

The LRHA Policy Corner

June 12, 2006

STATE & LOCAL ACTION:

**Legislative Briefs From The State Legislature*

- Senate advances bill toughening divorce rule
 - A bill that would require married couples with children under 18 to live apart for one year — instead of six months — for a divorce, neared final approval last week.
 - The Senate made slight changes in the House-passed version and then approved it 27-4.
 - The legislation, House Bill 1379, now returns to the House, where final approval is expected.
 - Backers said the longer waiting period is needed to give families more time to work out differences with children involved.
 - Opponents questioned whether the change would make any difference. The bill would not affect other grounds for divorce.

- AARP opposes setting Medicaid rates in law
 - AARP Louisiana wants Medicaid reimbursement rates based on performance and not locked into law.
 - Currently, the Legislature considers a multitude of factors in determining the reimbursement rate on an annual basis, the organization for people over 50 said in a news release.
 - Setting the rate in law might make changes more difficult, AARP said.
 - AARP Louisiana is proposing changes to Senate Bill 613, which would put the rates into law.

- Senate backs expanding homeland security staff
 - The Senate gave quick and final legislative passage to a bill that would expand the state's homeland security staff in the Governor's Office.
 - The state's Office of Homeland Security and Emergency Preparedness was moved after hurricanes Katrina and Rita from under the oversight of the Louisiana National Guard to the direct oversight of Gov. Kathleen Blanco.
 - House Bill 1388 by Rep. Francis Thompson, D-Delhi, would set up a detailed management structure for that office. The bill also increased the number of homeland security employees from 40 under the National Guard to about 100 staffers.
 - Lawmakers have questioned whether the measure simply expands state bureaucracy without improving emergency preparedness or response, but no one raised those objections on the Senate floor, and the bill sailed through with a 36-0 vote - it goes next to the governor's desk.

- PAR blasts free tickets for legislators to events
 - The Legislature should close the loophole that gives elected officials access to a perk — free tickets — that is prohibited for other public servants, the Public Affairs Research Council said last week.
 - Senate Bill 382 would eliminate an exception in the state ethics code that allows elected officials, including legislators, to receive free tickets to cultural and sporting events. The bill passed the Senate and was heard by a House committee on wednesday.
 - The ethics code generally prohibits public servants from accepting anything of value from lobbyists or persons doing business with, or regulated by, the government to prevent the appearance of impropriety, PAR noted in a news release.
 - The exception allows lawmakers and other elected officials to accept free tickets to sporting and cultural events if the value of the ticket does not exceed \$100 per event or \$500 a year per donor.

****Smoking Change Snuffs Support***

A bill to ban smoking in most restaurants has lost the support of two health groups because of a controversial amendment.

- The measure, which has passed the Senate 36-2 and is awaiting a vote in the House this week, earlier enjoyed the active backing of the American Cancer Society and the American Heart Association.
- Leaders of both organizations said initially that they backed the measure because it would reduce the harmful effects of second-hand smoke in restaurants and other public places.
- However, the Senate changed the bill to permit smoking in enclosed bars inside otherwise smoke-free restaurants - the change caused both groups to drop their support.
- A bid by Rep. Charles MacDonald, D-Bastrop, to make that controversial addition more palatable was added to the bill in the House Health and Welfare Committee - it would require bars in restaurants to be enclosed from floor to ceiling, including the doorway, by July 1, 2008.
 - “I offer this as a compromise,” MacDonald told the committee, which approved the amendment, and later the bill, and sent it to the full House for debate - the committee vote was 13-1.
 - But Terri Broussard, Louisiana advocacy director for the American Heart Association, and Zoey Devall, lobbyist for the American Cancer Society, said their groups cannot back the legislation with the bar provision attached.

***Budget Clears Panel - Bill \$142 Million Over On New Construction**

Lawmakers advanced a \$4.7 billion construction budget Sunday that is loaded with more new projects than the state can afford.

- The Senate Committee on Revenue and Fiscal Affairs approved a budget that contains \$373 million in new projects - the state has \$231 million to spend on new construction projects in the state government spending year that starts July 1.
 - To balance House Bill 2, the Blanco administration will have to whittle away \$142 million in new projects.
 - New area and statewide projects added to the budget Sunday include:
 - \$33 million for state emergency shelters.
 - \$1 million for a multipurpose enrichment and sports center for the Louisiana Leadership Institute in Baton Rouge.
 - \$500,000 for acquisition, planning, renovation and construction of the Lamar Dixon Expo Center.
 - \$450,000 for the Anna T. Jordan site and facility improvements in the Baton Rouge park system.
 - \$250,000 for a Louisiana Black History Hall of Fame museum and cultural center in Baton Rouge.
 - ✓ The construction budget legislation now goes to the Senate Finance Committee, which must approve it before the full Senate can vote.

ON THE FEDERAL FRONT:

****U.S. House Appropriations Subcommittee Releases Funding Amounts for Rural Health***

Late last week, Congressman Regula (R-OH) released fiscal year 2007 funding levels for the House Appropriations Subcommittee for Labor, Health and Human Services, and Education - for the most part, rural health programs are funded at the same levels as last year.

- The appropriations bill will be taken up in the full Appropriations Committee this week, and the vote on the House floor will likely take place the week of June 19th.
 - ❖ Here is more information on the House Subcommittee Appropriations bill, and how the funding levels compare to last year.
 - Rural Outreach Grants: \$40 million, an increase of \$1.1 million.
 - Rural Health Research: \$9 million, an increase of \$263,000.
 - Rural Hospital Flexibility Grants: \$40 million. This amount is a slight increase from the amount provided in fiscal year 2005, and provides the core funding for the Flex and SHIP programs. It is \$23.5 million below the 2006 level because last year's funding level included additional money that was not directed to the National Flex program, but was instead intended for a Delta Health Initiative.
 - Rural and Community Access to Emergency Devices: \$1.5 million, essentially a freeze at the 2006 level. This is still a cut of \$7.4 million below the funding in 2005.

- State Offices of Rural Health: \$8.4 million, an increase of \$259,000.
- Telehealth: \$10 million, an increase of \$3.2 million.
- Area Health Education Centers: \$28.681 million, the same amount as in 2006.
- Geriatric Programs: \$31.548 million. This is a restoration to the 2005 level for Geriatric Programs! Geriatric Programs got no money in 2006.
- National Health Service Corps: \$131.528 million, an increase of \$6 million.
- Community Health Centers: \$1,988 million, an increase of \$205.7 million.
- The House Appropriations Committee bill eliminates funding for the Denali Commission, a cut of \$39.3 million.
- The bill also fails to restore several programs that were eliminated last year, including Health Education and Training Centers, Quentin Burdick, Rural Emergency Medical Services, and the Community Access Program.

****Senate Fails to Limit Debate on Gay Marriage Ban***

After a largely formulaic debate whose outcome was never in doubt, the Senate last Wednesday refused to take up a proposed constitutional amendment to ban gay marriage.

- By 49-48, senators failed to choke off debate on a motion to proceed to the measure, effectively killing it - Sixty votes are needed to limit debate, and a two-thirds majority (67, if all 100 senators are present and voting) to pass a constitutional amendment.
- But the vote is not likely to end discussion of the issue, nor to keep the Republican-controlled House from voting on its own version next month.
 - Republican leaders are eager to fire up social conservatives in advance of the November elections.
 - Proponents of a federal constitutional amendment contend that bans on same-sex marriage now in place in 45 states could be trumped by “activist” judges someday.

****House Panel Approves \$427.4 Billion Defense Spending Bill***

Last week, the House Appropriations Subcommittee on Defense approved a draft Defense spending bill today that would provide \$427.4 billion in fiscal 2007.

- The measure, approved by voice vote, includes \$50 billion to support combat operations in Iraq and Afghanistan during the initial part of the fiscal year that begins Oct. 1.
 - Apart from the war funding, the bill would provide \$4 billion less than President Bush requested but \$19.1 billion more than the current fiscal year’s appropriation.
- In a rebuff to President Bush, it would substantially increase funding for the National Guard above the amounts he sought.
- Congress has provided nearly \$400 billion so far for combat operations in Iraq and Afghanistan, and a House-Senate conference committee is wrapping up a supplemental fiscal 2006 spending bill that would allocate another \$70.4 billion for the war effort.

- The \$50 billion in the Defense Subcommittee's draft fiscal 2007 bill would be just the first installment for war spending next year.

****Is Melancon Up For A New Job?***

U.S. Rep. Charles "Charlie" Melancon, D-Napoleonville, has been listed as a possible replacement for U.S. Rep. William Jefferson, D-New Orleans, on the powerful House Ways and Means Committee.

- Quoting anonymous sources, the Capitol Hill newspaper, Roll Call, mentioned Melancon as one of eight people being considered if Jefferson gets dumped.
- The House leadership began proceedings last week to remove Jefferson from the post because he is under federal criminal investigation for bribery - Jefferson has not been charged and has denied any wrongdoing and has refused to step down from the committee.
- Melancon declined to comment on the speculation.

****Fannie Mae Fined \$400 Million***

U.S. Rep. Richard Baker, R-Baton Rouge, got another boost last week for his call to create stronger controls over the nation's mortgage giants, Fannie Mae and Freddie Mac.

- A federal regulator appeared before Baker's Capital Markets, Insurance and Government Sponsored Enterprises Subcommittee with details of a \$10.6 billion accounting scandal at Fannie Mae.
 - As a result, the institution has been ordered to pay a \$400 million fine.
 - Baker's bill to create stronger oversight of the agencies passed last year in the House but has stalled in the Senate.

****Landrieu, Vitter Differ On Votes***

Louisiana's senators split on last week's vote on the marriage amendment.

- U.S. Sen. Mary Landrieu, D-La., voted against the amendment, even though she noted that she strongly supports the definition of marriage as a sacred union between man and woman.
 - "The Constitution has given authority over these matters to state legislatures, not to Congress," Landrieu says in a statement.
- U.S. Sen. David Vitter, R-La., was showcased on the issue by the Republican leadership at its weekly meeting with reporters.
 - Vitter called a two-parent family of a man and woman the biggest predictor of success in life.
 - He also noted that, in 2004, Louisiana voted with 78 percent support for a state constitutional amendment banning same-sex marriages.

- The federal amendment in the U.S. Senate failed last week when supporters could not get enough votes to end a Democratic filibuster.
- The pair also split on the vote to repeal the estate tax - Vitter supported the repeal while Landrieu opposed it, citing demands of Gulf Coast hurricane recovery.

****Social Security Issue To Return***

U.S. Rep. Jim McCrery, R-Shreveport, ruffled Democratic feathers last week when he stated that the House Ways and Means Committee would again attempt to take up Social Security reform at the beginning of the next Congress.

- McCrery is the odds-on favorite to become the next chairman of the powerful panel, which writes the nation's tax laws.
- Everyone from U.S. Rep. George Miller, D-Calif., to U.S. Rep. John Larson, D-Conn., denounced the McCrery comment.
 - "You thought the issue of Social Security was going away," Larson said. "They're back."

****Tauzin Among Most Traveled***

Former U.S. Rep. Billy Tauzin, R-Chackbay, was back in the news last week when it was revealed that he was one of the most-traveled lawmakers.

- The nonpartisan Center for Public Integrity said that over the past 5 1/2 years, lawmakers accepted \$50 million in trips, often to posh resorts, from corporations and groups.
- Tauzin, who served as the chairman of the Energy and Commerce Committee, was one of 11 legislators who took more than \$350,000 in privately funded travel between January 2000 and June 2005, according to the report.

****Hurricane Recovery Aid***

Millions in hurricane recovery grants were announced last week for St. Bernard and Plaquemines parishes.

- In Plaquemines, \$4.9 million from the Federal Emergency Management Agency will go toward debris removal.
 - Another \$3.7 million will replace individual water distribution systems.
- In St. Bernard, \$137 million will be dedicated to the demolition and disposal of destroyed homes.
 - Another \$19.3 million will be set aside for essential government employee housing while \$11.7 million will be used for monitoring debris removal.

**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.*