

## **Governor's Column – 01/27/02**

Leadership is action, not position.

I have three main priorities for the State of Mississippi – jobs, health care and education. All three are critical to the success of our state. Our children can't learn if they don't go to school healthy. Our workforce isn't effective if they are not healthy. These three issues tie into one another, and the success of each is dependent on the success of all.

Medicaid must be protected. We are all troubled by the national recession and the budget shortfall; however, this shortfall is much bigger than just Medicaid. It is a problem we face with the entire budget. On Friday, January 25, I unveiled my budget recommendations for Fiscal Year 2003. These recommendations provide a solution for the current year shortfall without using any of the tobacco funds. They also call for using a portion of the future payments to the Health Care Trust Fund for health care needs only and still leave the principal of the fund intact.

In the 2001 legislative session, the Legislature voted to expand Medicaid services. I have always worked to ensure our people – our children, our seniors, our elderly – had access to quality health care. I agreed that services needed to be expanded, but I also had concerns about the costs involved. In addition to the more than forty appropriations bills last year because I felt our revenues would not keep pace with our spending, I vetoed House Bill 1615, the Medicaid appropriations bill.

I did not veto this bill because I wanted to limit services. I vetoed the bill because I wanted to make sure we could continue providing services already offered to the people of Mississippi. In my veto message, I wrote that the budget would not work “if we fail to take into consideration the slowing of our national and state economy, if we fail to take into account the profound shortfall of revenue coming into the state coffers during the present fiscal year, if we fail to properly assess how much we are going to grow and where we will choose to direct that growth.”

Our health care plan, with its details open for inspection, is bigger than just Medicaid as well. Through this plan, we will be able to help provide the following: Prescription drugs for our senior citizens; screenings for diabetes, heart disease, breast cancer and cervical cancer; school nurses for our children; and better access to health care for disabled individuals. We also have a plan to improve the health insurance plan for state and public school employees.

We have thousands of seniors in nursing homes across our state. We have gone from less than 600 children on the Children's Health Insurance Program in 2000 to nearly 50,000 today. There are 545,000 Mississippians who rely on Medicaid for prescription drugs. When people lose jobs, and their health insurance along with them, they turn to Medicaid for help for themselves and their families.

I care more about the people of this state than I do about the protection of a trust fund that could serve generations not yet born, but would allow current generations to perish.

I am not going to shut down any services under Medicaid. I am not going to slash optional services such as prescription drugs, eyeglasses, dialysis, hospice services, dental care or the Children's Health Insurance Program. I refuse to cut services that would put our senior citizens out of nursing homes and onto the street. I will not be responsible for decreasing our efforts to treat mental illness.

Most of the Mississippians on Medicaid don't have a lobbyist in the Capitol, working the halls and committee rooms on their behalf – but they will always have Ronnie Musgrove.