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DeLuca hopes to end Highmark/UPMC dispute

After listening to testimony at an Aug. 25 House Insurance Committee hearing in downtown Pittsburgh, state Rep. Tony DeLuca said he believes legislative action may be necessary to break the stalled contract negotiations between Highmark Inc. and UPMC.

“We must ensure that western Pennsylvania residents continue to have affordable access to the health care provider’s 2,700 doctors and 20 hospitals,” said DeLuca, Democratic chairman of the Insurance Committee.

“I plan on looking over the testimony from the hearing and crafting legislation so millions of western Pennsylvanians will no longer be caught in the middle of this dispute. We have to take action now, before residents are left with no coverage or incredibly expensive health care bills.”

DeLuca said he hoped Highmark and UPMC would remember that their primary mission is to serve the health care needs of the community, but believes that won’t happen because UPMC President Jeffrey Romoff testified his organization is done negotiating.

The contract between Highmark, which covers about 3 million people in western Pennsylvania, and UPMC, expires June 30, 2012. If the health care giants cannot come to terms, Highmark members would pay out-of-network rates – which are four or five times more costly – for UPMC services.

Negotiations between the nonprofits broke down this year when UPMC learned Highmark was trying to acquire the second-leading health care system in western Pennsylvania, West Allegheny Health System.

Democratic Chairman Tony DeLuca, LEFT, takes part in questioning UPMC President and CEO Jeffery Romoff and Senior Vice President and Chief Legal Officer W. Thomas McGough Jr. during the House Insurance Committee’s Aug. 25 hearing at the Allegheny County Courthouse regarding the provider contract dispute involving UPMC and Highmark. House Democratic Leader Frank Dermody of Oakmont, RIGHT, also participated in the hearing.

“This dispute must be resolved because western Pennsylvania can’t afford the potential loss of thousands of health care jobs,” DeLuca said.

DURING THE HEARING, THE COMMITTEE:

- Learned that a Pennsylvania law allows the state Insurance Department to extend the contract, but only by an additional six months;
- Sought ways to break the stalemate and create competition in the health care industry;
- Announced it will hold additional hearings on the dispute;
- Urged residents to contact Highmark and UPMC to voice their concerns directly;
- Discussed possible legislation by DeLuca to fix the situation.

DeLuca said those with health questions should contact the state Insurance Department’s toll-free hotline at 1-877-881-6388.



Unscrupulous towing targeted by DeLuca



In an effort to help eliminate unscrupulous tow truck operators, Rep. Tony DeLuca introduced legislation, H.B. 1889, in late September.

“Texas requires all towing companies and storage facilities to abide by strict regulations. Consumers in Pennsylvania continue to request a regulated towing industry and I drafted this bill to provide stronger protection for my constituents,” DeLuca said.

Many vehicle owners encounter problems when they need to use the services of tow truck operators. These problems have included trying to locate their car after it has been towed, exorbitant and undisclosed fees, and services not requested.

The pro-consumer legislation would require tow truck operators to:

- Have a valid permit, license and proof of insurance;
- Complete a criminal history background check;
- Post fee schedules at the storage facility and on a state-operated website;
- Display on each towing ticket: the company name, telephone number, registration number, name of operator, location from which the vehicle has been towed and location to which it has been towed, justification for the tow;
- Undergo drug testing, both unannounced and annually scheduled;
- Stay updated on the state’s tow truck rules.

The bill also would assess violations for damages with appropriate fees, establish a Towing and Storage Advisory Board and allow vehicle owners the right to request a hearing if they believe the vehicle was removed without proper justification.

“My colleagues across the Commonwealth have all heard countless stories, as many people have encountered difficulties when their vehicle was towed. I believe my legislation will help to solve many of these problems and sticks up for the consumer,” DeLuca said.



Deadline extended for Property Tax/Rent Rebate

Residents are reminded that the deadline to apply for the state’s Property Tax/Rent Rebate Program has been extended until Dec. 31.

State Rep. Tony DeLuca said free assistance is available at his district office for those who require aid in filling out applications.

“My office is always available to help residents who need help completing state forms,” DeLuca said. “Sadly, there are dishonest companies out there that are sending out what looks like an official government form, telling seniors they need to send in a fee in order to have it processed. I want all residents to know that this is a scam and that they will not get a bigger rebate by paying an outside company. Free help is available from the Pennsylvania Department of Revenue and most state lawmakers’ offices.”

The program provides rebates on property taxes or rent paid in 2010 to eligible Pennsylvanians 65 and older; widows and widowers 50 and older; and people with disabilities 18 and older. The income limit is \$35,000 a year for homeowners and \$15,000 annually for renters, while one-half of Social Security, Supplemental Security, or federal Railroad Retirement Tier I income is excluded. The maximum standard rebate is \$650, but supplemental rebates for qualifying homeowners (automatically calculated by the Department of Revenue) can boost rebates to \$975.

Free assistance with the state’s Property Tax/Rent Rebate Program is available at DeLuca’s office at 7205 Saltsburg Road in Penn Hills. The office phone number is 412-793-2448. Applications also are available online at www.revenue.state.pa.us or by calling 1-888-222-9190.

Bill would limit veterans’ memorial fees

Legislation that would limit fees that cemeteries can charge for a foundation marker commemorating deceased veterans in Pennsylvania has been reintroduced by state Rep. Tony DeLuca.

DeLuca said current law has no limit on the price cemeteries can charge for the marker, and as a result, some cemeteries have charged fees in excess of the cost. His bill would set a \$250 limit.

“My legislation would benefit the families of deceased veterans who often times are being overcharged for foundation markers and cannot afford to purchase grave markers because of the excessive cost,” DeLuca said.

The Allegheny County legislator said veterans should be honored with proper cemetery markers because they have served our country.

He introduced H.B. 181 at the request of the Allegheny County Department of Veterans Services.

The legislation is being reviewed by the House Veterans Affairs and Emergency Preparedness Committee.

Stringent parole reform sought by DeLuca

In the next few weeks, Rep. Tony DeLuca is introducing legislation that would provide stricter parole penalties for offenders who commit a violent crime.

The bill was prompted by what occurred in December 2009 to Penn Hills Police Officer Michael Crawshaw, who was shot to death by a person who was in the state's parole system without serving his entire sentence for a previous offense. DeLuca said the legislature needs to pass this type of measure to try to prevent incidents from happening similar to what occurred to Crawshaw.

"My legislation is designed to keep violent offenders where they belong – in prison and not on parole. For far too long, parole has been treated like a right and not the privilege that it actually is. There is no reason that offenders convicted of a crime of violence should be paroled on day one of their parole eligibility. If you are convicted of a crime of violence, you need to be in jail," DeLuca said.

Under current law, an offender of a crime of violence (such as murdering a police officer) is eligible for parole upon completion of half their sentence.

DeLuca's measure would require such an offender to serve 85 percent of their sentence before being eligible for parole. Furthermore, an offender who commits a second crime of violence would no longer be eligible for parole.

"This legislation should have a deterrent effect on those individuals on parole who may be considering a second crime. It will act as a statement to those individuals on parole that they are expected to abide by their parole as well as the laws of the Commonwealth," he said.

"In the wake of the tragic death of Officer Crawshaw, my bill will ensure that individuals like the shooter serve the entire sentence that he originally received."

DeLuca: All school applicants should be drug tested

Rep. Tony DeLuca has reintroduced legislation that would require all potential public and private school employees, including independent contractors who would have contact with children, to undergo drug testing as a condition of being hired in Pennsylvania schools.

"Our children are one of our most precious assets and I believe this is an important tool in our arsenal to help make sure that all children are protected at school," DeLuca said. "One of my highest legislative priorities is to protect our children from situations in schools that may be harmful."

DeLuca said many workers must pass drug tests – including school bus drivers, turnpike employees and others – so it's only right to ask those who will have direct contact with our children to complete the same requirements.

House Bill 408 would require people applying for administrative and other positions in school districts, as well as with vocational-technical and intermediate units, to undergo the drug testing. A previous drug test could be used, but it would have to have been taken within 90 days of the application in order to be accepted by school districts.

An applicant would have to submit to the drug test after a job offer has been received but before the final hiring date by the school district.

The state Department of Education would develop regulations for drug testing to be provided to school districts across the state.

The legislation, which would not affect current school employees, is being reviewed in the House Appropriations Committee.



State Rep. Tony DeLuca received the Pennsylvania Insurance Fraud Prevention Authority 2011 Fraud Fighter Award for his support of consumers, insurers and law enforcement officials in the battle against insurance fraud in Pennsylvania.

CRIMINAL RECORD CHECKS WOULD BE EXTENDED FOR SCHOOL EMPLOYEES

House Bill 1721, sponsored by Rep. Tony DeLuca, would amend the Pennsylvania School Code to expand the list of offenses included in background checks for prospective employees and to require criminal record checks of all employees every seven years.

Currently, all prospective employees are required to submit, with their employment applications, such background checks. However, after being hired, no further review of such records is required. This legislation would require all employees to submit initial record checks within two years of the date the legislation passes and then every seven years thereafter.

"This change to the School Code would enable school districts to have accurate, up-to-date information, and protect schoolchildren even further," DeLuca said.

In the past, the General Assembly overwhelmingly passed legislation denying state pensions for teachers convicted of sexual assault and other offenses. This proposal would go one step further, by requiring regular review of all school employees' child abuse and criminal histories, not just when they are hired, but every seven years.

"We require continuing education for teachers. We should also require continuing protection for our children and our schools," DeLuca said.

The legislation is being reviewed in the House Education Committee.

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Enjoy a day away from home

Bus trip to Harrisburg



Each year, Rep. DeLuca sponsors bus trips to Harrisburg to tour the state Capitol Building, Senate and House chambers. Participants receive free lunch and a souvenir photo with Rep. DeLuca.

If you are interested in participating in a future bus trip to Harrisburg, call Rep. DeLuca's office at 412-793-2448.



State Rep. Tony DeLuca sponsored a Consumer Fair that provided important tips from a variety of state agencies, local utility providers and credit counselors. Being a well-educated consumer is the best way to make sure you get the most out of your hard-earned dollars.

In honor of Older Americans Month, the Penn Hills Senior Service Center sponsors a 90-plus



celebration each year. This spring, over 150 Penn Hills residents who are at least 90 years old were treated to a special celebration that included lunch, entertainment and a special keepsake. Rep. DeLuca provided a legislative citation to each individual marking the occasion. In addition, he provides a replica of the citation created with all the honorees' names on it which hangs in the Penn Hills Senior Service Center.