

Governor offers compromise on move of Rehabilitation Services program

By Rep. Debbie Buckner

On Feb. 16, which was the Georgia Council for Developmental Disabilities' annual Disability Day at the Capitol, Gov. Nathan Deal announced plans to change his controversial proposal to move the Division of Rehabilitation Services from the Department of Labor to the Department of Human Resources.

The governor told those in attendance that while he still supports the move between departments, the plan will be changed to ensure that Vocational Rehabilitation will operate as an independent program, in a similar manner to how the Environmental Protection Division (EPD) operates under the Department of Natural Resources (DNR). He said the move will make the agency more accountable to the public, ensure the state is taking advantage of all outside assistance for vocational rehab programs and better serve tens of thousands of Georgians.

Gov. Deal said, "Making Vocational Rehab a stand-alone program is a big step in the right direction. This new structure will put the decision-making power in the hands of experts who understand vocational rehabilitation." He said the change would result in more jobs for adults with disabilities, and he promised the new oversight wouldn't mean budget cuts or disrupted services.

This is a positive development on this issue. I will keep you posted as the process continues.

State Park Operations: Legislation I introduced to authorize the transfer of state park operations to local governing authorities if necessary to avoid closing certain parks and recreation areas is scheduled for a hearing this week in the House Game, Fish & Parks Committee. HB 684, which has strong bipartisan support, would require DNR to give 60 days' notice to city and county governments when a state park facility in their jurisdiction is to be closed or undergo a significant reduction in hours or services. DNR would then be authorized to enter into a memorandum of agreement with the local government to transfer control, operating and management responsibilities in order to keep the park open.

Inter-basin Transfers: Last week, I introduced legislation that is aimed at reducing the potentially detrimental consequences of transferring water from one river basin to another in Georgia. HB 984, which has a strong bipartisan team of co-sponsors, would require the Environmental Protection Division (EPD) to make inter-basin transfers a last resort before granting permits for such transfers. The proposal would also require the EPD to provide adequate public notice and, if warranted, hold a public hearing in advance of issuing the transfer permit. The legislation was referred to the House Natural Resources & Environment Committee for its consideration.

Public Education: With the debate over charter schools legislation continuing in the Georgia House of Representatives, it is noteworthy that a report compiled by the Georgia Department of Education has found that traditional public schools had more success than charter schools in achieving “adequate yearly progress” (AYP) standards during the 2010-11 school year. According to the report, Georgia had 162 charter schools in operation serving 56 districts. Of these charter schools, 70 percent made AYP that year, compared to 73 percent of traditional public schools. Despite some changes that have been made, I remain opposed to a proposed constitutional amendment that would allow the state to set up charter schools at the local level. HR 1162 fell 10 votes short of the required two-thirds majority approval in the House of Representatives on Feb. 8 but is eligible for reconsideration later in the session.

Nursing Education: Gov. Nathan Deal has signed legislation to amend a state law that inadvertently excluded some military-trained nurses from a license to practice in Georgia. HB 675 revises the definition of approved nursing education programs for registered professional nurses and licensed practical nurses. Through the passage and signing of this bill, around 150 nursing professionals will now be eligible for employment in Georgia.

House Action: Legislation approved by the House last week includes HB 728, which would clarify provisions of state law pertaining to property covenants; HB 729, the annual effort by the General Assembly to revise the state tax code so that it aligns with changes in federal tax laws; HB 744, the Uniform Partition of Heirs Property Act; HB 785, which would allow doctors and dentists to obtain state licenses even if they refuse to see Medicaid and Medicare patients or participate in the federal healthcare act; HB 800, which would change certain qualifications for assistant adjutants general; HB 824, which would revise the formula for allocating the state’s equalization grants to school systems in less-developed counties; and HB 835, which would allow a 5 percent variance of weight limitations for towing disabled commercial vehicles. All of these measures now go to the Senate for its consideration. The House also adopted HR 1325, which urges Congress to change the federal Communications Act of 1934 in order to permit the use of “cellular jammers” to prevent illegal cell phone use in prison facilities.

Session Schedule: The 2012 session of the General Assembly is now past the halfway point. Lawmakers are scheduled to be in session four days this week and three days next week, allowing more time for committees to work on legislation prior to “Cross-Over Day,” which is the 30th day of the session and the final day for either the House of Representatives or the Senate to approve legislation in time for it to be considered by the other house this year. Cross-Over Day is scheduled for Wednesday, March 7. Please continue to contact me with your views on the issues or whenever I can be of service.

- *State Rep. Debbie Buckner (D-Junction City) represents the 130th District (Harris, Muscogee and Talbot counties) in the Georgia House of Representatives. Contact her at 409 Coverdell Legislative Office Building, Atlanta, GA 30334; by phone at 404-656-0116; or by email at debbie.buckner@house.ga.gov.*