

Dear Friends,

This past fourteenth of February was not only a day honoring a saint, a windfall occasion for the makers of greeting cards, and the anniversary of an infamous gang murder, it was also my sixth-month anniversary as your Executive Director. I've learned a lot about you and your work over the last few months, and I still marvel at all that you do. You sweat the big picture – and the details too. Your passion for your work, your mastery of it, and your eagerness to help your clients, employees and colleagues have made a powerful impression on me. I'm proud to represent you in the councils of allied groups and at the N.C. General Assembly.

Speaking of that august body, you might ask, "How are things going at the Puzzle Palace, the Cave of Winds, the Land of Broken Dreams, Sleepy Hollow, Gucci Gulch or (pick your own nickname)? As of this writing, I'd say things are pretty good. Many of the items on our legislative wish list are already in play or soon will be.

(01) **Medicaid Relief for Counties** – Two bills with Republican chief sponsors call on the state to phase out the counties' share of Medicaid services costs. Because the Republicans are in the minority in both chambers of the General Assembly, neither of these bills may go anywhere, but that's not the end of the story. In his "State of the State" address Gov. Mike Easley boldly promised that if a legislative study commission didn't come up with a quick solution, he would. He gave no details, but some sort of tax swap between the state and the counties seems like the most promising possibility. Of course the county commissioners won't go for that idea if it obliges them to jack up local taxes and then shoulder all the blame at the next election.

(02) **NC FAST** may speed up now. At the direction of the Executive Board, NCACDSS representatives contacted Rep. Joe Tolson (D- Edgecombe-Wilson) and asked him to keep an eye on NC FAST and do all he can to see that the project moves forward. Rep. Tolson agreed to be of help, and he is well positioned to do so. He has just been appointed as a co-chair of the powerful House Appropriations Committee, yet he remains a vice-chair of the House Science & Technology Committee, which he led last year. Association leaders, NC FAST folk, and other friends at DHHS, DIRM and DSS were alarmed earlier this year when the Office of Information Technology Services essentially stopped the project. Mr. George Bakolia, the state's Chief Information Officer, expressed concern that the program was too big and would take too long to implement. These problems seem to have been worked out, and the new wrinkle is that NC FAST now has a potent legislative champion who has been briefed on the situation and is poised to keep things moving.

(03) **Child Daycare Funding** got a boost in Gov. Mike Easley's budget recommendations, which include an allocation of \$8.4 million in new state money to provide daycare coverage for 2,000 more children.

(04) **Child Welfare** isn't doing too badly either. The Association, its Social Services Consortium partners and other allied groups such as the N.C. Chapter of NASW are working to obtain a \$4.6 million increase to expand the Child Welfare Education

Collaborative to all of the accredited social work programs in public universities across the state. A bill sponsor must be found so that the measure can be put in play during the House's budget planning process. Meanwhile, the Governor's budget includes provisions that provide Medicaid benefits for foster care children until they reach age 21 (we originally wanted age 25) and support on-line learning for CPS workers. If enacted as proposed, Gov. Easley's budget would allocate about \$650,000 for on-line training for child welfare workers, foster and adoptive parents. Last but not least, Easley's plan would spend \$11 million to provide college scholarships for youngsters in foster care.

(05) **Adult Services** has gotten attention in the Governor's budget as well. It earmarks about \$500,000 to improve adult-care homes and beef up the state's ability to investigate complaints. The Association and its Social Services Consortium partners have endorsed nine of fifteen recommendations made by the state Study Commission on Aging. Many of those recommendations – including more housing funds, the APS pilot program and guardianship statutes – are in play.

(06) The topic of the **Service Crisis** facing county social service departments is a sort of place holder. The Association's Executive Committee has authorized staff to look for any and all opportunities to increase funding for county DSS services and emphasize the crushing problem of unfunded mandates.

I would be remiss if I did not brief you on SB466 "Amend Concealed Weapons Law." You may not be aware that it is already illegal to carry a concealed bowie knife, dirk, dagger, slung [sic] shot, loaded cane, metallic knuckles, razor, shurikin or stun gun. If SB 466 is enacted it will also be illegal to carry a concealed switchblade knife, ballistic knife, machete, slingshot, blackjack, throwing star, oriental dark or other deadly weapon of like kind, "except when the person is on the person's own premises." I think the bill should add rolling pins, frying pans, tool belts and ipods on carrying straps.

As always, thanks for your guidance and support.