



Legislative Update

#0004 for Feb. 19, 2007

Domestic Violence Gets Plenty of Attention – It’s going to be a busy session. As of the end of last week, the legislative hopper already bulged with about 450 bills, and ten of them addressed some aspect of domestic violence. Those include HB 43, sponsored by Rep. Marian McLawhorn (D-Pitt), which would earmark \$1 million in TANF funds for local domestic violence prevention programs. Rep. Mark Hilton (R-Catawba) has floated HB202, which would assure that a person who is granted a domestic violence prevention order could buy a firearm. Guns are also on the mind of Sen. Julia Boseman (D-New Hanover), but she chose the obverse approach. Sen. Boseman introduced a bill that would prohibit a person subject to a domestic violence protection order from buying a firearm, and her SB 9 would make it a felony for a person to knowingly violate a protection order while armed with a deadly weapon. Nor did she stop there. She has introduced six other domestic violence bills, including SB 31, the Senate companion version of HB 43 – the one that taps TANF money for DV prevention.

An even larger cluster of bills sponsored by various legislators would bag, tag, flag, and otherwise track sex offenders, but no one has yet proposed that they walk the streets like Biblical lepers crying “Unclean! Unclean!” The recidivism rate among sex offenders is often high, and the bulk of the perpetrators are males who’ve preyed on women or children – or both. Judging by the nature and scope of the bills aimed at these offenders, the solons have little faith in their prospects for rehabilitation.

What Do Medicaid And Our Prison System Have In Common? – It’s not a riddle or any other kind of joke. Both are entitlement programs in the sense that “eligibles” must be “served.” The costs and numbers of people served in both programs are growing, and both depend – at least in part – on state funds. The state can do things in both programs that tinker with costs but don’t truly control them. In SFY 2006, the state share of Medicaid came to \$2.9 billion.* (The counties’ share was \$426 million.) During about the same time period, the prisons’ portion of the N.C. Department of Correction budget came to a mere \$941 million. The number of Medicaid recipients in N.C. has more than tripled since 1980. Though growth in the prison population slowed in the 1990’s, it still climbed by more than 21 percent in the last ten years. The state has some ability to limit Medicaid costs through the list of optional services the program will cover, rates paid to providers such as physicians, restrictions on prescription drug coverage, and other means. The state can influence the number of prison beds it needs through sentencing guidelines, parole and early release, and so forth. The inmate population in our state stands at more than 37,000, and despite “stacking” and other efforts to cram more inmates in the same space, it is estimated that North Carolina will be 2,500 prison beds short by 2011. Both Medicaid and our prison system tap General Fund monies, and in that sense, they are competitors for limited state resources.

Prevention or “wellness” programs that help people avoid chronic illness are being seen as a vital part of the effort to reduce health care costs, including Medicaid.

Wouldn't it be wonderful if those who craft our state laws and policies began to see social services as a wellness program aimed at reducing crime, illness, unemployment, unintended pregnancies, and other blights? The unavoidable truth that many politicians refuse to recognize is that the public – especially the poor – *will* be served. That leaves just three questions. Where? By whom? And at what cost? County departments of social services already do heroic work in these areas. And if they were adequately funded. . .

(* all figures from the NCGA's Fiscal Research Division)

Short But Meaty – What follows is a list of bills and items of interest. . .

HB 57 “Phase Out County Medicaid Share” is pending in the House Committee on Appropriations. Rep. Julia Howard (R-Davie/Iredell), the sponsor, and a whole slew of county officials are watching that one.

HB 214 introduced by Rep. Margaret Highsmith Dickson (D-Cumberland) would appropriate \$1.1 million for 22 fully-certified child advocacy centers across the state and put up an additional \$30,000 for two training sessions aimed at the centers' workers.

Sen. Tony Rand (D-Cumberland) has introduced **SB 117**, which would earmark \$100,000 to hire a professional consulting firm to study *all* of DHHS's county funding allocations. There's a House companion bill, HB 187, sponsored by Rep. Rick Glazier (D-Cumberland). Doesn't seem like enough money. Just studying foster care allocations could take years.

Rep. Glazier is also the sponsor for **HB 125**, a bill that would set aside a total of \$50 million over two years as “noncategorical [sic] General Aid to County funds to improve the delivery of the 10 essential public health services in all counties.” That's a very direct way to respond to the crisis in services.

HB 51 “Earned Income Tax Credit” awaits its fate in the House Finance Committee. The sponsor is Rep. Jennifer Weiss (D-Wake).

A Crooked End to A Crooked Tale – As everyone in North Carolina knows, former House Speaker Jim Black (D-Mecklenburg) has pled guilty to federal bribery charges. Instead of some offense stemming from video poker, the state lottery or a shady move to hold power, Mr. Black admitted his part in a scheme to trade favorable action on insurance legislation for \$29,000 in bribes paid by “three chiropractors.” Of all people, those three should have known better. They adjusted Mr. Black's attitude, but they certainly weren't trying to straighten it.



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