

The LRHA Policy Corner

May 1, 2006

STATE & LOCAL ACTION:

**Legislative Briefs From The State Legislature*

- Senate Bill 312 – HINES – Has been withdrawn from the files of the Senate
- Language of the Senate legislation:
 - Proposed law enacts the "Rural Pharmacy Preservation Act."
 - Proposed law sets out particular challenges that pharmacies operating in rural areas of the state contend with, while defining "rural pharmacy."
 - Proposed law provides for specific minimum levels of reimbursement through the Medicaid program, as well as the office of group benefits.
 - Proposed law provides for the promulgation of certain rules by DHH, the office of group benefits, and the governor's office of homeland security and emergency preparedness.
 - Proposed law prohibits the exclusion of pharmacies in rural areas from certain health care organizations and provides particular protections for pharmacies operating in rural parishes or municipalities.
 - Proposed law provides for maintenance and access to rural pharmacies during a declaration of emergency.
- Senate panel advances anti-flag burning bill
 - A Senate committee advanced legislation that would create the crime of burning the American flag if the U.S. Constitution is amended.
 - The Senate Committee on Judiciary C approved Senate Bill 25 by Sen. James David Cain, R-Dry Creek.
 - The state already has a law that prohibits burning the U.S. flag, but it cannot be enforced because the U.S. Supreme Court has ruled that flag burning is protected by the First Amendment.
- House OKs legislation to increase clerks' fees
 - The House approved on a 76-25 vote legislation that would allow clerks of courts to increase many of the fees they charge.
 - House Bill 57 would increase the ceiling clerks could choose to charge from \$10 to \$15 for such services as issuing a marriage license.
 - The House inserted language that would authorize clerks to charge no more than \$1 for making copies of court records.
 - The legislation streamlines the number of charges clerks of courts can levy from 77 to 10.
- Alcohol abuse hot line fails to pass in House

- A bill that would create a statewide toll-free alcohol abuse hot line by levying an annual fee on bars and restaurants failed to get enough votes for House passage.
- The hot line would provide information about programs and services available to people with drinking problems, but it would be funded and staffed by a \$20 annual fee on bars, restaurants and other businesses that serve alcohol, under the bill by Rep. Jack Smith, D-Stephensville.
- Because of the fee, Smith needed to get 70 votes in the House for passage of House Bill 173. The vote was 64-36. He could bring the measure up again this session.

****Senate Panel passes smoking ban***

A revamped bid to ban smoking in restaurants statewide won approval in a Senate committee on Wednesday, April 26th – a bill aimed at protecting nonsmokers from the effects of secondhand smoke.

- A similar effort died in the Senate last year - Sen. Rob Marionneaux, D-Grosse Tete and sponsor of the bill, said his no-smoking plan failed in 2005 in part because it covered gambling casinos, which are excluded this year, as are bars.
 - The influence of the gambling lobby caused him to drop casinos from the bill this year and allow smoking to continue.
- Senate Bill 105 won approval without dissent from the Senate and Governmental Affairs Committee - It next faces action in the full Senate.
- The measure, if approved, would apparently not have any effect on a smoking ban for East Baton Rouge Parish approved by its own government last year - aside from rank-and-file restaurants, the ban would cover coffee shops, cafeterias, sandwich shops and school cafeterias.
 - Restaurants that include bars would also be included.
 - The ban would also extend to a wide range of other public places including banks, hotel and motel lobbies, public transportation, retail stores, sports arenas, theaters and school buses.
 - Excluded would be casinos, bars, homes, hotel rooms designated for smokers and retail tobacco firms.
 - People who violate the proposed law would face fines of up to \$300 - proprietors of the restaurant or other space covered by the ban would be subject to \$1,000 penalties.

****President Bush Visits Storm-Ravaged Gulf Coast; Helps In Cleanup Efforts***

With parts of this hurricane-devastated city still piled with debris and lacking basic services, President Bush promised on April 27th to make the federal response to any new hurricanes "as effective as possible."

- "All of us in positions of responsibility appreciate those who are helping us to understand how to do our jobs better," said Bush, whose administration has been faulted for its flawed response to Hurricane Katrina.
 - It was the president's 11th visit to the region since Katrina smashed into the Gulf Coast last August and it was intended to encourage volunteers to pitch in on the massive reconstruction effort.
 - The President stopped at a modest bungalow restored by volunteers, situated on a Ninth Ward street still littered with debris and overgrown with weeds - white government trailers that are the main housing for the displaced sat in many front yards.

- Bush, clad in casual blue pants and checked shirt, donned work gloves and a tool pouch as he wandered around the construction sites chatting with workers - the President, Louisiana Gov. Kathleen Blanco and New Orleans Mayor Ray Nagin helped raise roof frames onto one house.

- Katrina was one of the worst natural disasters in U.S. history, killing more than 1,300 people, leaving hundreds of thousands of homeless, and causing tens of billions of dollars in damage - the government's lagging help for disaster victims has contributed to a persistent second-term slump for Bush.

- Against a backdrop of continued misery nearly eight months after Katrina came ashore, the White House has sought to highlight a massive infusion of federal spending - more than \$100 billion once an emergency spending measure before the Senate is approved - toward the region's reconstruction.

- Bush's visit came as a bipartisan Senate panel investigating the government's flawed Katrina response said the Federal Emergency Management Agency is crippled beyond repair and should be dismantled in favor of a new agency.
 - Bush said his administration is working with local officials to make sure communications are clearer next time and that supplies are pre-positioned effectively during the new hurricane season, which starts in a little over a month.

 - ✓ Also on the 27th, the U.S. Senate continued voting on the emergency spending measure for Iraq and hurricane relief that includes \$27.1 billion for the Gulf Coast, including grants to states to build and repair housing and \$2.1 billion for levees and flood control projects
 - Bush has asked the Senate to add another \$2.2 billion to repair and strengthen levees in and around New Orleans - the request wouldn't add to the overall cost of the bill since it was accompanied by a decrease in FEMA disaster funds.

ON THE FEDERAL FRONT:

****House Leaders Retreat On Lobbying Bill As Appropriators Hold Fast***

In a sign that backstage negotiations have failed to seal a deal on treatment of member earmarks, House Rules Chairman David Dreier, R-Calif., abruptly yanked the rule for consideration of a lobbying overhaul bill midway through debate on it April 27th.

- House Republicans scurried from the chamber to a meeting room for a hasty conference meeting and the bill remains in limbo.
- Appropriators threatened to vote against the rule because it did not permit consideration of an amendment to extend new earmark disclosure requirements to tax and authorization measures as well as appropriations bills.
- Appropriations Chairman Jerry Lewis, R-Calif., approached Dreier on the floor and patted him on the arm - Dreier then withdrew the rule his committee had spent much of the previous day and night putting together.
 - The House then recessed subject to the call of the chair.

****Spending Bill Debate Veers Off Track***

Efforts to move the \$106.5 billion fiscal 2006 emergency supplemental measure toward Senate passage faltered last week as debate turned to soaring gasoline prices and amendments continued to pile up.

- Among those looming and threatening to bog down the bill were amendments to allow oil drilling in Alaska's Arctic National Wildlife Refuge, to strike \$500 million in hurricane relief funding earmarked for Northrop Grumman and to cut off funding for the National Security Agency's warrantless surveillance program.
- Majority Leader Bill Frist, R-Tenn., was expected to file a cloture petition on the bill later on Thursday - that would set up a floor vote early this week on whether to limit debate and block non-germane amendments.
 - The bill would provide funds for military operations in Iraq and Afghanistan, and for hurricane recovery efforts on the Gulf Coast.
 - Gas prices dominated debate today - Ron Wyden, D-Ore., refused to yield the floor unless GOP leaders agreed to allow a vote on his amendment to bar the administration from waiving royalty fees owed by oil companies for drilling on federal land until gas prices drop.

****Rural Health Care Incentives Draw Bipartisan Support***

A bipartisan drive is shaping up behind legislation to renew six provisions of the 2003 Medicare law granting special incentives for rural health care providers.

- The provisions, set to expire this year, provide Medicare incentives, bonuses and "hold harmless" payments to rural doctors, hospitals, ambulance operators and home health service providers.

- “Ensuring these payments is critical to maintaining care and access to rural medical services,” said Rep. Greg Walden, R-Ore., co-chairman of a bipartisan House coalition that unveiled a bill yesterday to extend the special payments for five years.
 - The extension would cost \$3.1 billion.
- ✓ Rep. Earl Pomeroy, D-N.D., also a co-chair of the coalition, said that while they have not yet secured leadership support for the bill, he is confident it will pass.

****U.S. House Appropriations Committee - Draft FY 2007 Appropriations Schedule (April 2006)***

- Note – This represents a draft schedule for Committee planning purposes only.
- All dates and times are tentative and subject to change.
- Proposed dates for floor consideration are TENTATIVE and provided only for planning purposes.
- All floor scheduling decisions are made by the Majority Leader.

MAY

Week of May 1*:

3rd (Wed)	TBD	Subcommittee: Agriculture
4th (Thur)	TBD	Subcommittee: Interior
	TBD	Subcommittee: Mil Quality

* No votes scheduled in the House on Monday or Friday.

Week of May 8*:

9th (Tues)	4:30 pm*	Full Committee: 302(b)s Agriculture
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(*NOTE – Cmte Members will be required to come back early for the Full Committee markup, votes not scheduled until 6:30 pm).

10th (Wed)	10:00 am	Full Committee: Interior - Mil Quality
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11th (Thur)	TBD	Subcommittee: Homeland - Energy & Water
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* No votes scheduled in the House on Monday or Friday.

Week of May 15th**:

16th (Tues)	3:30 pm*	Full Committee: Homeland - Energy and Water
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(*NOTE – Cmte Members will be required to come back early for the Full Committee markup, votes not scheduled until 6:30 pm).

17th (Wed)	Floor: Agriculture (TENTATIVE)
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18th (Thur) TBD (am) Subcommittee: Foreign Ops
10:30 am Floor: Interior (TENTATIVE)

19th (Fri) Floor: Mil Quality (TENTATIVE)

** No votes scheduled in the House on Monday.

Week of May 22:

24th (Wed) TBD (am) Subcommittee: TTHUD

Floor: Homeland Security (TENTATIVE)

25th (Thur) 9:00 am Full Committee: Foreign Ops - Leg Branch

Floor: Energy and Water (TENTATIVE)

JUNE

Week of May 29:

RECESS WEEK

Week of June 5**:

6th (Tues) 4:00 pm* Full Committee: TTHUD

(*NOTE – Cmte Members will be required to come back early for the Full Committee markup, votes not scheduled until 6:30 pm).

7th (Wed) TBD (am) Subcommittee: Defense

Subcommittee: Labor-HHS

Floor: Leg Branch (TENTATIVE)

8th (Thur) Floor: Foreign Ops (TENTATIVE)

** No votes scheduled in the House on Monday.

Week of June 12:

13th (Tues) 10:00 am Full Committee: Defense - Labor-HHS

14th (Wed) TBD (am) Subcommittee: SSJC

Floor: TTHUD (TENTATIVE)

15th (Thur) Floor: TTHUD (TENTATIVE)

Week of June 19:

20th (Tues) 9:30 am Full Committee: SSJC

Floor: Defense (TENTATIVE)

21st (Wed) Floor: LHHS (TENTATIVE)

22nd (Thur) Floor: LHHS (TENTATIVE)

Week of June 26:

28th (Wed) Floor: SSJC (TENTATIVE)

29th (Thur) Floor: SSJC (TENTATIVE)

**The mission of the Louisiana Rural Health Association is to serve as a unified voice for the promotion of rural health care through advocacy, education, and leadership. The information above was provided in part by the National Rural Health Association and gathered from various publicly released documents of news related sources.*