



▲ You have 3 free items remaining before a subscription is required. Subscribe now! (/subscribe/?town_id=0)

Jones: Education key to battling opioids

Posted Saturday, May 19, 2018

BY ED HOWELL

PARRISH - U.S. Sen. Doug Jones said Friday education is a major solution in trying to solve the opioid crisis, adding a bipartisan Senate bill to address the problem has a good chance of passing.

Jones, who was making one of his first known trips to the county, discussed that and other healthcare issues while holding a round table discussion at Capstone Rural Health Center in Parrish. He briefly toured the facility before meeting with a number of citizens in the lobby. Construction went ahead outside on the new Capstone facility, which is expected to be completed in October.

He said healthcare is one of the top priorities in the state.

"If we don't continue to have good health care delivery in this state, we're going to have trouble in counties like Walker County and cities like Parrish and others," said Jones, who is a member of the Senate Committee on Health, Education, Labor and Pensions, also known as the Senate Health Committee.

"We have so many folks who just can't afford good healthcare, unless we have community health centers like this, unless we have the CHIP (the Children's Health Insurance Program), unless we have the ability to bring down insurance costs and healthcare costs," he said.

Last year, the Congress was able to get funding passed for centers like Capstone for another two years, he said, as well as funding for CHIP for 10 years.

Jones said he also wants to introduce a bill next week to get the federal government's bureaucracy to be more streamlined for rural health care, noting health care for rural areas is probably the biggest challenge to the state.

He said Alabama is a poor state which is unhealthy. Jones quoted nurses at Capstone saying they saw many cases of diabetes and heart disease.

Jones mentioned the Health Committee in April unanimously passed the Opioid Crisis Response Act of 2018, which he added is rare for a major bill in committee. The bill, among other things, will help the National Institutes of Health to study the problem, give incentives for pharmacies to monitor the drugs, speed up work to find alternatives to opioids and arrange for counseling.

The Hill reported it contains 40 proposals from 38 senators, including making it easier to prescribe smaller packs of opioids for limited durations and bolster the detection of illegal drugs at the border.

"It was easy for doctors to say, 'Here is a 90-day supply,'" he said. "They don't need it more than a week, probably."

He said it was a good bill that will likely pass the full Senate and has broad bipartisan support. "The opioid problem is the one area in Congress right now that you can have almost unanimous agreement," he said. The White House and Attorney General Jeff Sessions, Jones' predecessor in the Senate, both have task forces on the problem, he said.

Jones noted that as a lawyer before winning the Senate seat last year, he had represented some clients from Walker County who went through drug court treatment. He was asked, based on his background as a federal prosecutor and an attorney what the community could do about opioids and drug abuse.

"As much as anything, I think it is an education issue. I really think getting in schools, getting in communities, and getting out there to educating people about the dangers and educating kids about the dangers, and trying to get people aware" are ways to address it, he said.

Jones said adults should also be educated that if they don't have to take something, don't take it. "Take an Advil. A little pain, I suffer with it every day," Jones, 64, said.

He felt the problem started with pharmaceutical companies who told doctors they wanted a pain-free society, using their drugs. While he said he was not complaining about the free market for that, "sometimes there are unintended consequences and I think the unintended consequences of pharmaceuticals trying to do good things to relieve people's pain, all of a sudden has caused this addiction ... that has been horrible."

Officials with the clinic said other drug abuse is also seen often, particularly crystal meth and heroin, with people graduating from opioids to heroin as it is more inexpensive.

Parrish Mayor Heather Hall said while cities fight the drugs, the problem then flees into the county, where there are limited law enforcement resources to deal with the problem.

Asked by Jones what he would do, Capstone patient health educator Matthew A. Tucker, once an addict himself, said he would like to "decriminalize a disease," as addiction is a disease.

"We arrest people and put them in jail, and we don't do anything for them other than that," he said, calling for non-violent drug offenders can get treatment instead of going to prison. He noted the high cost of the treatment is still a barrier, which Jones agreed with.

Jones heard about a variety of problems for an hour, including Medicaid reimbursement for mental health professionals at the clinic and incentives to recruit health care professionals.

He indicated he would favor Medicaid expansion, adding that Medicaid has an unfortunate "stigma" to it. He said in favor many recipients are hard-working people, children and single-parents, crossing over racial lines. He

said Medicaid dollars can be a economic lifeblood to cities like Parrish and help non-Medicaid patients by keeping local health facilities open and physicians nearby, which in turn attracts new industry.

He was concerned a spike in insurance rates is about to happen because key parts of the Affordable Care Act that kept prices down are about to be removed. He said that act was "never supposed to be the end of the line on healthcare reform," as details could always be tweaked when they didn't work. More work on the act is likely to come in the next Congress, and Jones wants hearings on the matter.

The group also discussed high prescription drug prices. University of Alabama assistant professor Joshua C. Eyer, who also visits Capstone Fridays as a psychologist, also noted access to mental health services in the state "is a huge problem."

That is due to a shortage of mental health professionals, who are needed to treat substance abuse, such as for opioids, Eyer said.

Eyer said Capstone is the "highest level behavioral health integrated federally qualified health center in Alabama — social worker, psychologist and consulting psychiatrist." He also notes sustaining it is difficult when working within the system in Alabama. It is "practically impossible, because everything is shut down for reimbursement, especially for mental health."

He talked about meetings with Medicaid to deal with some of the problems, which Jones said he would like to sit in on, adding solving many of the reimbursement needs in health issues was a major issue.

Jones said he wants to get more healthcare centers like Capstone started in rural areas, as well as work to provide more rural broadband as "that is critical for the future."

He noted that Sen. Richard Shelby of Alabama is chairman of the Senate Appropriations Committee. "We may have a better budget process than we've had in the past," he said. He noted an infrastructure bill is unlikely as members of Congress quickly rejected President Trump's idea for 80 percent of the cost to be undertaken by local and state governments.

Hall also talked with Jones about economic development needs, such as the need to level land for potential projects.

EARN WHILE YOU LEARN!  **Apprenticeship Programs Help YOU Land YOUR Dream Job!**
• Earn a salary while learning a skilled trade. 

Funding provided by the USDOL, ETA, Federal WIOA. An Equal Opportunity Employer/Program. Auxiliary aids and services available upon request to individuals with disabilities.

(<https://adsmopress.com/ads-state.php?l=366340409>)