

# Health care can be utilized to drive economy



## TRAY HAIRSTON

As a proponent of economic development, I believe that health care can be used as an economic driver and would diversify Mississippi's economy going a long way toward boosting jobs and quality of life in our state.

As a bond lawyer at Butler Snow, I work with Mississippi cities and counties on bond issues every day. One of my chief concerns is the rating these communities receive from agencies like Fitch, Standard & Poor's and Moody's upon issuing debt. When Fitch rated Mississippi's 2013 bond issue, it revised the state's outlook to negative and noted the following regarding Mississippi's manufacturing based economy: "The economy continues to diversify and some successful economic development initiatives should bolster employment in the coming years; however, the manufacturing concentration well exceeds national levels." Although health care-related manufacturing is a part of that concentration I hope we see more of, Fitch's outlook puts us on

notice.

Shortly after Gov. Phil Bryant was elected, he led a business delegation to Houston to tour the Texas Medical Center. After returning, having realized the potential economic impact of the health care industry, he and the Legislature began to push health care as an economic driver by passing the Mississippi Health Care Industry Zone Act during the 2012 session. This legislation is supposed to make the health care industry a major new target industry for the Mississippi Development Agency.

From an economic development perspective, health care offers an enormous opportunity. It encompasses the workers and infrastructure that support a vast and sophisticated network. Health care is not just about hospitals or clinics; it also includes the factories that supply those hospitals with everything from medical equipment and high-tech machinery to the basic goods and services necessary to make those vital institutions function. Lastly, health care is not just about the delivery of care; it is about research and development and more importantly, innovation.

While working in the governor's office, I saw the "health care as an economic driver" vision evolve from concept to

reality. Last week's announcement that North Sunflower Medical Center, located in the Mississippi Delta, would partner with GE health care and the University of Mississippi Medical Center to treat diabetes exemplifies that reality. A weakening condition like diabetes is being leveraged into a strength — treatment through innovation.

Through the Mississippi Home Corp.'s Health Care Industry Zone Program, creative projects are now on the horizon in Madison County and Marshall County. These counties are representative of a few of the communities that have created Health Care Zone Master Plans. MHC required housing developers seeking lucrative tax credits to finance Health Care Zone Master Plans in less-developed areas of Mississippi. This requirement has resulted in a public-private partnership. Inevitably, these plans, similar to those used at the Research Valley Biocorridor in Texas, are blueprints for local economic development directors to create jobs. The act allowed for the creation of Health Care Zone Master Plans and opened up these zones to a large portion of the state. A technical amendment to the Act derived from the leadership of the Mississippi Senate and Lt. Gov. Tate Reeves, who chose to broaden the definition of the term "zone" in April 2012. That should be applauded.

The Mississippi Medical Corridor in Jackson also has become a prime target for innovative technology based health care projects that I hope will be announced in the spring. Mississippi has a real



opportunity to seize the moment and make health care an economic driver. With initiatives like those in the Mississippi Delta, the state can leverage its weaknesses, turn them into strengths and further diversify its economy.

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