

Health issues remain a major focus for legislature

Kentucky does not have the best track record when it comes to health. We come close to leading the nation in all the wrong things - particularly chronic illnesses like diabetes, heart disease, obesity. Lifestyle choices contribute to the prevalence of diseases, but access to quality medical care certainly plays a big part as well. Of course, these are painful, crippling, and expensive diseases, but the COVID pandemic has made being chronically ill even more dangerous. If you have a pre-existing condition, you are more susceptible to the coronavirus and more likely to suffer complications if you get it.

This legislature worked diligently this session to improve health, focusing on access. One way we accomplished this is by giving more authority to physician assistants (PAs). This measure, HB 135, will allow PAs, who already practice medicine throughout the state, the ability to prescribe more medications as part of the medical care they provide to a patient. This is an important step in getting more providers into our state's most rural areas, which has historically

Capitol Focus



State Rep. Brandon Reed

been a struggle. The bill passed with incredible bipartisan support. Access to health care certainly means access to community hospitals in our rural areas. However, many of our rural hospitals were struggling financially before COVID, with half in danger of bankruptcy or closing due to poor financial situations. The state's prolonged moratorium on elective procedures has made the struggle harder and hundreds of health care workers across the state are on furlough. All of this makes HB 387 one of the most important bills passed this session because of its potential to revitalize rural hospitals. The bill creates a revolving loan fund within the Cabinet for Economic Development for financially distressed rural hospitals. Loan funds could be used by hospitals to maintain or upgrade their facilities, to maintain or increase staff, or

to provide new health-care services. This measure also included language that allows the Governor to access funds for the purchase of personal protective equipment (PPE) to be used in the pandemic. Unfortunately, the Governor inappropriately used his line-item veto power on this bill - leaving the entire bill in question. The legislature is moving forward to get clarification; however, if this bill does not become law, it could be crippling for rural communities. Hospitals are some of the biggest job producers in our rural communities; to say I am dissatisfied in the Governor's decision is an understatement. If hospital closures occur, there will be a rise in adverse health outcomes and tremendous economic consequences. There are lives on the line, and this bill was simply a tool to ensure our hospitals stayed operational.

If we want to increase access to health care, we have to invest in educating Kentuckians to be doctors and medical researchers. That's one of the major goals of HB 99, which provided a loan to the University of Louisville as it turns around Jew-

ish Hospital and the Kentucky One Health System. The university purchased the system late last year. If the purchase had not gone through, Kentucky may have lost one of its medical schools but also thousands of health care jobs. This would be a major blow at any time, but this pandemic makes the investment in future physicians and research, as well as today's health care needs, even more critical.

The common goal of access continues with House Bill 129, which simplifies and focuses the goals of local health departments to reflect the needs of their communities. The bill, referred to as the Public Health Transformation Act, prevents duplication of services and encourages shared resources and expertise. The legislation will help local health departments control costs and will relieve the instability of the current system. This bill ensures the priority is on the most necessary functions. In a separate measure aimed at helping local health departments, we froze the employer contribution rate they are required to make

towards pensions for one more year. Like so many, I am extremely troubled by the pension debt we inherited. However, this pandemic makes it even more difficult for health departments to make and meet their budgets.

Cost-cutting and improving customer services and delivery was a priority in passing SB 50, legislation that will simplify and reduce pharmacy costs for the Department for Medicaid Services. Senate Bill 50 requires only one pharmacy benefits manager to carry out the pharmacy benefits for all Medicaid recipients. We have heard extensively of the discriminatory pricing and reimbursement practices of pharmacy benefit managers, or PBMs. PBMs are an unnecessary regulatory burden, and I was proud to support this measure to begin to carve them out of our state Medicaid program.

We took a step forward in addressing the youth vaping epidemic by passing Senate Bill 56. This bill prohibits the sale and use of tobacco products, including vapor products, to anyone under 21. The youth vaping epidemic is exceptionally prob-

lematic and unhealthy. Hopefully, this bill will snuff out this dangerous practice in our teens by raising the age of purchase from 18 to 21.

Before I close, I want to offer my thanks to the health care workers, frankly to all the men and women who have continued to serve our state through this crisis. Just like in wartime, everyone has a role to play and everyone's role is important. As we move forward to reopen our state, I think the time has come to focus on how we can do so safely and strongly. I was pleased to be part of a General Assembly that adopted CDC guidelines to keep serving our constituents. And, I know that businesses and organizations here in this community will do the same thing to get back to work safely.

As always, I hope you will contact me with any questions or concerns you might have. I can be reached here at home anytime, or through the toll-free message line in Frankfort at 1-800-372-7181. If you would like more information, visit the legislature's website legislature.ky.gov or email me at Brandon.Reed@lrc.ky.gov.

Pandemic has made telehealth necessary, easier to get

Services are easier to get, and sure to continue as is; 7 to 8 years' worth of progress, official says

By MELISSA PATRICK
KENTUCKY HEALTH NEWS



Federal officials on a rural health webinar applauded the federal government's efforts to expand telehealth during the coronavirus pandemic, and predicted its uptick will continue long after the crisis is over.

I can tell you from personal experience that we are never going back," said Dr. Jeff Colyer, a surgeon who chairs the National Advisory Committee on Rural Health and Human Services. "I've seen the majority of my patients via telehealth, and they like the convenience and the access that it gives them. And so we are going to see those changes continue on in the future."

Bette Brand, deputy undersecretary for Rural Development in the Department of Agriculture, said, "The coronavirus has made the need for telehealth even more urgent. Its life-saving convenience is now underscored by its lifesaving ability to limit travel and unnecessary exposure."

program by the Department of Health and Human Services. Deputy HHS Secretary Eric Hargan called the changes "historic" and said they include, among other things, eliminating some barriers to Medicare reimbursement, enabling waivers or reductions of cost sharing, and allowing the use of everyday technologies, like FaceTime and Skype, in health care.

"In just about a month and a half, I think we've seen about seven or eight years worth of progress on telehealth," Hargan said. "Really, it's a revolution provoked by necessity. I'm excited to see what the future looks like based on getting patients and providers acclimated to the idea of telehealth in this way," he said.

"What sounds to many like dry, obscure flexibilities in regulations and reimbursement is translating into millions of Americans getting access to health-care more safely."

Tom Morris, associate HHS administrator for rural health, said telehealth resource centers have seen a tremendous increase in use: "You would not believe the volume increase that they have had. . . . The increase in their volume was well more than 1,000 percent of this time a year ago. And so the funding will better help them respond to that moving forward."

The webinar was sponsored by the Rural Health Information Hub. Click here to learn more about Kentucky's telehealth program.

Two analysts and a fellow at the Brookings Institution came to many of the same conclusions after taking a detailed look at telehealth regulations and recent changes. They write:

Telehealth has proven itself a viable supplement to an already strained health-care system, where both medical providers and patients are seeking timely, effective, and robust tools for early detection, primary care, and long-term evaluation. While progress was being made before the coronavirus outbreak to adopt telehealth in states, the pandemic not only demonstrated its worth but also proved it necessary to avert larger meltdowns in hospital systems and among medical professionals—even those whose work was stopped due to social distancing.

The world will probably not return to the

normalcy it once experienced before covid-19—and neither should health care. As Congress is charged with re-evaluating the leniencies permitted to health-care providers during this crisis, federal lawmakers should

also see the benefits. The same holds true for states that will need to reconsider lifting boundaries on telehealth services to accelerate its transformational capabilities for patients and doctors.

NOTICE OF PUBLIC HEARING

The Green County Fiscal Court will hold a Public Hearing on Thursday, May 28, 2020 at 9:00 a.m. Central Time. This Public Hearing will be on the Green County Fiscal Court Facebook page. The purpose of the Public Hearing will be to accept comments from the public regarding an application for a Land and Water Conservation Fund grant to construct a remote control car race track at the American Legion Park. Comments may be submitted in writing to the Green County Judge Executive's Office at 203 West Court Street, Greensburg, Kentucky 42743.

INVITATION FOR SEALED BIDS

The Green County Fiscal Court will be accepting sealed bids for the removal of two (2) existing metal siding, steel-framed buildings located behind the Green County Courthouse, commonly known as the "Rescue Buildings." The winning bidder will be required to remove the buildings, including all metal, steel and other materials, but excluding the concrete foundation and floors. All materials must be removed from the property within 30 days after the bid is awarded and lawfully disposed of in accordance with state and federal laws. Upon the completion of the work, the building sites must be left as clean as possible, and the structures must be leveled down to the existing concrete foundation and floors. The winning bidder will need to show proof of liability insurance in the amount of \$1M and will be required to sign an agreement releasing and indemnifying the Fiscal Court from any and all liability. Sealed bids will be accepted until Friday, May 29, 2020 at 12:00 P.M. Central Time at the Green County Judge-Executive's office at 203 West Court Street, Greensburg, Kentucky 42743. Bids will be opened on Friday, May 29, 2020 at 1:00 P.M. Central Time at a Special Called Fiscal Court meeting. Green County Fiscal Court will award the contract to the lowest and best bidder, and the Court reserves the right to reject any and all bids. For more information, please contact John Frank, Green County Judge-Executive, at 270-932-4024.

Crossword Puzzle Answers

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Crossword puzzle found on page 5A

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