm.edu>, "Terrell Lacy" <tllacy@copycats-printing.com>
Date: 11/12/03 9:19AM
Subject: wanted you to know

SOUTHERN MISS ANNOUNCES PLANS TO PURSUE TEACHING HOSPITAL ON GULF COAST

HATTIESBURG - Challenged by Congressman Gene Taylor to fill the health care needs of war veterans, The University of Southern Mississippi announced plans today it would seek a collaboration with the Gulfport VA hospital that would transform it into a teaching hospital.

Speaking at a Veterans' Day Ceremony in Gulfport, Taylor challenged Southern Miss President Dr. Shelby Thames to give back to a veteran community that has "sacrificed so much" for its country.

"There is talk of shutting down the Gulfport VA and running it at the Biloxi VA, and I don't like that one bit," said Taylor, who is a senior member of the House Armed Services Committee in the House of Representatives.

Turning to Dr. Thames, who was in attendance at the ceremony, Taylor continued: "I know Dr. Thames and I know he never backs away from a challenge. That's why he has offered his expertise and the expertise of those at The University of Southern Mississippi to team up with the Veterans Administration to transform the VA Gulfport into a teaching hospital, which will care for the veterans of this country while training the next generation of health care professionals in south Mississippi."

Dr. Thames said Taylor asked him personally to look at the health care needs of the veterans of the Mississippi Gulf Coast and to "do whatever we could as a comprehensive university to see that those needs were met."

Veterans are currently having to wait for medical treatment because of a lack of available services, Dr. Thames said. With Southern Miss being on the Gulf Coast and having a Bachelors through Ph.D programs and facilities that stretch all the way from Stennis Space Center to Ocean Springs, it makes sense that our university should fill that health care void, he said.

"This is a tremendous facility here in Gulfport, a gorgeous facility that was a hospital and is still a hospital, so basically it's just a matter of amalgamating our programs together," Dr. Thames said. "And the cost of doing this in a cooperative fashion will be significantly less than if we attempted to start a health care facility for these veterans from scratch."

Dr. Thames said Southern Miss, which educates more nurses than any other school in the state and offers degrees through the Ph.D. level, already has nurses working in cooperation with the VA hospital. "We have psychologists down here on staff, and some of their psychologists come to Hattiesburg and teach. We could do that in a much more extensive collaboration, save lots of money and become much more efficient and offer programs we do not now currently offer."

The next step in this process, Dr. Thames said, is for the university to talk with the constituents of the Gulf Coast - patients, veterans, VA administrators, staff, business leaders, educators - and to determine "what the real needs are and what it is they want Southern Miss to do."

"Since we've been issued this challenge, I think it's imperative that we take this seriously and make a strong effort to find out what those needs are, then go to our

Board of Trustees at the Institutions for Higher Learning and say, 'Here is the need, we want to fill it.'"

Edwin Cassell, chief of voluntary service at the Gulfport VA, said he thinks veterans and citizens of the Gulf Coast would welcome efforts by Southern Miss to turn the embattled hospital into a teaching facility.

"You could just tell by the reception today that a lot of people are excited about this," Cassell said.

Taylor said that the need for such a hospital is long overdue. More than one third of the state's veterans live in the fourth congressional district and the number will peak in about 12 years, he said. "For the foreseeable future, this is a challenge because the number of veterans we have will never be smaller than what we have now. It's here today and it's going to be an even bigger challenge 10 years from now. We're always going to have veterans, from the Iraq war to future wars that must be taken care of," Taylor said.

Citing Southern Miss' success in building world-class polymer science and medical technologies programs, Taylor said it is just "the next logical step to develop a medical center using the buildings that are available in Gulfport and using the patients that are there needing to be seen."

As the demographics of an aging nation start to favor retirees over working-age populations, more health care professionals will be necessary to meet rising medical needs, Taylor said. "We have a lot of people who'll have great unmet needs unless we have more of these professionals, and so we're fulfilling that need. Once they graduate they can go out and serve patients in south Mississippi, so I see lots of good things coming from this."

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Lisa Slay Mader
Director, Marketing and Public Relations
The University of Southern Mississippi
Phone (601)266-4491
Fax (601) 266-5381
www.usm.edu/pr