

The Mississippi Legislature convened in a special session this past week. On the agenda for their discussion were three issues: an economic development package, private prisons and Medicaid.

The economic development package dealt with a home-grown Mississippi company, and the decision of the Legislature to support the package was swift. Their action on this issue demonstrated again the importance of investing in existing industry in the state.

The Advantage Mississippi Initiative, passed in a special legislative session two years ago, is the vehicle driving our investment efforts. Recognized as one of the most aggressive economic development programs in the country, it has been used successfully to both recruit and retain industry in the state.

Advantage Mississippi was tailor-made for situations like the one we addressed this past week.

Howard Industries, based in Jones County, manufactures transformers, computers, and ballasts, and provides a full transportation service. Their impact on the global marketplace is strong, with their products being exported to 150 countries around the world.

The decision to provide \$31.5 million for infrastructure, site development, job training and recruitment was a good one. It sends a signal that our dedication to homegrown industry is strong. We must be willing to invest in companies already doing business in Mississippi, especially when those companies have deep roots in our soil.

The investment in Howard Industries, with its guarantee of 2,000 new jobs, will keep those roots strong for a long time to come.

Last month, contracts with the operators of five private prison facilities around the state were terminated. We knew we could negotiate better contracts, and we did. The taxpayers of our state demand fiscal responsibility in the spending of their dollars, and it's a responsibility I will not be taken lightly.

The legislation to revise the appropriation for the Department of Corrections was necessary to save \$6 million and to better provide for the mentally ill and youthful offenders currently in the system. The decision by a majority of the House to fund prison beds we don't need versus saving \$6 million is unfortunate and will likely force us back into a special session to address funding for our correctional system.

Finally, the House and Senate moved quickly to remove a spending provision on the Division of Medicaid. This provision, added during the 2002 regular legislative session, restricted spending to no more than twenty-five percent of their quarterly allotment.

For Medicaid to best serve the people it is committed to serving, it must have the flexibility to operate without undue constraints. The removal of those constraints is vitally important to our mission of providing quality health care to the 650,000 Mississippians who depend on Medicaid.

With the creation of 2,000 new jobs and the ability to improve the quality of health care, this special session was a victory for the people of Mississippi.