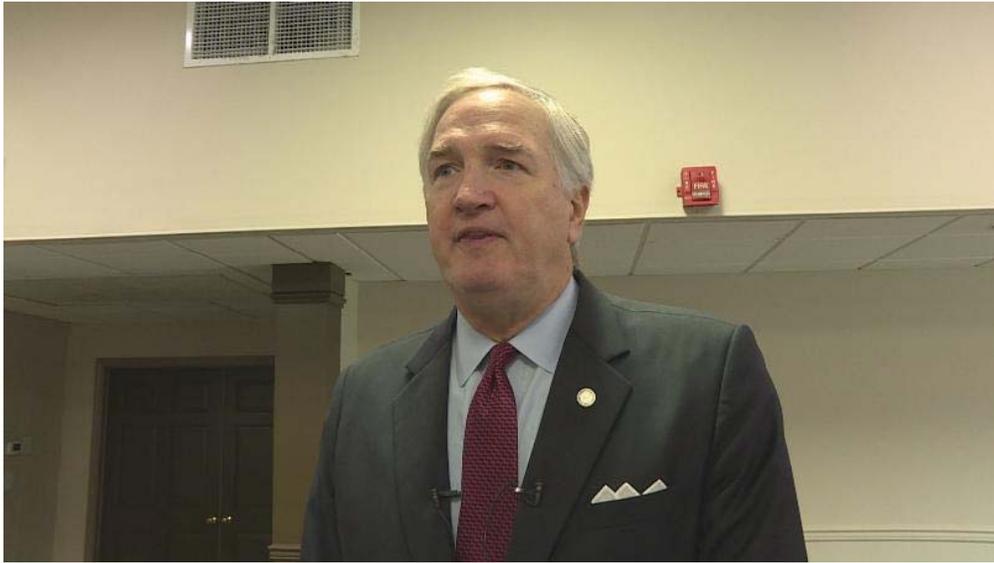


# While a lottery is in the works others see fraud a major Medicaid issue



Alabama Attorney General Luther Strange speaks to reporters after addressing members of the Dothan Rotary Club in this March 21, 2016 photo.

By Ken Curtis | Posted: Mon 9:12 PM, Aug 22, 2016 | Updated: Mon 9:47 PM, Aug 22, 2016

**Dothan-** The Alabama House this week will consider a lottery that would, in part, fund a financially ailing Medicaid agency. However, some believe there's another way to increase money Medicaid has to spend on its more than one million recipients.

"With Alabama's current budget woes largely centered around rising Medicaid costs, there should be increased attention paid to rooting out waste and abuse in the program," Attorney General Luther Strange said Monday in a written statement to WTVY. He has long been an advocate for more stringent laws to identify and prosecute Medicaid fraud.

"This year my office offered the Alabama Legislature two bills to help close legal loopholes for Medicaid fraud and unfortunately neither passed. We will continue to press for stronger laws to protect Alabama Medicaid and our taxpayers."

State Representative Elaine Beech (R-Chatom) has repeatedly called for better ways to recoup payments made to providers who bilk Medicaid. Beech, during a budget hearing earlier this year, said she knew of one case where money paid to an unscrupulous provider has been owed for years.

Beech said the amount could translate into over two million dollars when federal matching funds are factored in.

There may be some positive signs. The largest crackdown in U.S. history occurred earlier this summer when more than 300 people were arrested nationwide on Medicaid fraud charges. Among them, two counselors who practiced in Dothan.

Catrina R. Copeland, 43, of Dothan, was the owner of The Counseling Place, a mental health practice that contracted with the Alabama Medicaid Agency to provide counseling services to at risk youth.

Stephanie Govan, 41, a resident of Pike County, was employed by Copeland as a counselor, according to federal documents.

In the scheme of things, the amount the duo is alleged to have bilked taxpayers isn't all that much---only a few hundred dollars. However, as Beech pointed out following a Medicaid budget hearing in January, it all adds up.

Copeland and Govan were arrested June 21 by agents of the Alabama Attorney General's Medicaid Fraud Control Unit and the Health and Human Services' Office of Inspector General. They await trial.

"Over the past five years, the Fraud Control Unit has returned a total of \$86 million to the Alabama Medicaid program. While there is no exact figure as to how much money is lost each year to waste, fraud and abuse here in Alabama, generally accepted estimates of waste and fraud in federal healthcare programs run as high as 10 percent nationally," Strange said.

Strange said he would like to see laws passed that would provide incentives---rewards---to those who report Medicaid fraud. He plans to return to the legislature next year to, again, push for legislation.

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