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AARP spends day at Capitol ADVERTISEMENT

By Janice Fae Mitchell, Guard staff writer

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Janice Fae Mitchell


Lt. Gov. Bill Halter greets members of AARP Arkansas Wednesday as they line the staircase at the State Capitol.

LITTLE ROCK — Three little words — “Go get ’em” — inspired hardy cheers and echoing applause from a sea of red Wednesday in the rotunda of the State Capitol in Little Rock.

That is how hundreds of red T-shirted AARP Arkansas members reacted to the words of encouragement spoken by Lt. Gov. Bill Halter during a press conference/rally.

AARP members reacted positively about their experience.

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"I really enjoyed it," Willene McMinn of Batesville said. "It's my first time at the Capitol. I learned a lot and I had a lot of fun."

Many also wore "Choices in Care" buttons or held "No Payday Loans" signs because the AARP Arkansas Day at the Capitol gave members throughout the state a chance to raise awareness and voice support for House Bill 1036 (fines for abusive payday lending) and a House bill to create options counseling for long-term care, and opposition to shielding nursing homes from liability for abuse and neglect, also known as "tort reform."

Fifteen busses transported them from Batesville, Fayetteville, Hot Springs, Mountain Home, West Memphis and 10 other cities for a chance to be seen by legislators they hope will support their views. Among the supporters are AARP Arkansas president Billie Ann Myers; Maria Reynolds-Diaz, state director; Sam Sellers, associate state director advocacy; and Mark Johnson, consultant advocacy.

"We talked last summer to some candidates and we've talked with newly elected officials, and they agreed with us about these issues, so much so that some of them are sponsoring or supporting new laws during the 86th session of the Arkansas General Assembly," Myers said. "These new laws will give Arkansans the relief they need."

There are 360,000 registered AARP Arkansas members, according to Myers.

The lieutenant governor pledged his support of the payday lending legislation and the options counseling for long-term care.

"We have an option in this legislative session to put an end ... to the exorbitant interest rates that are charged to Arkansans, to put an end to this practice which is abusive," Halter said. "But ... it will not happen unless you work hard every day to make it happen. I'm counting on you to get it done!"

The Pentagon is opposed to this abusive practice, he said, because of the young soldiers, saying it reduces morale in the armed forces and makes it more difficult for the troops to serve their country.

"We can put an end to this. Will you help get it done?" Halter asked.

"Yes!" the crowd answered.

Halter said he and many others at the Capitol are also concerned about making sure that everybody in the state knows what their

options are for long-term care. He said he knows people who have worked hard and dedicated their lives to improving the state and country should get the options and the services they deserve.

“Make sure you reach out to your representatives ... to your senators ... to your governor. I feel like you’ve already reached out to me,” Halter concluded. “If you work hard, if you reach out to all of those folks that I just mentioned, if you dedicate yourself to getting these two pieces of legislation passed this session; it will happen. Go get ’em!”

House Bill 1036 is sponsored by, among others, state representatives David Johnson (D-Little Rock), Sandra Prater (D-Jacksonville), and Sen. Shawn Womack (R-Mountain Home).

Johnson said years ago voters passed an ammendment setting a 17 percent per annum interest rate cap on loans. “That practice of loaning people money (and charging them) in excess of that interest rate cap has been abused ... and Sen. Womack and I and a number of co-sponsors in the Legislature that are here to try and do something about that.”

He said the sponsors of the bill know low-income families, senior citizens and veterans need access to credit, and they don’t want these people abused in the process by predatory lenders who are charging huge amounts of interest.

“What this bill does is ... puts some teeth in the law and allows a fine of \$300 per transaction,” Womack continued. “Some lenders do hundreds, some do thousands, of transactions, and when it’s added up it can come to a huge chunk of money out of their back pocket.”

Prater said an AARP commissioned study in December revealed 86 percent of Arkansans surveyed want reliable, unbiased information about all the long-term counseling and services in their communities.

“Because of that, I have drafted a bill creating the Arkansas option counseling for long-term care program. This bill will empower Arkansans with the information necessary to make informed choices so that they can decide. ... This will help families realize the services available in their communities and cities and give them the option of where to go,” she said. “We must make sure that legislators know how important it is to every Arkansan to have the opportunity to make that choice where they want care.”

Myers said the research also revealed that almost 75 percent of those surveyed support a law requiring options counseling to

make them aware of all their choices. AARP Arkansas made sure every lawmaker in the legislature received a copy of the survey findings.

Hank Rivers of Evening Shade said, "I think it went real good. We had all the crowd here that we needed. I think the senators and the congressmen here have seen us. I think they really have."

It was Batesville residents John and Bev Cantacessi's first time to see the Senate in action.

"We went into the gallery and sat down. They called the Senate to order and took roll call. They tabled three bills, and came to a fourth bill, which was for the funds to run the Senate, so they passed that," John Cantacessi said. "Then a guy says, 'Is there any more business before the Senate?' and one of the senators got up and said, 'Well, there are members of AARP sitting up in our gallery and we'd like to take this opportunity to thank them for the pen and pencil sets that they gave us. And they all applauded!'"

"That was news to us!" Bev Cantacessi said, laughing.

Irene Scharstein, also of Batesville, said it wasn't what she had expected, but "I think we done a lot of good. The main thing is that they know that we're concerned and they know that we're here."