

HEALTH CARE

Let's protect Medicaid for sake of all children

Program provides benefits for families throughout the community

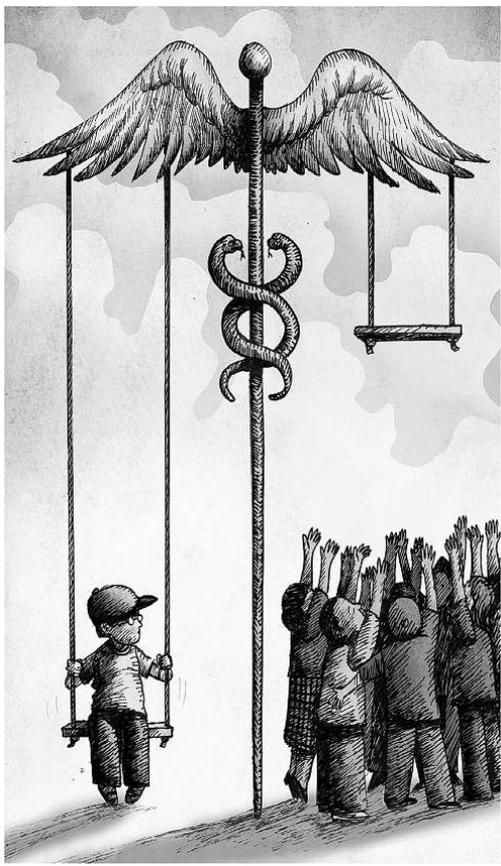
By Mark A. Wallace

One out of every 11 children in the United States lives in Texas. By 2015 we expect approximately half a million more children statewide.

As the largest and most comprehensive children's health system in the nation — and one that serves more Medicaid patients than any other pediatric hospital in the state — Texas Children's believes it is essential to preserve and protect Medicaid. The joint federal-state health insurance program for low-income individuals ensures all children receive much needed medical care. Slashing funding not only hurts Medicaid recipients, but also adversely affects key programs and initiatives that benefit all children. For example, less funding means fewer primary care physicians will be available to see patients for regular checkups or manage minor illnesses, resulting in more children seeking treatment in the already crowded hospital emergency rooms. And some families, who feel no alternatives exist, will allow medical conditions to go untreated until they become more serious, more chronic and more expensive to treat.

Everyone, even those fortunate enough to never need Medicaid coverage, benefits from the program. While acknowledging that Medicaid funding to essential pediatric providers offsets the cost of patient visits for children on Medicaid, it is important to point out that hospitals are also investing these dollars in programs and services utilized by all children in the community. Ultimately, Medicaid supports the broader health of all children — not just those on Medicaid — and serves as the pediatric safety net that provides care to the 2.8 million children across Texas. The statistics tell the story — Medicaid has been a successful and essential program for many children over the years.

► Medicaid is the single largest health insurer for children, who make up more



Paul Lachine

than half of all Medicaid recipients. In fiscal year 2008, Medicaid insured more than 30 million children under age 19 for at least part of the year. Approximately 28 percent of all children, 41 percent of infants and 30 percent of children with disabilities relied on Medicaid (the Children's Health Insurance Program) for health coverage. As of January 2010, more than 2.8 million children in Texas including more than 300,000 in Harris County — were enrolled in Medicaid.

► Children's coverage is not driving the growth of Medicaid costs. Although children under age 19 account for more than half of all enrollees, they account for only 25 percent of the costs.

The Medicaid program currently provides low cost health insurance to children and pregnant women; it allows children access to pediatricians and pediatric subspecialists. The simple truth is that our federal and state governments save money by investing in health care — treatment in hospital emergency rooms can cost up to seven times as much as a simple office visit. Children who grow up with regular health examinations, immunizations and care for childhood illnesses are more likely to become adults who are healthy and productive taxpayers.

Medicaid is not just a program for low income families. The "great recession" has painfully demonstrated that employer-provided health insurance is too easily lost and costly to replace. Without the safety net of Medicaid and the similar CHIP, more children would lack even the most basic health services, and cutting the programs would displace scores of families and children into a world of financial and medical uncertainty.

We all understand the desire to be fiscally responsible and the need to make difficult economic decisions. We urge our elected officials to make investments in Medicaid because investments in our children's health are investments in their future. The rate of return is sustainable, exponential and long-lasting.

Wallace is president and CEO of Texas Children's Hospital. Under his leadership, Texas Children's Hospital cares for more than 2 million children annually and is internationally recognized and ranked among the best pediatric hospitals in the nation.

ELECTION

Make the effort to vote on all issues on the ballot

Robert M. Stein

After every election the press reports how many of us voted; that is, they report the number of persons who showed up at a polling place on or before Election Day or mailed in a ballot. This, however, does not fully represent how many of us really voted. Many voters who show up at the polls on or before Election Day and vote; they fail to vote for a significant number of contests, initiatives and referendums that are on the ballot. In this year's election, Harris County voters will be asked to vote on bond initiatives for Houston Community College, the city of Houston, the Houston Independent School District and Metro's proposal to continue sharing its mobility fund with area governments. All of these initiatives will appear at the bottom of the ballot.

In the mid-term 2010 congressional election, voters in the city of Houston were asked to approve a drainage fee, which was narrowly adopted by less than 1 percent of the total votes cast. The ballot initiative appeared at the bottom of the ballot after dozens of federal, state and county candidate contests. Nearly 15 percent (56,016 voters) of all city of Houston voters who showed up at the polls in the November 2010 election did not cast a ballot on the city's proposed drainage fee. Why? And did it matter?

One explanation is that many voters did not have a preference on the proposed drainage fee and consequently passed on this ballot item. Another explanation is that these voters overlooked

this ballot initiative because they voted a straight ticket. Voters in Texas and 13 other states have the option to select "vote straight ticket Democrat, Republican or Libertarian" instead of voting for each race on the ballot. In 2010, 66 percent of all voters in Harris County voted a straight ticket (in 2006 only 47 percent voted a straight ticket), either Democratic, Republican or Libertarian. Voting a straight ticket is an efficient way to cast a ballot in dozens of contests in which the voter may not know much if anything about the candidates, other than their party affiliation. This is particularly true of the dozens of judicial contests that appear on the ballot.

Voters cannot cast a "straight ticket" vote on bond initiatives and other noncandidate contests. When Harris County voters cast their ballot on the e-slate voting machine, they are prompted with a screen that shows them the races in which they voted and did not vote, allowing the voter to cast a vote for these latter contests. In spite of this helpful reminder, a nontrivial number of voters still failed to cast a ballot for many contests and issues at the bottom of the 2010 ballot.

The incidence of undervoting in 2010 had significant consequences. In precincts that voted against the drainage fee proposal, the percent of voters that did not vote on the drainage proposal averaged 25 percent, compared to only 8 percent undervotes in precincts that voted to adopt the drainage fee. Can we assume that those voters in precincts that voted against the drainage and did



Karen Warren / Houston Chronicle

Poll watchers observe early voting at the Acres Homes Multi-Service Center during the 2010 election. In that election, nearly 15 percent of voters did not cast a ballot on the drainage fee proposal.

not cast a ballot on the drainage fee would have also voted against the drainage fee? How confident can we be that the source of undervotes on down ballot initiatives and referendums is due to straight ticket voting? And are all straight ticket voters vulnerable to undervoting, or is this just true for supporters of one party?

An examination of the numbers in the 2010 election reveals that straight ticket voting for Republican candidates significantly decreased the undervote on the drainage fee while straight ticket voting for Democratic candidates significantly increased the undervote on the drainage fee. Why?

There are several good explanations, but one that seems most relevant to this year's election is that many more Democratic than Republican straight ticket voters did not know about the down ballot initiatives and thus missed voting for the drainage fee proposal. But why? An answer seems to be related to how long these voters have lived at their current address. On average, Republican straight ticket voters reported in several surveys having "lived at their current address" for 20 or more years. Democratic straight ticket voters reported in the same surveys having on average "lived at their

current address" for 10 or fewer years. Voters who are residentially stable are more likely to be called, mailed and visited by the campaigns for bond and ballot initiatives. These voters are more likely to get information from advocates for bond and other ballot initiatives. Residentially mobile voters are a moving target and more difficult for candidates and campaigns to reach by mail, in-person or by phone. A possible consequence of not receiving a campaign message is that the voter, even a straight ticket voter, may not know there are initiatives to vote on at the bottom of

Vote continues on B9

OUTLOOK

THE OUTDOORS

75 years of preserving fish, wildlife

By R.L. Sawyer

A long-awaited Texas autumn is here, and with it sportsmen and -women head afield in search of resident game, migratory birds and fresh- and saltwater sport fish. Hunters, fishermen and naturalists should know their outdoor experience is made possible — in part — by America's Federal Aid in Wildlife Restoration Act and the later Fisheries Restoration Act (now known as the Wildlife and Sport Fish Restoration program, or WFSR). This year marks WFSR's 75th anniversary, and while the WFSR may not be a word in the vocabulary of all sportsmen, it deserves to be.

The first two decades of the 20th century brought America's first federal game laws and wild game refuges. These early efforts, however, were still insufficient to stem the tide of wildlife destruction. By the 1930s, a hungry Depression-era population continued to deplete stocks of many game animals and birds, already reeling from two centuries of unregulated hunting and habitat destruction. Resident game and migratory waterfowl also perished as America's heartland withered beneath a cloud of dust storms. There were many who pondered if more of America's wildlife were headed in the direction of the buffalo, passenger pigeon and Carolina parakeet.

The seeds of the WFSR were sown in 1930, when Aldo Leopold and other visionaries drafted a policy based on a thesis of well-funded habitat restoration, conducted by scientifically trained professionals, that they believed might help fill the gaps in existing wildlife conservation. As an inclusive conservation initiative, the idea was very different from early protective measures that focused mainly on wild game regulation. Passed by Congress in 1937 as the Pittman-Robertson Federal Aid in Wildlife Restoration Act, the WFSR was funded by a tax on sporting goods that was enthusiastically supported by arms and ammunition manufacturers, and the people who would pay that tax — America's sportsmen.

Under the direction of East Texas and Texas A&M University graduate Phil Goodrum, Texas was the first state to propose and apply for WSRA conservation funds, receiving \$46,238 for its fledgling program. Just two years later, the Lone Star State led the country



Bighorn Sheep are rushed to a processing area after they were caught in Culberson County. Texas Parks and Wildlife Department officials moved the sheep from the Beach Mountains, where they are thriving, to other areas in West Texas where they once roamed.

Mark Lambie / Associated Press



Shannon Tompkins / Houston Chronicle
Conservation efforts have helped preserve pronghorn antelopes in Texas.



Cody Duty / Houston Chronicle
The Attwater's prairie chicken is one of the most endangered birds in the world.

in the amount of money allocated to wildlife conservation and habitat restoration. By the 1990s this initial WFSR seed grew to \$9 billion.

Over its 75 years the WFSR, in partnership with the Texas Parks and Wildlife Department (TPWD) and its predecessors, boasts remarkable successes in increasing populations and

protective habitat of bighorn mountain sheep, pronghorns, white-tailed deer and wild turkeys, to name but a few. Texas sportsmen should — and many do — applaud the vision, implementation and victories of the WFSR program.

Yet we would be short-sighted to ignore the warning shots of a still-uncertain outdoor

future. Between 1937 and the present, Texans have witnessed the disappearance of migratory swans and most of the giant Canada geese, as well as dwindling numbers of mottled ducks, the only dabbling duck native to the Gulf Coast. Other failings include plummeting populations of Attwater's prairie chickens and, most recently, the bobwhite quail, which seems intent on following in its path. The culprits of wildlife deprivation are well known: agricultural practices, industrialization and urban and suburban sprawl that have poisoned waterways, silted bays, accelerated saltwater intrusion and contributed to vanishing prairies and wetlands.

Will Texas join other states, notably on the East and West coasts, where once grand ecosystems lay entirely buried beneath the mantle of progress? We can do more than hope the answer is no. There is promise in two relatively recent additions to the habitat and wildlife preservation arsenal: agricultural and conservation easements. Partnerships between landowners, ranchers and farmers with conservation entities, these programs are becoming increasingly popular in the fight to preserve our land and

outdoor culture. Many more acres, however, will need to be enrolled in these programs if we are to succeed.

Texans have played a crucial role in natural resource preservation since the first law to protect the state's wild game birds was penned in 1860. The law came about because sportsmen recognized we were at a turning point and took action. Support and involvement in conservation programs is as important today as it was then. And of the myriad choices we have, let's remember that one of them requires no action on our part: As long as we continue to hunt and fish, we contribute to the Lone Star State's conservation future through the WFSR. It's been 75 years since Phil Goodrum burned the midnight oil in his efforts to bring WFSR programs to Texas. Thank you, Mr. Goodrum, and may we prove to be worthy stewards of the next seven decades of restoration funding.

Sawyer, a Houston geologist, is the author of "A Hundred Years of Texas Waterfowl Hunting" and "Texas Market Hunting, Game Laws, and Outlaws," both published by Texas A&M University Press.

IMMIGRATION

Mexico needs to make border security a priority

By Nelson Balido

A study released earlier this year by the Pew Hispanic Center caught my attention, and its findings might require observers of U.S.-Mexico relations to reevaluate their thinking.

According to Pew data, immigration — legal and illegal — from Mexico to the United States has flat-lined. The report's writers found that in the five-year period of 2005-2010, 1.4 million Mexicans immigrated to the U.S., but that's the same number of Mexicans who immigrated from the U.S. to Mexico during that same period.

Certainly the weak U.S. economy has played a role in the declining immigration numbers. After all, a struggling U.S. jobs picture combined with increased workplace enforcement measures makes this country less attractive to the would-be immigrant worker.

But what cannot be discounted is the commitment and professionalism of the men and women of the U.S. Border Patrol, whose enforcement strategies have resulted in a dramatic drop in illegal alien apprehensions from a fiscal year 2000 high of 1.6 million to a fiscal year 2011 low of 327,000. Leaders like

David Aguilar, the most senior official at Customs and Border Protection and a former Border Patrol national chief, have made border security a top priority, and the proof is in the numbers. Crossing illegally into the U.S. from Mexico is as tough there as it has ever been.

The illegal immigrant of today is now likely to be what is known in enforcement circles as an "OTM," or "other than Mexican." My conversations with agents in the field in South Texas confirm that they're increasingly seeing immigrants from places like Central America and even the Middle East who have used Mexico as a jumping-off point into the U.S.

This is where Mexico's new presidential administration comes in.

Former state of Mexico Gov. Enrique Peña Nieto will be sworn in as Mexico's new president on Dec. 1. So far, the president-elect has made all the right moves, surrounding himself with a top notch transition team and sending a message to multinational businesses — especially those in the U.S. — that Mexico is open for business, as he even remains open to the idea of allowing increased foreign investment in such Mexi-

can points of pride as its oil industry.

I've been able to get to know some members of Team Peña Nieto, and I've been struck by their desire to increase Mexico's competitiveness in the world economy, attract investment and grow jobs. Mexico's economy has, for the most part, weathered the worst of the economic downturn, meaning that more young Mexicans can reasonably seek and find work in their country rather than heading north.

But with more Mexicans becoming part of the country's growing middle class, the new president cannot forget that his country still needs to help quell northward illegal migration into the United States, even if it's not Mexicans making that trek. When he takes office, President Peña Nieto must deploy a strategy to gain operational control of his border with Guatemala.

The former commissioner of CBP, Alan Bersin, acknowledged that Central America is the emerging new source of illegal immigration when he said in a speech last month, "That is why we must work with Mexico to restore the rule of law to the Mexican-Guatemalan border over the next 10 years."

This shift in migration



Keith Dannemiller

Migrants from Guatemala wait for a freight train in Chiapas, Mexico, to take them to the U.S. border.

patterns is occurring as many commentators are saying that 2013 could be the year for significant movement on U.S. immigration reform, after previous efforts fell apart due to intractable political differences.

Americans should be proud that our country, despite crawling out of this Great Recession, is still a country that people from all over the world want to build a life in. And the American business community is very aware that an economically healthy Mexico is good for the U.S., as it means a more competitive North America

in the face of an Asia on the rise.

But I would counsel President-elect Peña Nieto that the American goodwill that he will experience could quickly sour if U.S. public opinion begins to view him as an able, business-savvy leader, but someone who doesn't understand his neighbor to the north and the pitched battles that have been waged over immigration.

Balido is the president of the Border Trade Alliance and a former member of the Department of Homeland Security Homeland Security Advisory Council.

Vote for all issues on ballot

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the ballot. With heavy straight ticketing voting expected in this November's election, advocates and opponents of this year's bond and local issue initiatives will be trying to encourage their supporters not to miss these bottom-of-the-ballot contests. Does it matter?

The 2010 city of Houston drainage fee initiative was adopted by 6,264 votes from a total of 399,412 persons who showed up at the polls on or before Election Day. Among these voters, however, 56,016 did not vote on the drainage fee. Two-thirds of these voters lived in precincts where voters rejected the drainage by a margin of 60 percent or more. Can we assume the undervoters in these anti-drainage fee precincts would also have voted no? Probably, which might have resulted in the defeat of the drainage fee.

Stein is the fellow in urban politics at the Baker Institute and the Lena Grobbman Fox Professor of Political Science at Rice University.