

LEGISLATIVE UPDATE 2004 SESSION

Health-related issues

SB 1148 Care for the Mentally Ill in Long Term Care Facilities passed.

SB 1463 Health Insurance Innovations Commission passed

Appropriations include:

\$5 m to enable counties to hire additional child protective services staff to reduce case loads

\$205,000 to train CPS dealing with abuse and neglect related to methamphetamine use

\$3 m to raise the state/county special assistance rate, which helps low-income people afford long-term care. Counties must contribute \$3 m.

\$6.6 m to the NC Health Choice program, which permits continuing enrollment for the rest of 2004, but a cap is likely at 100,000 children. This covers children who live in families earning no more than 150% of the poverty level (\$23,500 for a family of 3; families who earn up to 200% must pay an enrollment fee and co-payments.)

The original target was 71,000 children who were uninsured. By 2002 it was insuring 84,000, and targets now suggest there will be 115,000 children eligible in the next few years. This was not set up as an entitlement program, so must be reassessed every year. It draws down \$3 from the federal gov't for every \$1 NC contributes.

\$750,000 to expand housing options for people with mental illness.

\$7 m for community health programs to increase access to primary and preventive health care for people who are uninsured and can't afford the health care they need
\$450,000 for a system for conducting criminal record checks on potential employees in long-term care facilities

The abortion fund remained capped at \$50,000. It has not been used because the requirements are so stringent.

There were some changes, but no new funding, for Medicaid and Health Choice coverage, mostly enlarging the categories of health providers one can access, like Nurse Practitioners, licensed professional counselors, marriage and family counselors and certified addiction specialists.

Economic issues

SB 1063 Eliminate IRB Wage Standard (This standard said that if a business wanted to receive state-backed IU bonds, it had to provide jobs that were at 110% of the average county wage.)

SB 1152 The Studies Act of 2004 lists 40 different topics that either may be or are required to have a study commission. Here are a few of them:

Workers comp for agricultural employment

High-risk health insurance pools

Pay equity

Care and safety of residents of residential care facilities

- Trafficking of persons
- Availability of health insurance for small businesses
- Availability of health insurance for uninsurable people
- Equity-building homes
- Computer voting without a paper trail
- Closing bank tax loopholes
- Ovarian cancer risks and prevention
- Bulk purchasing of pharmaceutical drugs
- Reducing prescription drugs cost

Of particular interest to women are the pay equity study and the availability of health insurance, not to mention trafficking.

Appropriations include,

- \$4 m additional to the New and Expanding Industry training program at the Community Colleges. Also increased tuition 7 percent.
- \$4.4 m for additional public school Voc-Ed teachers and support
- Five new HS Workforce Development Pilot Projects - this is first part of a state match for \$10 m from the Gates Foundation. It works to align curricula with workforce training needs of employers
- Restores \$156,000 to the WIC Farmers Market Program
- \$2 m for the state's six food banks

There was no action on the cigarette tax, or tax reform in general.

Domestic Violence and Sexual Assault

Domestic Violence Center funds were increased by \$2 m. The increase has been a long time coming, while the number of programs has grown steadily. Every county has some DV presence now.

HB 1354 passed with provisions recommended by the House Select Committee on Domestic Violence formed last fall. Among them are,

- Increased penalties for habitual misdemeanor assault offenders
- Creates the crime of strangulation
- Requires report by November 15 on DV training in the schools
- Requires DV training for law enforcement (\$132,000)
- Requests the State Supreme Court to establish rules establishing minimum Standards of education and training for District Court judges in handling Civil and criminal DV cases. Admin. Office of the Court must report to 2005 GA.
- Creates a funding stream for Legal Aid attorneys who provide representation to DV victims
- Requires judges to look at a number of custody factors in 50B cases. And, if visitation is granted, court must provide for the safety of the child and the aggrieved party and specify dates and times in the order
- Makes NC law conform to the federal law for felons and their right to possess a gun
- Allows warrantless arrest for those who violate pre-trial orders.

Requires all defendants convicted of DV and placed on probation to attend and complete an abuser treatment program

Requires Probation Officers to send a notice to Batterers' Programs within 15 days

Prohibits employment discrimination against DV victims effective October 1, 2004

SB 916 allows an employer to obtain a protective order on behalf of an employee who has suffered unlawful conduct at the workplace from any individual.

HB 951 creates a civil no-contact order for victims of sexual assault and stalking who do not have the required relationship in 50B (a list of some 15 familial and partner arrangements)

Appropriations include,

\$1.5 m for court personnel to deal with increased DV cases and increased meth cases

\$250,000 added to eliminate the backlog of untested rape kits

The Work First (TANF) funds were continued at \$1.2 m.

Child Care

Study bill 1152, alluded to above, also lists a possible study of the child welfare system and whether the reforms are improving weaknesses.

Appropriations include,

\$8 m more for child care subsidies. There are presently about 25,000 children on the waiting list. This will not reduce that, but will keep it from growing.

\$225,000 to the Healthy Start Foundation, which addresses infant mortality

Restores \$65,000 to Child Fatality Task Force for one staff member

Adds \$150,000 for planning of "Our Child's Place, which will be a treatment center for non-violent incarcerated women and their at-risk children

\$500,000 added to Juvenile Crime Prevention Councils

The Governor's More At Four was expanded by 2,000 students.

The total budget came to \$15.9 billion dollars.

To read bills go to www.ncleg.net and look for box labeled News/Information. The budget bill is HB 1414. Look up the other bills by their number.

This is a compilation of the reports of a group of dedicated legislative-watchers, absolutely essential to those of us not walking the halls of the legislature. Thanks to all of them.

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