

Legislative Link

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

WHAT'S INSIDE:

	Page
Guns and Kids.....	2
Transportation Disadvantaged	2
“New” Medicaid Funds.....	2
Bills Heard Last Week	3
Children’s Mental Health.....	5
Florida Teachers	5
Senate Budget Conferees	6



Helping all children succeed for life.
An initiative of the United Way of Florida,
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THE HOME STRETCH

Ten week-days remain in the regularly scheduled 2001 Florida Legislative Session.

Although it has passed the infamous Earnhardt Family Protection Act dealing with autopsy photos, the Legislature has not yet passed any of its high priority bills, or those of the governor. The budget, tax break, nursing home regulation, growth management, electric deregulation, election reform, career service, education reorganization and other major legislation await passage. History tells us that more than 20 percent of the bills that pass during the session will pass during its final two days. History will likely hold true this year.

The budget is the only bill the Legislature is constitutionally required to pass. As this Legislative Link went to press, speculation that the session will have to be extended in order to pass the budget was growing. The gulf that exists between the House and Senate 2001-2002 budget proposals is \$424 million, caused largely by the Senates refusal to adopt the House's \$350 million tax cut proposal. Last week, Speaker Feeney proposed in an open letter to President McKay that tax cuts could be accommodated if the Senate cut member projects from \$400 million to \$300 million and saved another \$70 million by cutting an additional 1,593 state jobs. At week's end, the President was allowing that about \$49 million in unspent tobacco revenues might be used to narrow the differences, but that he would not cut more state jobs for fear of hurting services.

The Florida Constitution requires a 72-hour cooling-off period between the time when the budget is tentatively approved, and when it is finally passed. Consequently, if the 2001 regular session is to end on time as scheduled next Friday, May 4, the budget will have to be put to bed and sent to the printer no later than next Tuesday, May 1.

COMMUNITY CARE FOR THE DISABLED – WAITING LIST THRIVES

One of Governor Bush's highest priorities has been eliminating the waiting list for Community Care for the Disabled. Through his leadership, the Legislature has pumped about \$300 million into the program to provide services to the nearly 20,000 people who were on the waiting list when he first took office. This year, in sharp contrast to the Governor's wise investment strategy, the House has only proposed appropriating about \$30 million for the program, and the Senate, about \$11 million. Advocates have been working to get the Legislature to embrace the Governor's \$57 million proposal, as both the House and Senate proposals will do little to pare down the 6,700 person waiting list that remains.

GUNS & KIDS: A BAD MIX

The Early Childhood Association of Florida – the state’s premier proponent of quality in school readiness programs – reports that American children under the age of 15 are 12 times more likely to die from gunfire than children in 25 other industrialized countries combined. Nationally, homicide is the third leading cause of death among children aged 5-14. According to the 1999 US Department of Health and Human Services, 559 Florida children, aged 0-19, died from guns between 1995-1997.

Despite the evidence that handguns pose an incredible danger to Florida’s children, the Senate has passed legislation prohibiting cities from suing gun makers, and the House stands poised to pass a similar bill. Obviously, it is questionable whether these bills would have any impact on the number of children harmed and killed by handguns. However, the question must be asked, “What is the Florida Legislature doing to reduce the tragedy caused by these weapons?” At this point, the answer is “Nothing”.

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- Gallons by which daily US oil consumption would drop if SUV's average fuel efficiency increased by 3 mpg:**49,000,000**
 - Gallons per day that the proposed drilling of Alaska's Artic National Wildlife Refuge is projected to yield:**42,000,000**

TRANSPORTATION DISADVANTAGED ADDRESSED?

Florida’s Transportation Disadvantaged Trust Fund provides funding for Florida’s elderly, disabled, low income and children at risk who need transportation for medical care, employment, and other life sustaining services. Anyone working in the human service arena knows that transportation is almost always one of the most important – if not the most important – factor impacting on a person’s ability to attain and maintain self-sufficiency.

However, because the Transportation Disadvantaged Trust Fund has not received increased funding in seven years, millions of individuals who must rely on publicly supported transportation in order to maintain employment and receive medical care have been thwarted in their efforts to do so. During the last four years, nearly 3,000,000 requests for trips have been denied. Last year the number of trip requests that were denied increased by 29 percent due to lack of available funds. Senate Bill 256 and House Bill 79 would help to address that shortfall by extending the \$1.50 motor vehicle registration fee currently paid by most vehicle registrants in Florida to trucks, trailers, motorcycles, tag transfers, and temporary tags. This would generate more than \$8 million for the TD Trust Fund, and about 1.5 million more trips for low-income people who desperately need them to survive. SB 256 was reported favorably from the Senate Finance & Taxation Committee on 4/19, and HB 79 was voted favorably from the Local Government & Veteran’s Affairs Committee on 4/19.

“NEW” MEDICAID FUNDS EASE BUDGET CRUNCH

Two weeks ago, the Federal Government approved three Medicaid waivers Florida had filed in hopes of having more flexibility in expending Medicaid funds. Because the waiver funds – about \$159 million in new federal money – had already been plugged into the House and Senate budget proposals for next year, a giant sigh of relief emerged from the Capital. The waivers will be used for three purposes: 1) \$143 million will be sent to teaching hospitals and hospitals that care for large populations of indigents across the state; 2) \$15 million will be used to pay for medications, doctor's visits, and other necessities for poor people that will allow them to stay in assisted living arrangements, rather than being forced to live in much more expensive facilities; and 3) about \$1 million will help diabetes patients pay for their insulin and other supplies through a mail order program. In addition to this windfall, it is hoped an additional \$32 million or so will come through another Medicaid waiver that has been sought by the state. The waivers have been expedited partially as a result of Governor Bush's relationship to the President, but also due to the President's intent to allow states greater flexibility in using Medicaid – and other federal - funds.

CHILDREN'S MENTAL HEALTH: HOPE AND CONCERN

Hope . . . M. E. lawsuit may settle In 1990, when Florida was spending about \$36 million on children's mental health services, the infamous "M.E." case was filed against the state in an attempt to secure mental health services for thousands of abused, neglected, and delinquent children. Over the years, the lawsuit, which now represents the interests of some 45,000 children in state custody or on probation, has forced the state to invest significant new dollars into children's mental health services. Today, children's mental health services receive about \$100 million in state funding. The state Commission on Mental Health says this serves only about 23 percent of children's mental health needs in the state.

Last week, after intense negotiations, a framework for settlement of the lawsuit was agreed upon by the parties. The agreement calls for significant systems changes that must occur within 21 months following its approval. Those changes revolve around 23 principles, almost all of which are framed around four basic questions: 1) Was the child accurately screened and assessed? 2) Did the child have a customized treatment plan that incorporates the recommendations of the assessment?; 3) Did the child receive the services called for in the treatment plan?; and 4) Did the services address the child's needs. We can only hope that the agreement – tied with much-needed additional funding – will begin to address the significant needs that remain.

Concern . . . No community resources for G. Pierce Wood phase out

When legislators agreed to the phased closure of the G. Pierce Wood mental hospital a couple of years ago, all agreed that the ultimate closure would succeed only if the Legislature appropriated sufficient funds to ensure that patients who were moved out of the hospital would continue to receive the services they need through community based providers. Now, with the closure slated for next year, the commitment to provide sufficient funding is razor thin.

Mental health advocates are pushing for the Legislature to embrace the Senate's 2001-2002 funding proposal, which would infuse \$37 million into community-based services for past G Pierce Wood patients. Governor Bush has recommended \$27 million, and the House – which has also proposed cutting \$20 million from Medicaid mental health services for the poor - would allocate only \$15.7 million to the effort.

If sufficient funds are not appropriated to provide the community based services ex-G. Pierce Wood patients need, the scheduled closure of the hospital should not take place. If it does, the patients themselves – and the communities they live in – will suffer dire consequences.

WHY FLORIDA TEACHERS LEAVE		WHAT WOULD BRING THEM BACK	
Pregnancy/child rearing	28.7%	Increased pay	72.4%
Dissatisfied with career	20.2%	Smaller class sizes	62.6%
For more money/benefits	14.2%	Fewer disruptive students	53.1%
To retire	10%	Less paperwork	42.4%
To pursue another career	8.2%	More support from school administration	34.7%

Source: Office of Economic and Demographic Research

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SENATE APPROPRIATION CONFERENCE COMMITTEE MEMBERS

Last Thursday, Senate President John McKay appointed the Senate Appropriations Conferees, listed below. As this Legislative Link went to press, the House had not yet appointed its conferees. (Phone numbers are for the conferees Tallahassee office and the area code for all is 850.

Jim Horne, Chair 487-5027 horne.jim.s06@leg.state.fl.us	Tom Rossin, At Large 487-5356 rossin.tom.web.@leg.state.fl.us
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GENERAL GOVERNMENT SUBCOMMITTEE

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Daniel Webster 487-5047 drawdy.ann.s12@leg.state.fl.us	

HEALTH & HUMAN SERVICE SUBCOMMITTEE

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Burt Saunders 487-5124 saunders.burt.web@leg.state.fl.us	

PUBLIC SAFETY & JUDICIARY SUBCOMMITTEE

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