

EIR: And then other aspects of your facilities; there's been also a national order that many Veterans hospitals are to be shut down. Do Mississippi people already have to go up to Little Rock, or do you have a functioning state Veterans Hospital network open still?

Calhoun: Up to this point, the Veterans Hospitals are still in operation in Mississippi. Hopefully that will continue. So far, they are still open. We have several, but we have a big one there in Jackson, and then we have some Veterans homes, taking care of our elderly.

EIR: Residential?

Calhoun: Yes, and they are doing fine, so far. Hopefully we won't get the cuts. I've been hearing about the cuts for the Veterans Hospitals. So far, they haven't hit Mississippi yet.

Hospitals Gone in Alabama and Arkansas

Ms. Johnnie Pugh, City Director, Ward 1, Little Rock, Arkansas; and Thomas E. Jackson, Member of the House of Representatives (D-District 68), Alabama, were interviewed on July 15 by Marcia Merry Baker in Washington.

EIR: Johnnie, let's start in Little Rock, where you've had a nursing career; you worked in a Veterans Hospital for seven years, and other facilities. So, you have seen up close how the hospital system, once built to serve all, is now being taken down. Little Rock is a hospital center, but you say, there are facilities with empty wards—no staff or beds?

Pugh: Well, I know St. Vincent's has wards—I have been through at least two wards—that had no beds and no people in them. The hospital has the rooms; there is no problem with the rooms; but the beds are just closed down.

There is really a nursing shortage, because since they have started working 10 and 12 hours, a lot of the people just don't want to do that. And they are so short, and they give them so many patients, so that a lot of nurses have gone to other professions because of it being too hard. So they just don't want to do it, because a lot of people—you know, you think about it, you do something that would take somebody's life, or something like that; that's something that you've got to live with.

EIR: So, short-staffing is one of the immediate problems.

Pugh: My granddaughter, an LPN, was working at Baptist Medical Center; and she quit because she was afraid of losing her license because she would be so tired that she felt she could not do it, and she didn't want to give the wrong medication.

She worked on one ward, and in the next ward over, if the nurse called in sick, she had to take her own ward *and* that ward. And she said that it was hard to just do her own ward,



Rep. Johnnie Pugh, Democrat of Arkansas, says the state has a serious shortage of nurses, leaving some wards empty.

so she was not going to take a chance on doing her ward, and the other ward too, because she was afraid of what was going to happen. Because she knew how tired she was, and at a certain period of time she just felt like she wasn't even thinking well. So she quit the job for that reason.

EIR: Has it come to pass anytime during flu season, or some other emergency, where they needed more beds, but didn't have them all?

Pugh: Not that I've heard. You know, we do have the University of Arkansas Medical Center; plus, then, we have Children's Hospital, and in the Children's Hospital we have a lot of people.

EIR: In Alabama, Representative Jackson, you have spoken out for some time about the distances people now have to go to try to get care. It's getting worse?

Jackson: [For some treatments] you have to go 60 miles away from the communities. . . .

EIR: Just for regular care, for having a baby, or falling off a truck, or something?

Jackson: They have closed obstetrics in some hospitals in communities, and you can't even go in for ob-gyn. You have to go to another community, and that's probably 40 miles away.

We're in a very dire situation when it comes to healthcare in my state, which is Alabama. And I think the nation is in pursuit. It's terrible.

Pugh: Well, we're worse than that. In West Helena, it's over 100 miles from Little Rock; and they have vans to bring people back and forth to Little Rock, to get the care of nurses, and what not. And when you leave there, between Little Rock, it's where the hospitals are, to Memphis.

Down in in Marianna and all that, Helena—this area is called the Delta. And the Delta area is poor. And those people have to go a long ways to get to a doctor and to a hospital.

EIR: In that particular place, Helena, or a similar town, do



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you recall when there was, at sometime in the past, some kind of hospital on site, but it's now gone?

Pugh: In Marianna there was a hospital; they closed it down at least 20 years ago. And they use this van to go back and forth; at certain times that they bring people. Of course, that happens a lot of other places down around Eldorado. They have small hospitals down there, but really, to get to larger hospitals and health clinics they have to bring them to Little Rock.

Jackson: In my district, in particular—especially in Southwest Alabama, in Choctaw County which is on the Mississippi line—they have no hospitals. There's a clinic, a rural health clinic, that a doctor comes in to maybe once a week; but a practitioner would be there to do blood pressure.

If there is an emergency, if there's a real catastrophic illness or stroke or heart attack, they're dead on arrival. Meridian is about 45 miles to their West, and anything to the East doesn't exist, for medical care. This is what rural Alabama is suffering from the most in this Medicare/Medicaid—the non-existent hospital beds.

In Alabama alone, we were going to lose something like 9,600 beds, Medicaid/Medicare. We had to increase the tobacco tax just to maintain those beds—no new services!—just to keep people from being put out of Medicaid/Medicare, statewide.

EIR: When did you make that decision?

Jackson: This past session. We increased 26¢ per pack on cigarettes—just to maintain those 9,600 beds to keep our elderly and senior citizens from being put on the street. The meals-on-wheels program also survived with this increase in tobacco tax for the state of Alabama.

EIR: And just for one year?

Jackson: Unless we can reform tax structure in our state. This is a band-aid approach, we need to go in and do surgery

and we're putting a band-aid on everything. It is not well.

EIR: LaRouche is saying, make the economy work again.

Jackson: *We need to re-make our economy.*

EIR: Because you could fight over the tax structure, and I'm sure it's corrupt. . . .

Jackson: It is. The poor pays the taxes, and the rich pay none.

EIR: Look at places like the City of Pittsburgh, which is bankrupt; and that's exactly what a rotten grouping is saying to do: They say, "Let's tax non-profit institutions, like schools and hospitals!"

Jackson: Non-profit? I mean, you are already paying the taxes to keep the schools running, so how are you going to tax? It's an extra tax on the poor! Most of these taxes we are doing now are taxes on the poor, instead of hitting the corporations who are making mega-millions or billions of dollars in the state, and paying little or no corporate income tax.

EIR: Then if you look back decades ago, there was a time in Alabama, when, say in Birmingham, you would tax "big steel."

Jackson: Yes, but that's not there anymore. Steel is—

EIR: So that's what you've been talking to LaRouche about, on infrastructure and industry?

Jackson: To rebuild the infrastructure of our nation and state, yes.

EIR: What is involved?

Jackson: Look at the transportation system. The interstates are falling apart, the state roads need repair. And then we need a rail system. We need maglev trains from North Alabama to South Alabama. Huntsville to Mobile.

EIR: Your only one train goes east to west, is that right? Near Montgomery?

Jackson: Yes. That's the only one we have. I don't know if it is conducive for travel even, now. The system is so shut down, so messed up.

Several years ago we had an accident right on Interstate 65, where the overpass gets washed out, with a tractor-trailer rig that had carried fuel. It was repaired in less than a year's time. But we need to go through the entire state and rebuild all these bridges that are in very bad, poor condition.

You know, there was one time when school buses had to let the students off on one side of the bridge, and cross the bridge, and then students had to walk to the other side to get on the bus, to meet the specs of the bridge. They couldn't stay on the bus, and cross the bridge.

And we have many more bridges in that condition. We need to rebuild the State of Alabama. We're in trouble.