

Governor's Column – 04/28/02

I have said two things were needed to save Mississippi's Medicaid program – flexibility and funding. Now, we've got them; and this is the first step toward ensuring quality health care – as well as some peace of mind – for 650,000 Mississippians who expect me to help them.

Last week, I called for the formation of a panel of health care providers, recipients and professionals from the Division of Medicaid to join us at the table.

The purpose: To restructure the Medicaid program and make it work for the people of Mississippi.

On April 9, I vetoed the Medicaid legislation because it did not adequately fund this vital health care program, and it contained restrictions that would affect the delivery of health care services.

Since then, I have been fighting with all the power of my office to make sure the Division of Medicaid has the funds and the flexibility to operate efficiently and effectively for the 650,000 Mississippians who depend on it.

The problems with Medicaid are very real. The discussion of those problems was not a scare tactic, but an honest attempt to help people realize what a lack of funding for this program could cause. Now, we have an opportunity to avert those problems.

In an opinion issued Wednesday, Attorney General Mike Moore affirmed Medicaid Executive Director Rica Lewis-Payton's authority to manage the program. The opinion provides Lewis-Payton and my office with the flexibility enjoyed by other states and the responsibility for making Medicaid a quality health care program.

The funding issue for Medicaid is resolved as well. During meetings last week, I requested an assurance from the legislative leadership that Medicaid funding would be provided, and that assurance has been given.

When I vetoed the Medicaid legislation, I did so because the people who rely on Medicaid needed someone to fight for them. They needed someone to help make sure the program was there and working for them.

The Division of Medicaid falls under the authority of the Governor's Office. Rica Lewis-Payton and I are both charged with the management of that program, and that's what we're going to do.

We are prepared to do whatever is necessary to ensure this program works for the people of Mississippi. Because of the work we did to make it to this point today, services such as nursing homes, prescription drugs and free-standing dialysis are protected.

To make Medicaid as efficient and effective as possible, however, requires the removal of the quarterly provisions contained in House Bill 1794. These provisions limit spending to 25 percent of the quarterly allotment, and restrict our ability to commit to medical services if spending goes beyond 25 percent.

This only hurts innocent people who need medical care, and I will call a special session to deal with this issue.

The flexibility to manage demands the flexibility to commit to medical services when they are needed, and I will not be satisfied until I know the people of this state can receive health care when they need it.