

Healthy Mississippians Build A Healthy Future

Improving Mississippi's health care is a common goal, a common concern for all Mississippians. We may differ in our solutions, but health care is a priority to everyone in Mississippi. Too many Mississippians of all ages and walks of life struggle with rising costs for health care. We are working on solutions to this crisis, but we still have many areas to improve. Healthy Mississippians are essential to Mississippi's success. For Mississippi to remain competitive in education and economic development, our people must be healthy and able to work.

The infant mortality rate in Mississippi has remained steady for the last two years. The death of even one child is too many. That is why we must reauthorize and continue the work of the Infant Mortality Task Force. We must continue to look for new ways to prevent infant deaths. We need healthy children and healthy adults to create a stronger and better Mississippi.

We are providing health insurance to more of Mississippi's children since the start of 2000. We now have more than 24,000 Mississippi children enrolled in the Children's Health Insurance Program, 48 times more than were covered when we took office in January. This health insurance program is working for working families. We continue to look for new, innovative ways to reach every child in Mississippi in need of health insurance coverage.

Mississippians are dying from breast cancer. We also have an alarming number of people dying from cervical cancer. Mississippi's First Lady, Melanie Musgrove, has begun her work promoting Breast Cancer Awareness across our state. Research and awareness are essential, if we are to stop this killer.

During a One-On-One session in Tupelo, I listened to a man talk of his inability to no longer offer health insurance to his employees. For decades this small businessman had prided himself on providing this benefit to his employees, but the cost and participation rates required by his insurance company were forcing him to face his employees with the bad news. We must find solutions.

The creation last year of Medical Education Scholarship Programs provides full scholarships for up to twenty new recipients each year provided they agree to serve ten years in family medicine in a critical needs area of our state. In tandem with licensing physicians' assistants, we will begin to see the expansion of access to health care particularly in rural areas. Continuing the effort to recruit doctors and other health care providers to rural Mississippi remains a top priority particularly in light of continuing federal disinterest in medical care for rural Americans.

The cost of prescription medication continues to spiral, taxing all of us, especially those caught in the squeeze of the middle class. While pharmaceutical advertising budgets grow, our ability to afford the high-cost of medicine slips away.

One group of Mississippians who need our special attention are the dedicated men and women who work diligently to make sure that our state works efficiently and effectively. For the upcoming budget year, our budget recommendation and the Legislature's budget place a high priority on the state employees health insurance plan. The Legislative Budget committee has budgeted \$7.6 million for state and public school employees health insurance, where our budget proposes \$10 million. Mississippi's health benefits for state employees may be better than some states across our nation, but it's not good enough. We are committed to doing what can be done to make sure that our state and public school employees have access to affordable, quality health insurance.

We must not use the budget as an excuse to avoid tackling the difficult issues in health care. We may not solve all the problems with health insurance and prescription drug costs quickly, but we can begin with a sound investment in the health insurance we offer our state employees.

Over the past year, we have discovered a new state of mind. We have renewed a spirit of hope. Mississippians must have hope for a better quality of life. Improving our health care system and options is one of the ways. Together we have told the nation and the world we will not settle for second best. We will not be labeled or told we cannot, just because we are Mississippi. That confidence is contagious. I believe it breeds success.