

Governor's Column 11/04/01

### **Health Care Proposal Gaining Support**

Three months ago, I unveiled a proposal for addressing the health care needs of the people of Mississippi. There are so many issues for us to deal with, so many “worst firsts” for us to turn around and turn into positives for the state.

The “worst firsts,” a term coined by Dr. Ed Thompson of the Department of Health, refer to the areas where Mississippi leads the nation; unfortunately, they aren't areas where we want to be a leader.

Mississippi is first in the nation in prevalence for diabetes, heart disease death rate, lack of breast cancer screenings in women over age 50, population underserved by primary care physicians, and age-adjusted death rate.

We are second in the nation in overweight population, hospitalizations and emergency room visits, and fifth in uninsured population.

We can change these statistics. When Mississippi was reported as having the lowest seatbelt usage in the nation, we addressed the problem. Through a coordinated effort, we have increased seatbelt usage by over 26 percent and dramatically decreased the number of fatalities on Mississippi's roads by more than 40 percent.

When we are faced with a challenge, we have taken on that challenge and overcome it. It's time to do it again.

The health care proposal I have offered is the way to do it. By developing innovative and creative means of addressing health needs, we will make a difference. We have an opportunity to increase the funding for Medicaid by maximizing federal funds, and we cannot let this opportunity go to waste.

We want to ensure people are able to have access to primary care physicians, so our emergency rooms are not overwhelmed and being used for non-emergency visits.

We want to help screen for cancer, diabetes and heart disease, and catch these diseases early so treatment can begin. If we practice preventive medicine, we will save lives. It's that simple.

Earlier this month, I presented my proposal to the members of the State Board of Health. Comprised of physicians and health care providers from around the state, the Board has first-hand experience with the health needs of individuals and the frustration of a health care system in need of change.

Following my presentation, the Board endorsed components of the proposal. In their resolution, they stated that "1) there are major health care needs in the state that are unmet; 2) the Board feels we can use the money wisely for Medicaid waivers; 3) this can save state money in the long term in terms of treating chronic diseases; and 4) these health care expenditures should be prioritized utilizing the state health plan and monitored to ensure the state is getting its money's worth."

Strong support from those who know the depth of the challenge before us.

I am confident we can work together to build a healthier Mississippi. It's a matter of setting priorities. It's not unlike education; by investing now in health care, we will make a difference in our future.

We've taken on challenges before, and come out on top. We'll do it again.