

Governor's Column – 2/3/02

CUT SERVICES. INCREASE SPENDING.

Like oil and water, the two just don't mix. The House of Representatives is passing a bill to cut Medicaid services. The Senate is working on a bill that will increase Medicaid spending.

It just doesn't add up.

“Ain't no telling where I'd be.”

“I'd certainly be dead.”

These aren't my words. These are the voices of some of our children, young Mississippians who are currently living at a psychiatric treatment facility in Jackson. At a meeting with some of these young men and women last week, I heard their stories and how they are being helped through services provided by Medicaid.

These children live at a place that is at once their home, their school, and their source for treatment. If Medicaid services are cut, they lose all three. If Medicaid services are cut, the hope of a young generation of Mississippians is lost.

“If you need my help, you call on me.”

Again, not my words. This is the voice of a Mississippi senior citizen, a resident at a nursing home. She depends on Medicaid to help cover the costs of her nursing home care, her prescription drugs, and other medical needs.

The optional services being considered for cuts by the Legislature will take away medical services from our children, disabled and senior citizens. The optional services include

prescription drugs, adult dental and vision care, mental health services, child psychiatric services, hospice services and waivers for home-based care.

Which one of these, when cut, would not be a denial of medical service?

House Bill 1200 stands to be one of the most oppressive pieces of legislation ever passed out of committee. In addition to taking \$108 million from the principal of the tobacco trust fund, it also cuts prescription drugs, reduces payments to health care providers, and places a greater financial burden on those least able to shoulder it. Health care providers are going to stop providing medical treatment, especially in rural areas.

A bill has been passed through the Senate Public Health and Welfare Committee to increase the number of beds covered by Medicaid in a psychiatric residential treatment facility. This increases costs.

There's a mixed message here. Cuts are being called for while services are being expanded even more.

At the request of the Legislature, I provided a plan for dealing with the current Medicaid shortfall without cutting services or dipping into the tobacco trust fund. I was pleased with the discussions that took place last week regarding my plan because, for the first time, a governor's proposal was being given serious scrutiny by the Legislature. However, a different path has been chosen and I will not support the direction in which we are heading.

It's time for difficult decisions to be made, and we cannot shy away from making those decisions. We must work together to ensure the people of Mississippi – our seniors, our disabled, our children – are not left without access to the vital medical services they so desperately need.

There are Mississippians who are genuinely concerned about the medical services they currently receive through Medicaid. There are children who need help, who understand all too well what will happen if the funding for their treatment isn't there. There are senior citizens who realize that after a lifetime of working, their access to health care is threatened.

Their voices are speaking to us loud and clear. It's up to us to listen, and it's up to us to respond to them.

"Ain't no telling where I'd be" is not what we need to be hearing from our children, not when we can be helping them say "this is what I'm going to do."