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Alarm system a work in progress, university officials say

By Josh Humphries
The Daily Reflector

Tuesday, December 16, 2008

East Carolina University officials tested an outdoor alarm system at several locations around campus Tuesday.

The tests were the first steps toward installing an outdoor emergency-notification system that would alert students to coming dangers.

Officials sounded tones and voice commands from speakers on top of buildings to test the distances from which the speakers can be heard.

The voice commands included odd phrases, such as, "Please write crave now."

Martin Jackson, assistant director of network services at ECU, said the words were chosen to make sure that each kind of sound can be heard and understood from various distances. "We want to cover as much of campus as possible," he said.

Workers were testing the system through speakers on the roof of ECU's Cotanche Building, which is close to large ECU parking lots and more than a dozen ECU buildings.

"This is an enhancement to our inside notification systems," Jackson said.

ECU officials have the ability to sent out mass text messages with warning of bad weather or other emergencies.

The university recently installed large televisions in public areas and dorm lobbies that can deliver information very quickly to where students are often gathered. The university also can send out mass e-mails that will pop up on a student's screen no matter what they are doing.

The alarm system — though working — is still without a sound. A committee will develop a tone that can be recognized immediately as signifying an emergency, so anyone on campus will know to listen for instructions from the speakers or from the televisions in public areas.

But this is not the end of ECU's efforts toward safety.

"It will continue to evolve as technology evolves and as we grow," said Tom Pohlman, environmental manager with environmental health at safety at ECU.

"The goal is always to get the message out to as many people as possible."

Officials are not sure when the alarm system will be fully operational, but say they are aiming for some time in the spring.

Safety funds from the UNC system safety initiative will pay for the speakers and the installation.

Josh Humphries can be contacted at jhumphries@coxnc.com and 252-329-9565.
Official: State must act now to avoid bigger budget problems

By Tom Marine
The Daily Reflector

Tuesday, December 16, 2008

ROCKY MOUNT — As the nation's economy slips further into a recession, North Carolina's own budget problems could deteriorate quickly if financial decisions are not made now, Elaine Mejia said Tuesday at a legislative briefing.

Mejia, who works as director of the North Carolina Budget & Tax Center, said the state already is facing a budget shortfall of nearly $2 billion this year, but could encounter a $3.3 billion shortfall next fiscal year, if budget questions are not addressed. That figure, she said in her presentation, accounts for about 16 percent of the current budget.

More than 30 people attended the briefing, along with a number of officials from Pitt, Edgecombe and Nash counties. The event was held at the RBC Bank Campus, and featured staff from the N.C. Budget & Tax Center, N.C. Justice Center and the United Way of North Carolina.

It was billed as an overview of the North Carolina state budget, economic forecast and issues affecting the community, and served as a platform to highlight the state's budget woes and the efforts of the United Way of North Carolina to combat these problems.

State agencies already are struggling with making state-mandated cuts.

"We need to have a discussion about our priorities and what the impacts could be," said Mejia. "There will be real impacts on the quality of state services."

Mejia described a series of steps for this financial discussion, which begins with identifying the size and scope of the budget problem and realizing the impacts any spending cuts would have on the economy. Next, she said, a broad group of individuals with different opinions about these impacts could open a door for a wider range of possible solutions.

"Finally, the conversation may shift to seeing this is not a short-term problem, where spending cuts will solve everything," Mejia said. "We need to also look at state revenues."

Louisa Warren, senior policy advocate for the North Carolina Justice Center, followed Mejia's presentation with a list of policies that could stabilize the economy and help working families. She said four major areas could improve the financial situation of many North Carolinians: boosting incomes of families hit hardest by the economic downturn, aiding the growing number of unemployed workers, helping families facing foreclosures; and, investing in human skills and infrastructure.

"We are in dismal times, but there are some solutions that we can think about," Warren said. "We must look long-term."

Warren addressed a few examples of boosting incomes, such as providing child-care subsidies to working families, increasing the state's earned tax credit and supporting foreclosure prevention.

Further complicating the financial picture is the role unemployment and under-employment can play in the state's economy, Mejia said.

She pointed out that under-employed workers, relegated involuntarily to part-time jobs, will face tight finances at home, thus restricting their own spending, while passing less to the state in income taxes,
because they're working fewer hours at lower pay.

That means the total amount of money flowing through local communities will continue to dwindle.

North Carolina's unemployment rate is already at its highest peak in nearly 20 years — roughly 7 percent — and Mejia said most economists predict that rate to increase until the recession hits bottom. According to a report by the BTC, the state has not created enough jobs to keep pace with the growth of the work force.

Still, both Mejia and Warren said, the economic crisis provides an opportunity to create long-term structural changes.

"Having a drastic cut in spending hurts the economy, because that money ultimately works its way around the community," Mejia said. "We need to look at what is best for the community, and we need all options on the table."

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Legislator suggests name change for state university

The Associated Press

ELIZABETH CITY — A North Carolina legislator says a state university in his district could have better recognition and attract more funding if it changed its name.

The Daily Advance of Elizabeth City reported that state Rep. Bill Owens, D-Pasquotank, made his name-change pitch Monday to trustees at Elizabeth City State University.

Owens says the school’s name should show it is part of the University of North Carolina system.

Owens says the historically black school, founded in 1891, could get more funds and donations, recruit more faculty and attract students from out of state with a new name.

Trustee chairman Walter Davenport says the board was only listening to Owens and would make a decision later.

The legislator told the board that he co-sponsored a bill 13 years ago to change the name of Pembroke State University to the University of North Carolina at Pembroke.

Owens said since then the university’s student population has more than doubled.

Owens said that during the same period Elizabeth City’s student population has increased by 50 percent.

"There are a lot of things to be proud of, but we need to be all that we can be here at this university," Owens said.
Medicare’s pushing more doctors to ditch their prescription pads

Physicians who e-prescribe will receive bonus pay starting next month.

The Associated Press

WASHINGTON — The push for paperless prescriptions is about to get a boost: Starting in January, doctors who e-prescribe can get bonus pay from Medicare.

For patients, the benefits are obvious — from shorter drugstore waits to increased safety, as pharmacists no longer squint to decipher doctors’ messy handwriting.

But persuading U.S. doctors to ditch their prescription pads for electronic prescribing so far has been a long, uphill battle. Only about 10 percent of doctors are taking the plunge like Dr. Ted Epperly in Boise, Idaho, who’s adopting the technology now.

Still, the movement is gaining steam as Medicare warns that its bonus payments are for a short time only: Holdouts still sticking to paper in 2012 will find their Medicare payments cut.

And continuing the push for medical information technology is a key part of President-elect Barack Obama’s health-reform plans, in hopes that moving to computerized records — not just prescriptions, but all those troublesome paper charts that contribute to medical errors and wasted care — ultimately could save millions of dollars a year.

“We’d never go back,” says Epperly, also president of the American Academy of Family Physicians. Patients “recognize that, ‘Hey, Dr. Epperly’s in the information age, and my safety is better and the quality of care is better.’”

What’s a paperless prescription? When the doctor writes it by computer and sends it directly to the drugstore by computer, no little piece of paper to get lost or stolen anywhere along that trail.

Some doctors do write prescriptions via computer but then hand the patient a printout, or it arrives at the drugstore as a fax. Those don’t count as true electronic prescribing.

In December 2007, 35,000 doctors were writing at least some paperless prescriptions, according to SureScripts-RxHub, which operates drugstores’ e-prescription network.

The 2008 count isn’t finished yet, but SureScripts estimates that number has doubled to more than 70,000. Moreover, the volume of prescriptions filled electronically grew about 15 percent a month since August, faster than the 5 percent to 8 percent monthly increase seen earlier in the year — presumably as doctors geared up for the Medicare incentive.

The biggest reason for the paperless push is to improve safety. More than 1.5 million Americans are injured every year by medication mistakes. Deciphering doctors’ chicken-scratch — was that 100 milligrams or 100 micrograms? — does play a role. But perhaps more important, electronic prescribing systems can flash an alert if the dose seems wrong or patient records show use of another drug that can dangerously interact.

By avoiding unnecessary medication injuries, Health and Human Services Secretary Michael Leavitt has estimated that widespread e-prescribing could save as much as $156 million over five years.

It can save patients cash, too. Most insurance plans divide their formularies into tiers with escalating co-pays, and e-prescribing can let doctors debating which drug to recommend take patient cost into account.
Foundation gives $10M to UNC system

CHAPEL HILL — The University of North Carolina system has received a hand-delivered donation of $10 million from a foundation run by its former president, C.D. Spangler.

The donation will be used to create a challenge grant program aimed at boosting the university system's ranks of endowed professorships.

— From Associated Press reports
UNC challenged to tune of $10 million

ERIC FERRERI, Staff Writer
Comment on this story

A foundation run by former UNC system President C.D. Spangler has hand-delivered $10 million to the university system, an advance payment to a challenge grant program for distinguished professorships.

The payment, which fulfills the foundation's financial commitment through mid-2011, comes as the university system grapples with impending budget cuts.

"My family and I feel there has never been a time when the benefits of the University of North Carolina and all 16 of our campuses were needed more by the people of our state than is so at this time," Spangler said in a statement. "A prime strength of these universities is their faculties. Our hope is in these troubled times that the importance of the academic efforts of the University of North Carolina will continue to be recognized by all who are in a position to help make a difference by their voices and otherwise."

The money is part of a commitment the foundation made last year to increase distinguished professorships in high-need academic fields. The foundation has pledged $20 million over five years. But there's a catch: The money can be used only if the state provides matching funds totaling $4.6 million each year.

"President Spangler has always been remarkably generous," said Judith Wegner, a UNC-Chapel Hill law professor who chairs the UNC system's faculty assembly. "His commitment to making this gift early will, I'm sure, encourage the General Assembly to make matching funds available."

Money for professorships donated by the Spangler foundation and other private sources has outpaced the state's ability to provide the matching funding. Thus, there is already a backlog of professorships awaiting funding.

As of Oct. 31, 65 endowed professorships have been funded but need the state match. The UNC system is asking for $6.8 million in recurring funds and $5 million in one-time money, in its next budget request, to finance the professorships.
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Abby Shevach, 3, plays hide and seek with therapist Jenny Terry, 35, at Pediatric Possibilities last week. Abby, like many children in the Triangle and across the nation, has been diagnosed with sensory processing problems.

Staff Photos by Chuck Liddy

Abby Shevach plays with therapist Jenny Terry during a treatment session last week. Researchers say sensory processing problems affect how children eat, dress and play.

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**Everyday sensations overwhelm some children**

**THOMAS GOLDSMITH, Staff Writer**

Comment on this story

In the ears of Abby Shevach, who’s not quite 4, the whoosh of a public rest room’s hand dryer can roar like a jet taking off at close range.

That, and other routine sensations of childhood, can be torment for Abby, her mother said.

"It's more than not liking the hand dryer," Jennifer Shevach said, while watching Abby's session at a North Raleigh occupational therapy clinic outfitted with brilliantly colored ramps, swings and trampolines. "When we're at the mall and it's time to go to the potty, she falls down to the floor kicking and screaming because she's afraid to go in the rest room."

Abby, along with hundreds of other Triangle children, receives occupational therapy every week to help relieve problems related to her senses. Affecting everything from taste, smell and movement to the children's physical sense of where they are, problems like Abby's are widely referred to as sensory processing problems -- or, by some professionals, sensory processing disorder.
The scope, origins and treatment of such problems are the subject of a 10-year, $3 million UNC-Chapel Hill study that recently won renewed National Institutes of Health funding for its second five-year term.

Parents say children are often overwhelmed by everyday sensations, including flushing toilets, crunchy foods, rapid-fire TV images and scratchy clothes.

"These kids struggle more -- people think they are weird when they are just having trouble understanding what's going on," said Shevach, a computer scientist turned fitness trainer. "It has to do with their senses and how they think and how they understand the world."

In the realms of academe, medicine and occupational therapy, there’s controversy over problems such as over- or under-sensitivity to various sensations.

"Clearly these issues exist -- they exist in autism; they sometimes exist in typical kids," said researcher Grace Baranek, a UNC professor of occupational science. "There are ways that these things have impact on really important life skills," such as eating, dressing and playing with other children, she said.

But the experts question whether these problems add up to a separate disease, symptoms of another condition, or typical development of the senses. As academics and professional organizations debate the issue, parents and therapists see effects of sensory problems daily.

"When a child comes home from school and strips her clothes off and goes and hides in the closet, this is not, 'I don’t like the flowers on my pants,' " said Dawn Rohlik, an occupational therapist and owner of Pediatric Possibilities, the North Raleigh clinic. "This is not about noncompliance."

Rohlik and her staff at the Creedmoor Road clinic, equipped with more than $100,000 in therapeutic equipment, treat about 60 children each week. At a fee of $125 an hour, children go through one-on-one, often vigorous therapy in the form of play and movement.

**Widespread problem**

Nationally, 25,000 children are diagnosed with autism each year, and about 70 percent of those, according to UNC researchers, have problems with sensory processing.

The number gets much larger if you add in the children with developmental delay -- UNC researchers say about 40 percent of these kids have sensory problems -- and as many as one in 20 children overall, according to Colorado psychologist Lucy Jane Miller.

There’s no central source for numbers of children locally with these problems, but Triangle schools, doctors and therapists are trying to help more of them defuse sensitivities.

"Helping kids get used to movements, you introduce them to little movements that don't bother them," said Dr. Kristi Milowic, a Raleigh pediatric psychiatrist. "You can expose children to softer noises, then louder and louder noises."

Triangle mom Donna Zoba wanted to help son Chris get over sensory problems like chewing on his shirt and "everything in sight." Zoba has fixed up a large room in the family's Apex home with a ball pit, bean bags, bubble blowing toys, trampolines and a peanut-shaped exercise ball.

It’s not as elaborate as the therapy rooms at Pediatric Possibilities, but has the same goal: teaching kids to deal with a wider variety of experiences through play.

"It's fun for them, so they don't realize they're learning," occupational therapist Jenny Terry said.

**Documented in '70s**

Occupational therapy researchers have documented sensory problems since the 1970s, noting that untreated symptoms can cause clumsiness, behavioral and emotional problems and failure in school. Some children's sense of touch is so sensitive that a shirt collar label can be a major distraction, therapists say.

Colorado researcher Miller has advocated the inclusion of sensory processing disorder as a separate diagnosis in the influential Diagnostic and Statistical Manual produced by the American Psychiatric Association.
The designation as a disease would allow for more money, research and recognition of the condition. However, some doctors have argued that there's no compelling evidence or clinical trials to support a separate diagnosis of sensory processing disorder.

"I think that [sensory processing disorder] is a standalone condition," Shevach said. "That doesn't mean that it can't be part of other conditions."

Baranek said she sees both sides.

"Where do we draw the line of what's a disorder and what's not?" Baranek said. "People may use that label to support practices that may not necessarily be effective. We don't know because we haven't done the research."

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THE UNC-CH STUDY

UNC-Chapel Hill's new wave of National Institutes of Health-funded research is led by Grace Baranek. Called the Sensory Experience Project, the research could help answer key questions about the nature, development, causes and consequences of sensory processing problems.

* Do problems with senses sometimes simply go away with age? What factors and treatments work best to help people with the condition?

* How do these issues play out during specific home activities?

* Can scientists link these problems to specific brain waves as shown in EEG tests?

"We want to see not only what causes these features, but what we can do about it," Baranek said.


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Ph.D. is a triumph for blind man

JAY PRICE, Staff Writer
Comment on this story

RALEIGH -

Glaucoma left Charles L. Walker blind about 20 years ago, but he still enjoys golf.

"You just put the ball on a tee and swing until you hit it," he said. "It teaches you something about life."

Walker, 47, is a living lesson in not giving up. Today a family member will guide him across the stage at N.C. State University's McKimmon Center as he joins 2,800 fall graduates picking up diplomas, in his case a doctorate in education. It's his fourth degree -- not bad for a man who missed part of his senior year at Raleigh's Sanderson High School because of an eye infection and never graduated.

"From G.E.D. to Ph.D.," he said. "Yeah, it's a big day."

It took about a decade to earn that doctorate. Along the way, Walker has been an advocate, consultant, college lecturer, computer trainer, expert witness before the state legislature, student government leader, university career counselor and, not least, father, helping rear two children to college age themselves.

Friends said that besides his obvious intellectual ability, Walker's persistence was crucial.

"I'm sure that he doesn't view this as some astounding accomplishment," said Ricky Scott, who is almost finished with his own doctorate in the same program and who also is blind. "The way he would see it is, that if you have the ability, if you have the desire and you have the will to do it, it's a matter of when it will get done, not whether it will get done."

Friends say that Walker used a combination of perseverance and politeness to get around the inevitable hurdles for a blind student.

In fact, he eliminated some of those hurdles. As a member of the student senate, he wrote legislation to make the university improve accessibility for students with disabilities. He also persuaded NCSU leaders to spend $250,000 on equipment such as talking computers and a talking elevator.

The rigors of earning a doctorate meant he sometimes needed people paid to read to him. Other times, he
would spend hours downloading text into a talking computer, all too often hitting glitches that killed the material before he could hear it.

There were also sometimes physical barriers. He still laughs at the time the university asked him to evaluate new Braille information plates to be attached to the emergency phones scattered around campus on poles with blue lights. "The Braille was fine," he said, laughing. "But how was I supposed to find the pole if I was in trouble?"

Not everything was a challenge, though. Walker said the university did a good job of making things accessible and calls the College of Education an "island of accessibility." Now, Walker is starting a private practice in counseling and hopes to sign a teaching contract with NCSU soon.

Much of his research was into how blind and visually impaired people develop identities. His dissertation, though, was about his study of 300 counseling students' attitudes about blind and visually impaired clients. He found they were poorly prepared to deal with such clients, which didn't surprise him, he said, given that his own counseling education included only one section in one book in one class.

He hopes to improve such preparation, but that's only part of the goal. "It's not just counselors," he said. "I want to improve the situation for blind people in this society and the whole world, and you have to lead by example and change by example.

"Whether you can see or not, you have to get up in the morning and get it done. You have to find ways to contribute and not just be a client."

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