

*Remarks for the
Mississippi Access to Care Press Conference
February 21, 2002*

Good afternoon. Much has been said in recent weeks about health care in Mississippi. The Medicaid shortfall, brought about by the dramatic increase in health care coverage for our people, has been a common topic of discussion.

The recommendations I made in my budget presentation are focused on making a difference in the health of our people, and I will continue working to get those recommendations put in place.

We have received a letter of support from Tom Scully, Administrator of the Centers for Medicare and Medicaid Services in the Department of Health and Human Services.

I am releasing copies of the letter from Mr. Scully in which he echoes our recommendations, especially with regards to screenings for diabetes, heart disease and cancer.

This support from the federal government is further evidence of what can be done for health care in Mississippi. We simply have to be willing to try.

It also ties in to the work we've been doing to improve health care for our citizens with disabilities.

Last year, as a result of a U.S. Supreme Court decision ordering states to provide services to the disabled in community-based settings, the Mississippi Legislature passed a bill that mandated the development of a comprehensive plan to comply with this decision.

That plan – Mississippi Access to Care – was submitted to the Legislature last September. In the time since, the plan has been recognized as one of the best in the nation.

According to a survey by the National Conference of State Legislatures, Mississippi's 59-page plan contains "a clear vision for systems change, specific strategies and goals, agencies responsible for each strategy, timelines and budgets."

Great work has been done on this plan, and I want to commend Rica Lewis-Payton and the Division of Medicaid for their work as the lead agency on this effort

Christy Dunaway, chair of the Governor's Commission for Citizens with Disabilities, has also been involved in this work.

This nation attention is a step in the right direction, but if we fail in this effort, all of our previous work will be for nothing.

We must work to ensure the plan is properly implemented

In this current session, House Bill 1070 was introduced to implement this plan. This bill would establish an oversight committee to oversee this effort and ensure the goals of the plan are met for those Mississippians who need these services.

Unfortunately, the bill as originally introduced has been significantly changed. The committee substitute currently before the Senate does not offer the strength of the original bill.

House Bill 1070 needs to come to my desk as originally introduced. Anything less would be a disservice to those whom the bill seeks to help.

I'd like to ask Rica Lewis-Payton to speak to the importance of the endorsement from the Department of Health and Human Services and its role with the Mississippi Access to Care plan.

(Rica and Christy Dunaway to speak)

We'd be glad to take any questions.

