

Viewpoints

Yours, ours and others

Page 4 — The Chicot County Spectator, Wednesday, Oct. 12, 2005

Rep. Mike Ross reintroduces Reconstructive Surgery Act

WASHINGTON, DC - U.S. Rep. Mike Ross (AR-04) Friday reintroduced the Reconstructive Surgery Act of 2005, legislation which would ensure nationwide insurance coverage for medically necessary reconstructive surgeries.

Ross wrote the bill after learning of the challenges a constituent faced in getting the reconstructive surgery necessary to overcome her own disorder.

Approximately 100,000 children are born each year with some degree of craniofacial disfigurement.

Additionally, both children and adults can develop such conditions through trauma and disease.

Unfortunately, these individuals are often denied insurance coverage because their health insurers classify needed operations as "cosmetic."

Legislation has been passed in 16 states that to some degree requires insurance companies to cover reconstructive surgeries.

The American Medical Association (AMA) has developed clear and simple guidelines regarding the differences between cosmetic and reconstructive surgery.

The legislation proposed by Ross, which incorporates the AMA definitions, would provide insurance coverage to individuals who suffer from congenital defects, developmental abnormalities, trauma, infection, tumor or disease that leads to disfigurement that medically impairs them.

The legislation also mirrors language in federal law requiring coverage for reconstruction after mastectomies.

"Individuals are forced to fight their insurance companies so they can receive the life-saving surgeries they need," said Ross. "The fact that these surgeries have been grouped in the same 'cosmetic' category as surgeries that simply make people look better or younger is a tragedy. This legislation is another step in ensuring that individuals living with these conditions will receive the necessary medical care."

Ross was inspired to draft the bill by a constituent, Wendelyn Osborne.

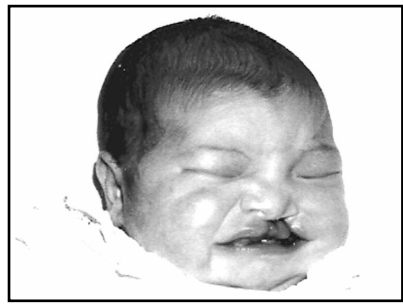
The Arkadelphia resident was the 16th person documented with the rare bone disease, Craniometaphyseal Dysplasia, which causes an overgrowth of her craniofacial bone that never deteriorates.

"Wendelyn's condition requires periodic surgeries to correct the growth and abnormalities caused by the disease," said Ross. "Unfortunately, Wendelyn has had to fight for any type of disease-related procedure as well as access to qualified physicians. Wendelyn's condition is rare, but her experience in seeking medical care is not."

For additional information on craniofacial conditions, please visit the Web site of the Children's Craniofacial Association at www.ccaakids.org or Cleft Advocate at www.cleftadvocate.org.

Note: The Cleft Advocate director has shared with us some before and after surgery photographs who can serve as examples of the good that can be done when surgery is provided to help the people unfortunate enough to have this condition.

For more information and success stories, see the Web sites Congressman Ross had listed in the preceding story.



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Legislative Update by U.S. Representative Mike Ross

Breast Cancer Awareness Month

October marks National Breast Cancer Awareness Month, and each year we dedicate this month to the prevention and early detection of one of the most common cancers among women. In 2005, it is estimated that over 200,000 women will be diagnosed with breast cancer, with 2,090 of those in Arkansas.

Breast cancer does not know boundaries and affects women of all ages, color, and ethnicities. Chances are someone very close to you has or will be diagnosed with some form of cancer, and that is why early detection is so important. There have been tremendous advancements in the detection and treatment of cancer, but awareness is the best defense against this deadly disease.

It is important to perform monthly self examinations and, if you are a woman over the age of 40, a yearly mammogram by your doctor. I urge you to be cog-

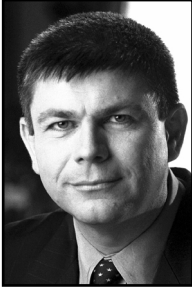
nizant of your family history as you are more likely to be at risk for the disease if your family has a history of the disease.

Knowledge is the most powerful tool in the fight against cancer. I hope that you will take a few moments and visit www.cancer.org to learn about prevention, early detection, and local resources in Arkansas in the fight against the most common cancer among women. I strongly encourage you to spread the word of National Breast Cancer Awareness Month to your family, friends and your community to get the message out that early detection and diagnosis is the key to survival and winning the fight against breast cancer.

As your Representative in Congress, I will continue to support breast cancer research and treatment funding in Congress. I am a co-sponsor of the Breast Cancer Research Stamp

Reauthorization Act with allows the United States Postal Service to issue special stamps to help fund breast cancer research. I am also a co-sponsor of the Breast Cancer Patient Protection Act of 2005, which would require group health insurance coverage to include medical and surgical benefits and radiation therapy in the treatment of breast cancer. I remain committed to defeating breast cancer by raising the public's awareness and continuing to fund the research necessary to fight this disease.

I welcome your comments and concerns on issues important to you. I encourage you to write to me at 314 Cannon House Office Building, Washington, DC 20515, e-mail me at mike.ross@mail.house.gov or phone my office at 1-800-223-2220. I also encourage you to visit my web site at www.house.gov/ross.



Ross

Letter to the Editor

Group wants Lincoln to run for president

Since February, I have been part of a growing nationwide grassroots "draft" committee to publicly articulate why U.S. Senator Blanche Lincoln should give serious consideration to a presidential run in 2008.



Lincoln

Senator Lincoln recently made passionate speeches on behalf of Americans who became homeless in the aftermath of Hurricanes Katrina and Rita. She has insisted upon an emergency aid package to provide

health care for those who have lost their communities to these natural disasters.

This illustrates Senator Lincoln's strong potential as a White House contender, given her similar work ethic on issues pertaining to energy independence, national security, child safety and judicial responsibility.

I invite Arkansans who would like to join in our public appeal to Senator Lincoln to visit our Web site: www.lincoln2008.com

We are looking for people who would be willing to volunteer as team captains to help us spread the message of how Senator Lincoln could lead and inspire

the Democratic Party with the crucial task of making electoral inroads into rural America and red-leaning "swing" states.

Blanche Lincoln's authentic leadership on behalf of farmers, gunowners, veterans, soldiers and working families would resonate effectively at the national level.

Tony Eichberger
Black River Falls, WI

President & Founding Member of Lincoln2008-www.lincoln2008.com

Capitol Week in Review from State Senator Jimmy Jeffress

Lake View school funding case refuses to die

In a report to the Arkansas Supreme Court, two special masters said the state has not made education its top priority. About half of the state general revenue fund is dedicated to public schools.

In the past three years, the state has increased public school funding by \$750 million.

If the Supreme Court agrees with the masters' report, the state may have to significantly increase school funding.

The court has given the parties in the case 20 days to file responses and objections.

The masters specifically noted that the legislature had provided cost-of-living increases for state agencies, but had not raised the minimum foundation funding level for the current school year. It is \$5,400 per student this year and will increase to \$5,497 per student next year.

In hearings before the special masters, school superintendents testified that their districts had financial difficulties because the legislature did not increase per pupil funding this year.



Jeffress

While minimum funding amounts remained constant, they said, schools were required to start new programs and raise teacher pay.

In effect, the superintendents said, they had to pay the cost of unfunded mandates enacted by the legislature.

The masters agreed with them. The masters faulted the amount allocated for improving facilities, saying it did not meet the documented needs of public schools.

In their defense, state officials said a master plan should first be done, so facilities funding is spent efficiently and wisely.

The masters said, however, that "the state has already spent too much time getting ready to get ready as far as facilities are concerned."

In the 2005 session, the legislature allocated \$109 million for facilities and adopted a construction and repair plan that ensures schools will be adequately maintained in the future.

This year, in lieu of an increase in per pupil funding, the legislature chose to add \$35 million to the teacher health insurance system.

The additional contribution is meant to stabilize the insurance system, which

experts say is threatened with financial crisis because so many teachers are leaving it to buy cheaper health coverage elsewhere.

The masters, however, said that, while the increased teacher health insurance contributions were good, they were only of indirect benefit to education.

Improving teacher health insurance does not excuse the state's failure to adequately fund schools, the masters said.

Also, the masters noted that local property re-assessments had resulted in an increase of about \$39 million in local districts' responsibilities for school revenue.

At the same time, the re-assessments resulted in lower state contributions to the school funding formula, also by \$39 million.

The Constitution says it is the state's duty to provide an adequate education.

The school funding case was filed in 1992 by the Lake View School District, a small, rural and poor district in east Arkansas.

The legislature met in special session in 2003 and 2004 to increase school funding by about \$400 million a year, strengthen academic standards and impose tighter accountability measures for schools, teachers, administrators and students.

From State Representative Randy Rankin

Rankin offers his view of the Lake View law suit

For the second time in slightly more than a year, special appointees of the Arkansas Supreme Court have taken another look at the workings of the Arkansas General Assembly and how lawmakers have dealt with education issues.

The first time, lawmakers got a passing grade from the special masters, and the Supreme Court, in response, closed the long-running

Lake View school-funding case only to reopen it some months later.

The second time, in a report released on Oct. 3, the same special masters — Bradley Jesson of Fort Smith and David Newbern, both of whom are former justices on the Arkansas Supreme Court — said the 85th General Assembly largely had failed to continue the improvements of the past two years. Nearly \$400 million in additional funding has gone to public schools over the past year and a half.

The masters, in an 86-page report, didn't make a direct recommendation to the Supreme Court on how it should proceed on the Lake View case. They

noted, instead, that the state has more than \$100 million in unallocated surpluses and that the amount will grow this fiscal year. The state has the financial means to provide more money to public schools if lawmakers would be called into special session, the masters said.

The masters collected testimony from certain lawmakers, state officials and school officials during two weeks in September, and used that information and material gathered from other sources to compile its most recent report.

The masters, in particular, noted the lack of a "cost-of-living" increase for public schools in the base amount of state aid per student, currently at \$5,400 per student per year. That's the same amount of per-student base funding as last school year. Other state agencies received cost-of-living increases, the special masters noted. While adding that no one could have foreseen the recent large increases in the cost of fuel.

Various pieces of legislation approved by lawmakers, such as duty-free lunch periods of teachers, also increased the

costs facing schools, they said.

The special masters, in its first report in April 2004, noted that the state must refocus its efforts on retaining and recruiting teachers.

Legislation this year provided a \$35-million bailout of a teacher's insurance plan, resulting in lower premiums and serving, essentially, as a pay raise for teachers. The special masters, however, said the bailout, while laudable, would have little if any direct effect on education.

The state also has spent "too much time getting ready to get ready" for a massive rehabilitation of school facilities across the state, as ordered by the court in the Lake View case, the special masters said.

In closing, the masters said lawmakers in the 85th General Assembly knew that much work remained to be done and had demonstrated "a strong willingness to stay the course." They called on current lawmakers and their successors to "retain the high ground ... to erase the stain of unconstitutionality from Arkansas's public schools."