



## Task force explores accessible health care; Bentley considers state plan

Health Care Task Force.jpg

Gov. Robert Bentley created a 38-member Alabama Health Care Improvement Task Force by executive order on April 6, 2014. The group will look at how to increase access to health care in rural Alabama where there is a "serious shortage" of primary care physicians and dentists, the governor said. (Erin Edgemon/eedgemon@al.com)

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Gov. Robert Bentley officially formed a task force today that will address how to bring more accessible and affordable health care to residents in the state of Alabama.

The 38-member Alabama Health Care Improvement Task Force **created by executive order** will look at how to increase access to health care in rural Alabama where there is a "serious shortage" of primary care physicians and dentists, the governor said.

Some areas of focus may be telemedicine, medical resources in rural areas and scope-of-practice laws for nurse practitioners and other professionals.

Bentley said the task force's work will be long-term, but they are expected to bring the governor some initial recommendations before the 2016 legislative session in case legislation needs to be drafted.

The governor said Alabama won't expand Medicaid under the Affordable Care Act, but he confirmed he has spoken with Sylvia Burwell, secretary of the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, about creating an Alabama health care plan, that would utilize private insurance.

To receive this coverage, able-bodied people must be employed or be in a workforce training program.

"I think that is only fair because we are trying to help them better themselves," Bentley said.

The governor said he wanted to create this task force in his first term, but he wanted to wait to see what happened with the Affordable Care Act. Now, he says it's still unknown what's going to happen with the federal program.

"We can't wait for the federal government to try to help our people in this state get health care and so we are going to proceed ... " Bentley said. "Alabama faces some really serious chronic problems - chronic conditions in this state. Many of our health care issues are related to lifestyle choices, related to poverty and related to access to quality healthcare."

He said the state must take steps to "reverse the troubling health trends in our state."

Because Alabama is rural, the state needs to take a different approach including using telemedicine so physicians from Birmingham or Huntsville can treat a patient from the Black Belt area, Bentley said.

"Distance does not have to be an obstacle to health care," he said.

State Health Officer Don Williamson said 65 percent of the state's rural hospitals are losing money.

He said the task force may look at changing the infrastructure of those hospitals into urgent care or emergency room units with fewer beds.

The 38-member task force includes doctors, medical school leaders, hospital administrators, insurance executives, nurses, state agency leaders, legislators and other professionals in mental health, dietetics, dentistry, public health, pharmacy, wellness and other specialties.

Here is a list of the members:

1. Susan Alexander, president of the Nurse Practitioner Alliance of Alabama; clinical associate professor in nursing, University of Alabama in Huntsville
2. Stephanie McGee Azar, acting Alabama Medicaid commissioner
3. Billy Beasley, pharmacist; partner in Clayton Drug Co. and Clio Drug Co.; a state senator
4. Elaine Hill Beech, pharmacist; Health Committee, Alabama House of Representatives
5. Beverly Bell-Shambley, associate commissioner for mental health and substance abuse services, Alabama Department of Mental Health
6. Cynthia Bisbee, executive director, The Wellness Coalition, Montgomery
7. Jeff Brannon, chief executive officer, Monroe County Hospital
8. Brian Buchmann, president, Alabama State Nurses Association; family practice unit director, Huntsville Hospital
9. Jim Carnes, policy director, Alabama Arise
10. Mitch Cohen, physician-in-chief, Children's of Alabama; chair, Department of Pediatrics, UAB School of Medicine
11. Richard Craig, executive director, JBS Mental Health Authority
12. Conan Davis, assistant dean for community collaborations and public health, UAB School of Dentistry

13. Joy P. Deupree, director of professional development and assistant professor, UAB School of Nursing; a Robert Wood Johnson Foundation executive nurse fellow
14. Gerald Dial, chair of the Health and Human Services Committee, Alabama Senate
15. Brandon Farmer, government relations and public affairs executive with NHS Management LLC in Tuscaloosa
16. Will Ferniany, chief executive officer, UAB Health System
17. Ronald D. Franks, vice president of health sciences and professor of psychiatry, University of South Alabama
18. Laura Hall, co-chair of the state Alzheimer's Disease Task Force; a state representative
19. Sarah Harkless, director, Office of Substance Abuse Treatment and Development, Alabama Department of Mental Health
20. Boyde J. Harrison, chairman, State Committee of Public Health
21. Craig J. Lenz, dean, Alabama College of Osteopathic Medicine
22. Joseph Marchant, chief executive officer, Bibb County Healthcare Authority
23. Patricia Z. Marincic, associate professor, director of the Didactic Program in Dietetics, College of Human Sciences, Auburn University
24. Stephanie McGilvray, past president, Alabama Society of Physician Assistants; assistant professor, UAB School of Health Professions
25. Doug McIntyre, vice president, health care networks, Blue Cross and Blue Shield of Alabama
26. Max Michael, dean, UAB School of Public Health
27. Neal Morrison, commissioner, Alabama Department of Senior Services
28. Michael Murphree, chief executive officer, Medical AIDS Outreach of Alabama, Inc.
29. Michael J. O'Malley, executive director, Alabama Association of Health Plans
30. Carol J. Ratcliffe, co-leader, Alabama Health Action Coalition; associate professor, Ida V. Moffett School of Nursing, Samford University
31. Ron Sparks, director, Alabama Rural Development Office
32. Darlene Traffanstedt, member of the State Committee of Public Health; an internal medicine physician in Hoover

33. James A. Tucker, director, Alabama Disabilities Advocacy Program, University of Alabama

34. John B. Waits, program director, Cahaba Family Medicine Residency; chief executive officer, Cahaba Medical Care Foundation

35. April Weaver, chair of the Health Committee, Alabama House of Representatives

36. John R. Wheat, professor of community and rural medicine, College of Community Health Sciences, University of Alabama

37. Charles White, chief executive officer, Franklin Primary Health Center

38. Don Williamson, state health officer, who shall chair the Task Force

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