

Legislative Link

A legislative update provided by the United Way of Florida, Inc.

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GRIDLOCK

Last Wednesday was the 2002 Legislative Session's midway point. As of that date only six bills of minor importance had been passed by both chambers and sent to the Governor. The logjam Republicans are beginning to fear will cause fallout during the upcoming November elections largely revolves around the inability of the Governor, and House and Senate leaders to gain consensus regarding tax reform. This week, the Senate put a compromise on the table (page 9), offering to cut hundreds of millions of dollars worth of sales tax exemptions, primarily to fund education. In addition, the Senate's proposed 2002-2003 budget includes \$640 million in local property taxes to pay for education. Again, the Governor and Speaker oppose this effort.

The Revenue Estimating Conference will meet in early March to provide its projections of revenue the state will collect during the 2002-2003 budget year. This projection will provide the final numbers that will be plugged into the final state budget. Rumors are circulating that the conference will project increased income of several hundred million dollars, perhaps even up to \$1 billion. If so, the Governor and Speaker will contend that additional revenues – through tax reform or increased property taxes – are unnecessary.

With only three weeks left in the regular session, the Legislature doesn't appear ready to deal with much else other than the only two items it is constitutionally required to pass – next year's budget and redrawn district lines. Odds are, if history is any indication, the logjam will break with enough time prior to the end of session – or heading into an extended or special session – and the floodgates will open with hundreds of bills that are now being worked through committees hitting the floors for final action. Then again, history may be thrown to the wind, as we saw during the aborted first special session last year, and as witnessed by the parliamentary gymnastics we saw last week in the House, ala the Select Committee of the Whole.



Helping all children succeed for life.
An initiative of the United Way of Florida,
Publix Super Market Charities, Inc. and
Bank of America



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The year is 1902, one hundred years ago . . .

Only 8 percent of the homes had a telephone. A three-minute call from Denver to New York City cost eleven dollars.

Only 14 Percent of the homes in the US had a bathtub.

Alabama, Mississippi, Iowa, and Tennessee were each more heavily populated than California. With a mere 1.4 million residents, California was only the 21st most populous state in the Union.

FLORIDA NOT ALONE: STATE BUDGET SHORTFALLS

At the National Conference of State Legislators meeting late last year in San Antonio, Florida legislators joined their counterparts from around the country to bemoan the economic slowdown that is creating budget turmoil. For the first time since the early 1990s, about a third of the states had to deal with budget shortfalls last year. It is projected state revenues around the country only grew about 2.4 percent last year, while expenditures grew about 2.3 percent. At the same time, the 2001 net tax reduction nationwide by state governments was \$1.8 billion, substantially lower than the 2000 tax reduction of \$9.9 billion. States have cut \$34 billion in taxes since 1995.

FLORIDA IS NATION'S LIGHTENING CAPITAL

The St. Petersburg Times reported this week that National Weather Service researchers have concluded Florida has twice as many lightning strike deaths as any other state in the country. But, unlike Florida, which receives its lightning during seasonal thunderstorms, the Central African nation of Rwanda is #1 in the world. Rwanda has thunderstorms year-round – recording more than twice as much lightning than is recorded in Florida. The paper reported that scientists recorded 35.4 lightning flashes per square kilometer per year in Central Florida, while they recorded 82.7 flashes near Kamembe, Rwanda.

*To the optimist, the glass is half full.
To the pessimist, the glass is half empty.
To the engineer, the glass is twice as big as it needs to be.*

OPPAGA REPORTS PROVIDE VALUABLE ANALYSES

The Office of Program Policy Analysis and Government Accountability (OPPAGA) is a special staff unit of the Legislature created by state law in 1994 that examines agencies and programs to improve services and cut costs when directed by state law, the presiding officers, or the Joint Legislative Auditing Committee. Three current OPPAGA reports of interest are:

- *Information Brief: Guardian ad Litem Placement May Shift for Reasons of Funding and Conflict of Interest* addresses the program's efforts to relocate, share best practices and develop strategies for revenue maximization.
- *Program Review: School Readiness Program's Potential Not Realized With Critical Issues Unresolved* found that the program has not been fully implemented; the partnership cannot document effectiveness until it implements the assessment system; local readiness coalitions have made limited progress in integrating delivery systems and some are deliberately postponing changes to preserve the status quo; and several critical issues could jeopardize future program success including disagreements over authority and potential loss of school districts as providers.
- *Program Review: Legislative Options to Control Rising Developmental Disabilities Costs* recommends that further steps could be taken to control costs and manage growth of the program by requiring the department to establish purchasing strategies to improve cost-efficiency and save an estimated \$38.7 million; limiting the number of new clients on the Home and Community-based Services Medicaid Waiver and/or the amount spent per client; and requiring the department to develop a plan to test the feasibility of implementing a managed care system.

Read these reports on-line at www.oppaga.state.fl.us

SCHOOL HEALTH BILL MOVES

According to the 1999-2000 State Summary of School Health Services by the Florida Department of Health, the registered nurse to public school student ratio was 1:3,515. The National Association of School Nurses recommends one registered nurse for every 750 students. Legislation addressing the desperate shortage of school nurses would create a public school volunteer health care practitioner program. HB 355/SB 1250 by Representative Cusack and Senator Miller, respectively, would provide incentives to encourage active health care practitioners to provide their services for 80 hours per school year and retired practitioners to volunteer at least 400 hours during each school year. In return, the practitioner would receive a waiver of the biennial license renewal fee and a maximum of 25 percent of the continuing education hours required for license renewal. The House bill was passed by the Council on Lifelong Learning on Tuesday, and will go to the House floor next. The Senate Education Committee will hear SB 1250 on March 4.

Find more information about school health services at: <http://www9.myflorida.com/Family/school/default.html>

Hillbilly Medical Terms:

Bacteria... Back door to cafeteria.

D&C.....Where Washington is.

Tablet.....A small table to change babies on.

ELDER EXPLOITATION DOESN'T PAY

HB 137, relating to exploitation of elders, passed the Council for Healthy Communities on Tuesday. The bill amends the civil theft statute to provide that exploitation of certain elderly persons or disabled adults may be pursued under the civil theft law. (Current law already provides that a victim of civil theft may sue the perpetrator, and receive treble damages plus attorney fees.)

The bill provides that the Statewide Public Guardianship Office must monitor the guardianship process, and requires professional guardians to register with the Statewide Public Guardianship Office. It expands current law authorizing the Statewide Public Guardianship Office to establish an Office of Public Guardian in any county or judicial circuit, to authorize creation of one or more offices in a county or judicial circuit. Lastly, the bill increases from \$5,000 to \$15,000 the maximum amount for which a guardian may settle a claim on behalf of a ward without appointment of bond, stabling a legal guardianship, or appointing a guardian ad-litem with prior court approval of the settlement.

HB 137 was approved last week by the Council for Healthy Communities and will next be considered by the full House.

TRANSPORTATION DISADVANTAGED GAINS MOMENTUM

Anyone working in the human service arena knows that transportation is a major barrier to services for many individuals. SB 100, and HB 141 would begin to address the huge deficit in the transportation disadvantaged program. Almost half of the House is sponsoring HB 141, and numerous Senators have stepped to the plate to co-sponsor SB 100. If passed, the bills would generate an estimated 1.6 million additional trips statewide next year for Florida's transportation disadvantaged. It would do so by raising an estimated \$9.6 million for the Transportation Disadvantaged Trust Fund by removing several current exemptions from Florida's motor vehicle registration law. Both bills moved forward this week, with SB 100 being withdrawn from appropriations and placed on the Senate Calendar, and HB 141 passing out of the House Transportation Committee.

Quote of the Day

"Why does Sea World have a seafood restaurant? I'm halfway through my fish burger and I realize, Oh my God . . . I could be eating a slow learner."

Lynda Montgomery

MANDATED HEALTH BENEFITS MAY BE REVIEWED

On Thursday, the House Committee on Health Regulation passed HB 911, requiring the Office of Legislative Services to contract for a report assessing the impact of mandated health benefits. "Mandated benefits" are state laws requiring private health insurance policies and health maintenance organization contracts to include specific coverage for particular treatments, conditions, persons, or providers.

With a total of 51 mandated health benefits, Florida now has one of the nation's most extensive sets of coverage requirements. These mandated benefits affect plans covering an estimated 33 percent of all Floridians, and 40 percent of insured Floridians.

HB 911 would require an analysis of the nature of the services used by those with mandated benefits, the effect of any benefit caps, and utilization guidelines for coverage. As originally filed, the bill would have required study of numerous mandated

benefits, including those covering: bone marrow transplants; cancer drugs; child health supervision services, cleft lip and cleft palate for children; dental procedures for children; diabetes treatment; emergency care; extension of major medical benefits; HIV coverage; mammogram; vasectomies; surgical procedures and devices; maternity (length of stay and post-delivery care); obstetrical and gynecological annual visits; out of hospital services; temporal mandibular joint disease; and newborn hearing screening.

Before passing the bill on February 21, the Health Regulation Committee amended it to reduce the number of benefits studied, targeting only mandated coverage for substance abuse; contraceptives and infertility; mental health services for persons with serious mental illnesses; medical nutritional therapy, and occupational therapy. Its Senate companion, SB 1658 has not yet been heard.

MARCH 4TH FOR CHILD CARE!...MAKE YOUR VOICE HEARD!

On Monday, March 4th, we have an opportunity and obligation to contact our congressional delegation to ask them to support significant new funds for the Child Care and Development Block Grant as proposed in the Act to Leave No Child Behind. This is critically important -- did you know that Florida receives most of its funding for child care and school readiness from federal sources? (Florida receives over \$500 million out of a budget of \$681 million annually).

We are asking for an increase of \$20 billion over the next five years to serve nearly two million more children in our country. With an average waiting list of 48,000 children in Florida (and that's not reflective of the need), we need to let Congress know how important those funds are to the children in Florida.

The importance of early learning and literacy is recognized. Please Congress understand that child care is the greatest opportunity for early learning.

Census data reveals that 76% of parents with children are in the workforce - 65% with children under six and 50% percent of parents with infants and toddlers are working -- these are critical years in forming the foundation for all learning!

PLEASE MAKE THE EFFORT TO ADVOCATE THIS IMPORTANT PRIORITY TO OUR U.S. SENATORS BOB GRAHAM AND BILL NELSON - AND YOUR CONGRESSIONAL REPRESENTATIVE.

THE WAITING LIST IS NOT A PLACE FOR CHILDREN TO LEARN OR BE SAFE.

Let's March 4th for children on Monday in Florida and throughout our country!

To learn more about our March 4th opportunities, visit the web at <http://www.cdfactioncouncil.org/>

(Source: Florida Children's Forum)

CARE ACT GAINS MOMENTUM

Independent Sector reports there appears to be growing momentum behind the CARE Act of 2002, the new bipartisan legislation to encourage charitable giving and support community and faith-based organizations sponsored by Senators Joe Lieberman and Rick Santorum.

Tens of millions of Americans make charitable contributions every year to support local religious organizations, youth and family programs, medical research, theaters and museums, and a host of other causes. From 1982 to 1986, federal tax law allowed all taxpayers to deduct their charitable contributions regardless of whether they took the standard deduction or itemized deductions separately. Since that legislation sunset at the end of 1986, only those who itemize deductions separately receive direct recognition for their charitable gifts at tax time.

The CARE Act of 2002 will allow the 86 million taxpayers who take the standard deduction to deduct up to \$400 for charitable contributions they made during the tax year if they file individually, and up to \$800 if they file jointly. The provision would be in place for two years, allowing sufficient time to assess the impact of this deduction on federal tax revenues and on charitable giving before Congress would decide whether or not to extend the deduction for a longer period. There is no guarantee that the provision would be extended, as the nonprofit community clearly learned in 1986.

The Charitable Contribution for Non-itemizers will bring greater equity to the tax system by giving a tax break to the many low- and middle-income people

who currently give and will provide reinforcement and incentive for them to keep giving. It would provide an immediate tax break to non-itemizers--90% of whom earn less than \$50,000--who make charitable contributions. It also provides a concrete reminder to all taxpayers--much like the reminder they now receive to make annual contributions to an IRA--that they should consider making or increasing their charitable donations.

No one can estimate precisely how much new giving will be generated by this tax deduction, but there is broad agreement that there will be an increase in donations. When non-itemizers were recognized for their contributions from 1982 to 1986, there was a substantial increase in giving noted in reports from the IRS and from nonprofit organizations. Non-itemizers who take the deduction for their charitable contributions would be subject to the same substantiation requirements as itemizers, and it is unjust to claim that non-itemizers are more likely to submit fraudulent reports to the IRS than are other taxpayers.

There is no basis for claims that the CARE Act of 2002 and its charitable deduction for non-itemizers will lead to reduced government funding for other social services programs. In fact, many nonprofit organizations are particularly supportive of the CARE Act because it includes a substantial increase in funding for the Social Services Block Grant program.

For more information, please visit www.IndependentSector.org.

Hillbilly Medical Terms

Benign.....What you be after you be eight.

Tumor.....More than one

IGNORING CRIME COULD COST SCHOOL PERSONNEL MORE THAN TIME

After learning of a case in which a principal failed to report an incident of child-on-child abuse at a school in his area, Representative Carey Baker of Eustis filed legislation that would create penalties for such inaction. House Bill 793 provides that if any school instructional or administrative personnel has knowledge that a sexual battery has been committed by a student upon another student and fails to report the offense to a law enforcement agency having jurisdiction over the school, or over the place where the sexual battery occurred, that failure constitutes a misdemeanor of the first degree. Under Florida law, a person who has been convicted of a first degree misdemeanor may be sentenced to a definite term of imprisonment not exceeding one year and may in addition be sentenced to pay a fine in the amount of \$1,000. HB 793 has been approved unanimously by all committees to which it was referred and will next be considered by the full House.

NUTRITION ACT MOVES

Last week, the House General Education Committee passed the Children's Summer Nutrition Act (HB1321), and on Monday, the Senate Education Committee passed its companion bill, SB 1314.

The bills have been amended to require that school superintendents report to the Florida Department of Education "any activity or initiative that provides children who are eligible for free or reduced-price meals access to the federal Summer Food Service Program (SFSP). The report will include any developed or implemented plans for how the school district will sponsor, host, or vend the SFSP or will provide food service to such eligible children during school vacation periods."

These bills are important because while more than half of Florida's elementary-aged children are eligible for free or reduced-price school meals, only a quarter of them are able to access summer food when school is out. In the summer of 2000, only one in four Florida school children participated in the summer food program.

If Florida would provide more summer food sites-- so there were 42 children eating summer meals for every 100 participating in the National School Lunch Program that is in place during the school year, Florida would bring in more than \$9 million in SFSP reimbursements, thereby feeding more children, importing more of our federal tax dollars, and generating a small positive impact on our local communities' summer economies. And it doesn't cost the state a penny – it is entirely funded by the federal government.

Highlighting the need for the bills is the annual *State of the States* report issued this week by the Food Research and Action Center (FRAC).

To view the report, go to www.frac.org/html/news/alert022602.htm.

More detailed information about the summer food and other federal programs listed on the attached can be found in "Good Choices in Hard Times" at: www.frac.org/html/publications/stimulus2002.pdf

"Only the little people pay taxes."

Leona Helmsley, hotel magnate who was later indicted for nonpayment of taxes.

HOUSE HOSTS ALZHEIMER'S SUMMIT

According to the Alzheimer's Association, Florida is home to nearly 500,000 Alzheimer's patients and two million family caregivers. To address this increasingly important issue, the House of Representatives held the Florida Alzheimer's Summit this week at the Capitol. The event was hosted by Speaker Designate Johnnie Byrd of Plant City and Elder and Long Term Care Committee Chair Carole Green of Fort Myers, who share a personal interest in Alzheimer's disease as a result of first hand experience. Representative Byrd's father and Representative Green's grandfather died of the disease.

Presenters from Mt. Sinai Medical Center, the Mayo Clinic, the University of South Florida, the McKnight Brain Institute at the University of Florida, the University of Miami, Pfizer, the Brevard County Sheriff's Office and the Alzheimer's Association shared valuable information regarding a wide range of issues. They provided an overview of the symptoms, risk factors, current research, relationship to Down's Syndrome, drug therapy development, caregiving, and communications challenges of Alzheimer's. They also discussed the social and economic impacts of Alzheimer's disease, which are significant and will grow along with Florida's increasing elder population. Florida currently has 3.5 million seniors, a population that is expected to increase to over 4.5 million by 2010. The Alzheimer's Summit is an important signal that the Legislature recognizes the challenges that lie ahead for our state and its citizens.

Resources of Interest: Alzheimer's Caregiver Support, a project of the Florida Department of Elder Affairs and the University of Florida, www.alzonline.net or 1-866-260-2466

Alzheimer's Association (with links to Florida's chapters): www.alz.org

EDUCATING BY LEGISLATING

Working their way through the legislative process this year are the following bills which aim to raise awareness of critical health issues:

Arthritis Prevention and Control: SB 2372/ HB 1469 creates the "Arthritis Prevention and Control Act" requiring the Department of Health to establish an Arthritis Prevention and Control Program and an Advisory Panel on Arthritis. It also requires the department to promote public awareness of and knowledge concerning arthritis.

Birth Defects: SB 1934/ HB 1417 requires the Department of Health or a contractual designee to maintain and expand the Florida Birth Defects Registry and, among other provisions, requires the department to establish a birth defects education program and create a birth defects advisory council.

Colorectal Cancer Awareness Month: SB 2392 is a resolution recognizing March as Colorectal Cancer Awareness Month and urging all men and women to become aware of the risks and symptoms associated with colorectal cancer.

Prostate Cancer Awareness Program: SB 672/ HB 525 establishes a Prostate Cancer Awareness Program within the Department of Health to implement the January 2000 recommendations of the Florida Prostate Cancer Task Force to provide statewide outreach and health education activities to ensure that men are aware of and appropriately seek medical counseling for prostate cancer as an early detection health care measure.

For status of these bills, visit the Legislature's website: www.leg.state.fl.us

JUVENILE JUSTICE ACCOMPLISHMENTS HIGHLIGHTED

Governor Bush proclaimed February 17- 23 as Juvenile Justice Week 2002 to recognize Florida's commitment to reducing juvenile crime and to honor partners and citizens who work alongside youth to prevent juvenile crime and rehabilitate juvenile offenders. In addition to events at the Capitol, over 150 community based events were held across the state to spotlight and celebrate juvenile justice accomplishments and programs.

According to the Department, targeted delinquency prevention and early intervention programs annually serve more than 67,000 Florida youth at high risk of becoming repeat offenders. During Juvenile Justice Week, the Department highlighted the success of their efforts with the following data:

REDUCED CRIME - Since 1999, juvenile murder arrests are down 30 percent; armed robbery arrests are down 26 percent; and concealed weapons arrests are down 58 percent. Juvenile arrest rates in 2000 for major violent and property crimes were below 1990 levels, despite a 38 percent increase in Florida's youth population in the last decade.

MORE MENTAL HEALTH TREATMENT - One of 3.4 residential beds for juvenile offenders is funded to provide mental health, substance abuse and sex offender treatment, compared to one out of 24 beds funded for specialized treatment in 1999. Specialized treatment helps offenders break out of the cycle of criminal behavior.
(Continued on page 8)

IMPROVED SUCCESS RATES - 58 percent of juvenile offenders are staying crime-free a year after release from residential delinquency treatment programs, a 12.5 percent improvement from five years ago. 33 percent of juvenile justice programs in 2001 achieved deemed or special deemed status (exemplary scores in Quality Assurance program monitoring), an all-time high.

FEWER JUVENILES IN ADULT PRISONS - 61 percent fewer juvenile offenders are sent to the adult system than in 1996, the year when adult transfers peaked. A recent research study showed juvenile offenders are less likely to become repeat serious offenders if they serve time in the juvenile, rather than the adult, system.

For more information, visit www.djj.state.fl.us

MAKING CHILD CARE A CAREER

Following recommendations of the *Pathways to Professionalism* report released in October 2001, House Bill 1567 sponsored by Representative Lorraine Ausley and Senate Bill 1550, by Senator Silver recognize the professional potential in child care personnel and creates opportunities to obtain higher certification. This legislation increases the required hours for child care introductory courses from 40 to 45, expanding the topic areas to include brain research and computer technology for professional and classroom use. Successful completion of this

introductory course by child care personnel, as evidenced by passage of a competency examination, will be articulated into community college credit in early childhood education. Childcare personnel with specified credentials are exempt from certain training requirements.

HB 1567 was approved by the Council for Lifelong Learning last week. SB 1550 will next be heard by the Education Appropriations Committee.

Hillbilly Medical Terms

Barium.....What you do with dead folks.

Cesarean Section.....A neighborhood in Rome.

Coma.....A punctuation mark

Fester.....Quicker than someone else

G.I .Series.....World Series of military baseball.

Hangnail.....What you hang your coat on.

LONG-TERM CARE BILL HEADS TO THE FLOOR

Your third issue of the 2002 *Legislative Link* provided an in-depth review of SB 596, which implements recommendations contained in the Senate Interim Reports entitled “Long Term Care Alternatives to Nursing Homes” and “An Overview of the Long Term Care and Managed Care Programs.”

Since then, the bill has gone through two committees, been remolded into two committee substitutes and, this week, was withdrawn from the Appropriations Committee. Next stop: the Senate floor.

CS/CS/SB 596 requires the Agency for Health Care Administration (AHCA) in consultation with the Department of Elderly Affairs, to develop a plan to reduce the number of Medicaid funded nursing home beds. It modifies the agency’s duties with respect to the Certificate of Need Program by requiring that, prior to issuing a Certificate of Need to construct additional nursing homes, it must determine that such need cannot be met through enhanced home and

community based services (this was in the original bill). The bill also establishes an Office of Long-Term Care Policy within the Department of Elderly Affairs and increases the maximum number of members on local long-term care ombudsman councils to 40. In addition, the bill requires individuals who receive Community Care for the Elderly services to complete the Medicaid eligibility process within 60 days, or they will not be eligible to continue services. Lastly, the bill establishes statutory requirements for the Comprehensive Assessment and Review (CARES) Nursing Home Preadmissions Screening Program. These new requirements are intended to ensure that Medicaid payment for nursing facility care are made only for individuals who require such care, and to ensure that long-term care services are provided in the most appropriate setting. The bill does not move the CARES Program from the Department of Elderly Affairs to AHCA.

SENATE PROPOSES TAX REFORM ALTERNATIVE

In hopes of getting some limited tax reform passed this session, Senator Don Sullivan, Senate Education Appropriations Subcommittee Chair, last week unveiled a proposal aimed at infusing \$1 billion into Florida's education budget. The plan calls for the repeal of several tax exemptions that benefit special interest groups. It earmarks \$798 million for K-12, \$30 million for community colleges, \$40.5 million for state universities, and \$10 million for private colleges and universities by repealing the following sales tax exemptions for one year:

- Rental, lease, sublease, or license for use of a skybox, luxury box, or other box seats
- management services, management consulting services, including lobbyists and political consultant services and public relations services
- computer programming services, systems design services, data processing services, and other computer related services.
- radio and television broadcasting rights and music license fees
- professional sports club operators/ promoters of professional and semiprofessional athletic clubs; promoting athletic events; and managing individual professional athletes (i.e. racing activities, including racetrack operators, racing stables, jockeys, racehorse trainers, and race car owners and operators)
- the sale of a racing dog by its owner if the owner is also a breeder
- the purchase of feed for racehorses and ostriches
- wine and alcoholic beverages provided by distributors or vendors for the purpose of "wine tasting" and "spirituous beverage tasting"
- promotion-based advertising, such as coupon promotions and event-based promotions such as golf tournaments or extreme sports exhibitions
- services provided by dance studios, dance schools and dance halls
- admissions to live theater, live opera or live ballet productions
- horses sold at claiming races on first sale and mark-up
- tanning salon services
- charter fishing boats

This proposal was announced on the floor of the Senate last week, a day before the Appropriations Committee voted on the Senate's budget. The Senate has taken a position against any budget compromise that doesn't substantially increase education funding beyond the current House proposal. This measure will only sustain the previously decreased amount of money to education and in some instances actually enhances funding; the impact is a 6.26% increase in the FEFP (Florida Education Finance Program) over the budget cuts during last fall's Special Session.

MENTAL HEALTH PARITY BILL FILED

Last week legislation was filed which would create the "Chris G. Mental Health Parity Act." Senate Bill 2486 by Senator Buddy Dyer of Orlando would prohibit group health insurance and prepaid health care policies that provide medical, surgical, and mental health benefits from imposing any treatment limitations or financial requirements on the mental illness coverage unless comparable limitations are imposed on the medical and surgical benefits. The bill exempts group health insurance plans and prepaid health care plans offered by small employers, defined as employers whose average number of employees on business days during the preceding calendar year did not exceed 50. Also exempted are certain plans that provide both in-network and out-of-network benefits. The bill directs the State's Chief Financial Officer to evaluate the effect of the implementing the act on: 1) the cost of health insurance coverage; *Continued on page 10*

Mental Health Parity continued

2) access to health insurance coverage, including the availability of in-network providers; 3) the quality of health care; and 4) such other issues as the Chief Financial Officer considers appropriate. The results are to be submitted to the appropriate committees of the Legislature by July 1, 2004.

The bill is named for Chris Gangwisch, a Winter Park high school student whose severe depression led to his suicide on September 27, 2000. His parents have since become advocates for mental health parity. They have an uphill battle. Attempts to pass mental health parity legislation in Florida have failed every year since 1995 except for 2001, when no such bill was filed. There is, however, substantial information to support parity. In a July 2001 report to the Legislature, the Louis de la Parte Florida Mental Health Institute provided a preliminary estimate of the benefits Florida could expect from a mental health parity law. They estimate that approximately 16,000 additional Floridians would seek treatment, approximately 11,200 of whom would show significant improvement in their condition. The report estimates an annual social benefit of \$95.7 million for the State from the successful treatment of these individuals. Furthermore, parity legislation could reduce the costs borne by government for the treatment of mental illness, disability benefits, accidents and suicides, increased medical expenses, and services for the homeless. While opponents argue that mandating coverage would increase premium costs, review of the experiences of some of the 32 states that have passed parity legislation show modest, if no cost increases.

SB 2486 has been referred to the Committees on Banking and Insurance; Children and Families; Appropriations Subcommittee on General Government; and Appropriations. The House companion bill, HB 51, has been withdrawn.

Find the above referenced report, *Mental Health Parity: National and State Perspectives 2001*, on-line at <http://publications.fmhi.usf.edu>

For more information on the Gangwisch Family's awareness efforts, visit their website at www.geocities.com/chrisgangwisch

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