

*Remarks for the  
Health Insurance Press Conference  
August 29, 2001*

This morning, Mississippi's teachers and state employees got up to go to work and saw this headline in the paper – “7% premium hike OK'd.”

The Health Insurance Management Board recommended this rate increase yesterday, which means one thing – less take-home pay for the teachers and state employees.

While it is true the state covers active employees, the increase in the premium means that the cost for covering dependents is going to go up – not the 7 percent mentioned in the headline, but 12 percent.

At a time when only 25 percent of our state employees carry their dependents on the state plan, this increase will dramatically affect their ability to cover the costs for their families.

Once again, they will be forced to dig deeper into their pockets and into their savings to meet their basic health care needs. For many, leaving the insurance plan and getting on Medicaid is the only option.

This increase is just one more hit on state employees without looking at other options.

I want to say again that I am bound and determined to fix the health care problems facing these employees. For too long, the only thing they have seen is for their insurance costs to go up while their salaries remain the same.

I want them to see some different, positive action taking place.

Last month I offered a proposal to address the health insurance problems of our state employees and all Mississippians. This proposal takes into account the rising cost of health care, and gives us a great opportunity to look at the options available for meeting that cost.

My proposal is not a definitive set of ideas, but there are areas in health insurance where I have suggested specific action.

We could cover the increase in the premium for dependents. We could eliminate the deductible for regular visits to physicians.

And we can do it by working together to maximize federal matching dollars. That's the whole basis of the proposal I offered last month. I want us to look at how we can get more of the money we've been sending to Washington back here in Mississippi to take care of our people.

I've suggested to the legislative leadership that we work together, that we bring legislators and health care experts to the table for a frank discussion of what we can do.

The health of our state is built on the health of our people. We have been dealt some blows in the past, such as the 1997 Balanced Budget Act that took \$930 million away from Mississippi.

That act alone helped force the closure of the Perry County Hospital in July, and now there are over 30 rural hospitals at risk of closing in the state.

It's time for us to talk less about how expensive health care is becoming, and more about what we can do to help ease that burden for our people.



With state health insurance alone, we are talking about almost 200,000 employees, dependents and retirees. If we take action now, we have helped 10 percent of our population.

We can't afford to let opportunities get away from us because we didn't want to try something new or different. I've said before, I will not make promises based on false information or false hope.

What I will promise is my commitment to finding every available avenue for helping our state and our people.

In the end, the one question that should be asked is, what is best for the people of Mississippi?

That's the question I've tried to address with my proposal, and I hope we will have an answer for the people soon. They deserve no less from us.