

The Legislative Report

By SHEILAH PEPPER

The Gazette Staff

Austin: Last Sunday night, the only Democrat Congressman from Texas to vote no on the health care bill was Chet Edwards of Waco. Apparently, the House leadership was willing to look the other way so that a few of the Blue Dogs could vote against the bill. They could not endanger the outcome once the President had won over the anti-abortion Democrats.

No Republicans voted for the bill. At last count, 38 states, Texas included, will mount challenges to the bill in the federal courts. This will not prevent the bill from going into effect and the legal issues may take years.

In state politics, State representative Kip Averitt (R-Waco) is retiring for health reasons. A former senate leader, David Sibley, has announced he will run for the seat - a post from which he retired in 2002.

Insurance agent Darren Young, who lost to Averitt in the Republican primary earlier this month, has announced he will run in the special election, which has been scheduled for May 8th.

Averitt had suspended his campaign back in January due to health concerns, but it was too late to get his name off the ballot. The special election will fill the seat only until January 2011.

Whoever gets on the November ballot - if he wins the election - would fill the seat beginning in January for a two-year term.

Sibley, a former Baylor University basketball star, attorney, oral surgeon and former Waco mayor, held the seat from 1991 to 2002. When he retired, he opened a lobbying office which he closed last month.

Governor Rick Perry has called for special elections in HD 22, the Averitt seat and also for HD 100, due to the resignation of Representative Terri Hodges.

The beleaguered state facilities for people with mental disabilities, still seem to have their problems. The facility in Corpus Christi does not have any staff psychiatrists and apparently, as therapists who are ill-equipped to work with people with complex needs. This comes just nine months after Texas and the U.S. Department of Justice entered into a settlement to improve health care and more quickly investigate reports of abuse and neglect.

State rep. Abel Herrero, D-Robstown, is vice-chairman of the state House Committee on Human services. He said, "The state-supported living centers, specifically Corpus Christi, are overwhelmed in meeting their responsibilities for caring for people with intellectual disabilities." A spokesman for the department of Ageing and Disability Services said that the department is "aggressively recruiting" to find two staff psychiatrists. "We, like everybody who deals with behavioral health, are competing for very few licensed and qualified psychiatrists."