Gov. Perry Addresses the Texas Hospital Association

Encourages creative approaches to statewide nursing shortage

*Note - Gov. Perry frequently departs from prepared remarks.

Thursday, January 22, 2009

Thank you, Barclay [E. Berdan, THA Chairman] and thank you for having me here today.

In the course of my life, I’ve been blessed to avoid too much time in hospitals. except for a few childhood accidents, and spending time with my wife on breaks during her nursing shifts.

However, I am fully aware of the important role that hospitals play in our country, both as front-line providers of the world’s best healthcare, and as economic development engines in our communities.

Your facilities, which are a lot like self-contained cities, are often a microcosm of the challenges faced by our cities and our state.

As hospital leaders, you deal with everything from big budget issues and utility rates, to infrastructure challenges and federal regulations that can strangle growth, innovation and success.

Fortunately, your hospitals are mostly located in Texas, so you have the benefit of our lower taxes, so your employees get to keep a little more of what they earn.

You also get to work in a regulatory climate that we’re constantly striving to improve, so you can apply best practices for your patients without drowning in paperwork.

Best of all, you get the benefit of the reforms we’ve made to our legal system, so that you and your doctors can spend more time treating patients, and less time battling lawsuit, and less money on insurance premiums.

As a result, Texas has become a magnet for MDs. Since we passed tort reform in 2003, the medical board received more than 18,000 applications, and issued nearly 14,500 new physicians licenses.

That represents a whole lot more doctors treating Texans, often in places that were previously underserved due to shortages and unfavorable conditions.

I believe you’d be hard pressed to find better healthcare than the kind provided in your hospitals across the state.
Every day, you walk into your office, knowing that you and your team face a big time challenge, to provide the best possible care to everyone who walks through your door, while plowing through a mountain of reporting requirements, and hoping to make a little something for your trouble.

I admire you for that and want you to know I will continue to work with our legislators on improving the state of healthcare in Texas.

One key challenge for you is the current state of Medicaid. We are still elbow-deep in negotiations with CMS, to get them to show Texas a little love, by giving us some flexibility in their guidelines.

We believe Texans will be healthier in the long run if we can maintain a focus on consumer choice and personal responsibility. One-size-fits-all approaches don't work with surgical scrubs and they sure as heck don't work in patient care.

You and I both know that flexibility is not the first word that comes to mind when you mention the federal government, but I have not lost hope that our calls to let us be a little more creative will ultimately pay off. With the highest rate of uninsured in the country, we need to continue to work on solutions to this ever-growing problem.

We'll keep pushing because we Texans believe in the power of local solutions to local challenges, and know that leaders on the front lines like you have perspectives and ideas they can't see from Washington.

Few if any of the challenges facing your industry have simple, obvious solutions, but I am especially concerned about the challenge you face of providing care for the uninsured.

Regardless of its complexity, it is an issue that must be fixed, or hospitals will be crushed by the burden, jobs will be lost, and care will suffer.

Another challenge that is affecting healthcare in Texas is the ongoing shortage of qualified nurses.

You probably don't need to read the Texas Center for Nursing Workforce Studies to know about the 27,000 nurse shortfall they're predicting by next year. Chances are you're already painfully aware of that shortage, mostly because you're too busy trying to adequately staff your shifts, and find resources to fund countless hours of overtime.

The bottom line is that our current system of educating nurses isn't producing the number of nurses we need. The traditional educational structures are overwhelmed by applicants, evolving technologies and funding shortfalls.

I remain a firm believer in hospital-based partnerships that put the skilled, qualified practitioners in touch with students.

I also think we're going have to use some of that creativity I discussed before, and pioneer some public-private partnerships that can pull together resources from every direction. I'm talking state, federal, private, and philanthropic resources, all of which are needed to improve the situation.

Our Texas Hospital-Based Nursing Education Partnership initiative is a step in the right direction. Using competitive grants, the program funds these partnerships between hospitals and schools that offer an ADN, BSN, or nursing degree bridge program.

In 2007, Representative Donna Howard convinced her peers to pass a bill authorizing the partnerships, but they came up short when it was time to fund the program. I sincerely hope they'll revisit the issue in this session and give the
program the resources it needs to start chipping away at the nursing shortfall.

These are just a few of the challenges our state faces when it comes to providing care for our citizens, but they are worth the effort, because Texans are worth the effort.

I am grateful to all of you for the hard work you do, day in and day out, to bring healing into the lives of hurting people. You do so in an environment that was seemingly created to make your life difficult, and still you persevere.

As you wrestle with staffing issues, funding challenges and regulatory entanglements, I encourage you to keep pressing on, and do not waver in your life’s calling that first drew you into this profession.

You are bringing comfort, saving lives, and creating jobs. You play a big part in making Texas the best place to live, work and raise a family.

On behalf of your fellow Texans, I thank you for your service. May God bless you and, through you, may He continue to bless the great state of Texas.