

## **Governor's Column – 04/21/02**

We're working hard to protect the 650,000 Mississippians who need their health care covered by Medicaid. We will fight to keep people in nursing homes, to provide prescription drugs and free-standing dialysis, and all the other optional services threatened by the lack of funding for the next fiscal year. This issue is part of the larger problem of escalating health care costs and access to medical treatment in every community.

On April 12, the Legislature returned to debate this issue. The House of Representatives quickly acted to remove restrictions on the delivery of health care and offer flexibility in the management of the program.

Some good work was done that day in the House, but without agreement from the Senate we are back to square one. With the knowledge that we can't afford to let this problem linger, I will be calling a special session to address the issue once again.

This time, there's a strong plan for consideration by the Legislature.

Representative Steve Holland serves on the Public Health and Welfare Committee, and is known for his in-depth knowledge of the Medicaid program. He has offered a proposal for the problems facing Medicaid and the 650,000 people it serves, and it has my full endorsement and support.

Representative Holland's plan has four main components. First and foremost, it offers the flexibility I have been requesting for Rica Lewis-Payton, Executive Director of Medicaid, to restructure the program and make it more effective and efficient.

Our Medicaid program has more legislative oversight than any other program in the country. Rica Lewis-Payton is a health care professional with 18 years' experience, and she should have the opportunity to use this experience to help the program.

This new plan would give her authority to establish guidelines regarding services, eligibility, fees, provider reimbursement and methods for securing the maximum amount of federal matching dollars.

Second, the Speaker and Lieutenant Governor would appoint a joint legislative committee to work with Lewis-Payton to address the rising costs of the program. While health care costs are rising dramatically nationwide, this cooperative effort would seek to streamline the program while continuing to provide the best possible service to both recipients and providers.

Third, every health-care related agency of the state would be part of a cooperative effort to strengthen the delivery of health care in a cost-efficient manner. Executive directors from the departments of Health, Mental Health, Vocational Rehabilitation, Human Services and the University Medical Center would be part of a team led by Lewis-Payton.

Fourth, and perhaps most important, this plan would establish the Medicaid appropriation for the next two fiscal years at a level of \$425 million. This “no-growth guarantee” ensures the Legislature will know exactly how much is needed to fund the program. The responsibility for the fiscally prudent administration of these dollars would stop at my desk, and that’s a responsibility I’ve asked for from the Legislature.

More than 650,000 Mississippians are served by Medicaid. They are senior citizens, disabled and children. They need to have some peace of mind about their health care, and I am going to fight to make sure they have it.

We have the opportunity here to find some more common ground from the 2002 session. With the components of the Holland plan – flexibility, legislative input, cooperation among agencies and fiscal responsibility – set in place, we can be well on our way to providing the quality health care services the people of Mississippi need and deserve.