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AARP questions candidates on payday lending, Medicaid

BY JAKE BLEED ARKANSAS DEMOCRAT-GAZETTE

Members of the Arkansas chapter of AARP began a statewide tour last week to promote issues in the November election, including ending payday lending and opposing additional legal protections for nursing homes.

The group advocates for those over the age of 50 and, with more than 351,000 members in the state, it has political clout in election years, said Billie Ann Myers, the president of the state chapter.

While the organization does not endorse candidates, it has asked candidates in the Nov. 7 election to give their stands on three issues: ending payday lending, opposing legal protections for nursing homes and expanding state Medicaid funding for those who want alternatives to staying in nursing homes.

"Every candidate for elected office already knows that the mature American voter is a frequent voter," Myers said. "And that makes us a very powerful force."

At a news conference at the state Capitol, Frances Burnett, 81, who said she has been disabled since a car accident in the late 1940s, said that older Americans should have more options to receive care at home and not go to a nursing home.

"If we can live alone and we can do our own thing, we are so much happier," said Burnett, who lives in an apartment in Jacksonville.

Pat Jones, a spokesman for the Arkansas chapter, said candidates for governor, lieutenant governor and attorney general were asked where they stood on the three issues.

Gubernatorial candidates Asa Hutchinson of Little Rock, a Republican, and Mike Beebe of Searcy, a Democrat, both agreed with all of the organization's positions. Rod Bryan, an independent candidate for governor, said he did not receive a survey from AARP.

Dustin McDaniel of Jonesboro, Democratic candidate for attorney general, and Bill Halter of Little Rock, Democratic candidate for lieutenant governor, both agreed with all of the organization's positions.

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Gunner DeLay of Fort Smith, Republican candidate for attorney general, and Jim Holt of Springdale, Republican candidate for lieutenant governor, didn't respond, Jones said. She said the deadline was May 23.

DeLay said he recalled receiving the survey but didn't know why it wasn't returned.

After receiving a call from the Arkansas Democrat-Gazette, Holt's campaign asked for a copy of the questions from AARP and plans to respond, said David Phillips, a volunteer on the state senator's campaign.

The organization asked candidates whether they would end payday lending.

AARP says Act 1216 of 1999, the Check Cashers Act, allows lenders to charge more interest than is allowed by the state constitution.

Myers said AARP has taken a stand against payday lending because recipients of Social Security checks often rely on the lenders to get cash before their checks have arrived.

The organization provided statements the gubernatorial candidates made on the questions. Beebe, who as attorney general has filed lawsuits against payday lenders, said, "I cracked down on predatory lending in our state and I'll take that position with me to the governor's office."

Hutchinson said he wants to adopt new penalties for violating state limits on interest rates.

AARP also asked if candidates supported or opposed expansion of a 2003 act that provided some legal protections to some businesses. AARP opposes expanded protections, and all of the candidates who responded agreed.

Hutchinson said he would oppose laws that "restrain seniors from having meaningful recourse in court from abuse and neglect."

Beebe said that he has "gone to bat" for senior citizens and taken on "issues of nursing home neglect and abuse."

The organization, formerly known as the American Association of Retired Persons, also asked the candidates whether they supported "giving Arkansans a choice about how and where they receive long-term care services" through Medicaid.

AARP says 70 percent of the Medicaid funds spent on longterm care goes to nursing homes. According to the organization, providing care to individuals in their homes is cheaper than paying for nursing home care.

Beebe said, "Medicaid should be less restricted, making it available for programs like assisted living and at-home care."

Hutchinson said he would "review" existing programs to fund long-term care and "advocate an emphasis on additional home- and community-based services."

Under a budget request filed by the state Department of Health and Human Services, Medicaid will spend $580 million in fiscal 2008 and $623 million in fiscal 2009 on nursing home care.

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