

State task force to tackle chronic health problems, access to care



The Alabama Health Care Improvement Task Force, created April 6 by Governor Robert Bentley, has taken its first steps toward finding potential solutions to some of the state's most compelling health care challenges.

The 38-member task force is comprised of legislators, physicians, state agency officials, consumer advocates, and health care professionals from around the state. State Health Officer Dr. Don Williamson is chairing the group which is expected to explore possible reform ideas over the next three years and offer suggestions for policy changes to the Governor as early as the 2016 legislative session. The group held its inaugural meeting April 15.

In the executive order filed by Gov. Bentley to create the task force, he cited a shortage of primary care doctors, the prevalence of chronic conditions and the closure of 10 hospitals between 2011 and 2013 as some of the major issues the task force hopes to solve.

“As governor and a physician, the health of Alabamians is extremely important to me,” Gov. Bentley said. “Alabama faces serious problems with chronic conditions. Many of our health issues are related to lifestyle choices, poverty and access to quality health care. The Alabama Health Care Improvement Task Force will address options to improve the health of Alabamians, including strategies to have more-accessible and more-affordable health care in the state.”

Making health care accessible and affordable are but two of the challenges to be addressed by the group. At its second meeting on May 20, chairs of the task force's three committees – Personnel, Infrastructure and Quality of Care – outlined their first areas of focus to include more telemedicine options; improving or ensuring access to hospitals, clinics or other facilities in rural areas or underserved urban areas; making sure communities have enough medical professionals; and improving the integration of care for mental health and physical health, and improving the overall general health of Alabamians.