

*Remarks to the
Mississippi Alliance of State Employees
August 11, 2001*

Thank you, Brenda, for the opportunity to be here today. I am always glad to have a chance to visit with the people who are working hard for Mississippi – especially when it's our state employees.

You are there every day doing tremendous work for the people of Mississippi, and on their behalf, I want to thank you for the work you do.

Good things are happening in Mississippi, and I want to make sure we build on those good things and continue to make life better for all of our citizens.

Last month, we made history when the Legislature voted to remove the five percent provision in the teacher pay legislation. We accomplished something we've been working on for years, and we should be proud of that accomplishment.

I have said time and time again that education should be our highest priority in Mississippi, and we have kept that commitment.

We did it through perseverance, hard work and the support of great people like Maryann Graczyk. Thank you, Maryann, for your tremendous work.

We've made our commitment to our teachers. Now it's time to make good on our commitment to you, the people who make our state work every day of every year.

At the Neshoba County Fair, I unveiled a proposal to give you a pay raise that is long overdue. And as a part of this proposal, I want to also address another issue of importance to you – health insurance.

Let me begin with the overall scope of how this proposal would work. Mississippi, through the good efforts of Attorney General Mike Moore, became the lead state in a settlement with the tobacco companies.

As a part of this settlement, each year we receive a payment from the tobacco companies – and these payments will continue as long as these companies are in business.

Today, we have about \$650 million in a trust fund, just sitting there earning interest. This is money that cannot be touched, by law, and I am by no means proposing that we raid this fund.

Our next payment from the tobacco companies will be approximately \$210 million.

If we divert just \$100 million of that payment into Medicaid and match it with federal dollars, a 4 to 1 match, we can turn \$100 million into \$500 million – all for health care.

What can we do with the general fund dollars we free up? We give you a pay raise – one that you have had coming for some time, one that is well-deserved, and one that says we value your work.

What else can we do? We can enhance your health insurance plan. For years, your premiums have gone up while your pay has stayed the same – and you all know that means that your take-home pay just goes down.

Right now, only 25 percent of our state employees have their dependents on their health insurance. That's just not right. We've got to fix this problem now.

I have been meeting with the legislative leadership and the members of the Legislature to discuss this proposal.

I have hosted five different lunches at the Governor's Mansion with legislators to ask for their input and thoughts on this proposal.

Their advice and knowledge will be important in shaping a good plan.

That's why I unveiled the proposal five months before the session, so we could work together to craft a plan that works for you and works for Mississippi.

You do so much for our state, and don't ever think that I have forgotten it. Thank you for your support, your patience, your enthusiasm, and your hard work for the people of Mississippi.