

Improving Health Care Should Be Priority

We can turn \$100 million into \$400 million for health care issues in the state through the Division of Medicaid. That's really the basis of my health care proposal – making our money work for the people. The tobacco settlement has provided an income stream for health care needs, and I believe we should be using it in a manner that allows us to have a definite impact on those needs.

This proposal would divert a portion of the future payments from the tobacco settlement, targeted for health care needs in the state. And, as I mentioned last week, the tobacco trust fund would continue to grow and the principal of the fund would not be touched, as mandated by law.

Do we use it for health care, or put it all in the bank drawing low interest? Here's what we can do:

- ELIMINATE DEDUCTIBLES FOR STATE EMPLOYEES ON DOCTOR VISITS;
- REDUCE THE COST OF PRESCRIPTION DRUGS;
- PUT SCHOOL NURSES INTO PLACE AROUND THE STATE;
- ADDRESS HEALTH CARE NEEDS SUCH AS DIABETES AND HEART DISEASE;
- FREE UP MONEY FROM THE GENERAL FUND FOR STATE EMPLOYEE PAY RAISES, AND JUNIOR AND COMMUNITY COLLEGE AND UNIVERSITY PAY RAISES.

Prior to unveiling the proposal on July 26, I spoke with Lieutenant Governor Amy Tuck, Speaker Tim Ford and Attorney General Mike Moore to inform them about the proposal. I asked them to keep an open mind about the idea, so we could work together to improve health care in the state.

In the following weeks, I met with the lieutenant governor, the speaker and the attorney general to determine how we could best sharpen and hone the proposal. In those meetings, I suggested we bring together members of the House and Senate, along with experts chosen by the attorney general and myself, to sit down and determine the best methods for making the most of the available opportunities in health care.

Instead of working together, on August 22, a Joint Select Legislative Study Committee was announced, without prior notice to my office, to study the proposal. In the announcement of the committee, it was stated that the Legislature shared my interest “in enhancing health care for Mississippians through maximizing federal reimbursements to the state Medicaid program.”

And, on August 28, I received an invitation from the committee “to make a presentation regarding the issues you have raised as to the maximization of federal funds to the state Medicaid program.” This past Tuesday, I had the opportunity to make my presentation, and I hope I was able to convey to the committee some sense of the potential in this proposal, as well as its complexity.

I am told the proposal is too vague, that it needs more specifics. I have asked the Legislature to work with me and members of the health care industry to develop those specifics, because there are so many variables to consider. If it falls to me to put together a final package of proposals for consideration, I will do it and I will do it with the best interests of Mississippians and their health in mind.

The bottom line is this: The people of Mississippi are facing serious issues regarding health care and insurance costs. Diabetes, heart disease, cancer – these illnesses affect so many people across the state and we must work to bring them under control. We can do it; it’s just a matter of dedication and commitment.

This is not a time to allow politics to negatively impact something that can be positive for the people. Too much is at stake here, and I don't want to see the health of our people and our state diminished; that is something we truly can't afford.