

Weekly Report
January 23, 2004

By: Sen. John Griesheimer
(573) 751-3678

SENATE ADVANCES LEGISLATION THAT WOULD CREATE A COMPREHENSIVE CHILDREN'S MENTAL HEALTH SERVICE

In the second full week of this year's legislative session, the Missouri Senate has passed legislation that would establish a comprehensive children's mental health service system. Among several provisions, Senate Bill 1003 would stop a current condition where parents must relinquish legal custody of their children to the state before the children can receive state funded mental health services.

The Senate action sends the measure to the House of Representatives for similar debate. Joint passage would place the law into effect unless vetoed by the governor.

This bill is an opportunity for lawmaker's to right a very grievous wrong. For far too long we have forced parents of children with mental health problems to relinquish the custody of their children in order to receive care that the Division of Family Services provides.

According to Division of Family Services, there are almost 600 children in the state whose custody has been relinquished to the state. These are children that are not Medicaid eligible.

Currently if parents turn to the state for help, the state requires that they relinquish custody to the state in order to get assistance. However, this will include the parent's names being placed on the child abuse and neglect registry for abandonment.

After giving up custody to the state, parents lose the ability to have any decision-making power in their child's life.

SB 1003 will clear up that terrible provision so that parent's will no longer be required to lose custody of their children in order to get them help.

On Tuesday, the Senate Ways and Means Committee heard testimony on SB 730, a measure that would create the Missouri Homestead Preservation Act. I sit on this committee and I have been a long-time supporter of this reassessment reform measure.

SB 730 would allow senior citizens and those who are disabled to obtain a credit against their property taxes that exceed a certain amount – estimated at around 5 percent. The credit for an excessive increase would be applied against the taxes paid in the following year.

Assessors would be required to forward all information on homestead applicants to the Department of Revenue (DOR) by Oct. 31. The DOR would certify to the collectors those applicants who meet the requirements of the homestead exemption credit.

Each January, the Missouri General Assembly would then file an appropriation bill to fund the homestead exemption.

In October or November when county collectors send a current year tax bill, for all those eligible there would be a homestead exemption from the prior year's list on the bill and applied against the current bill.

There was a great deal of support for this legislation, and many of those who testified favorably have opposed this matter in the past including representatives from the Missouri School Boards' Association, the Missouri State Teachers Association, the Missouri Silver Haired Legislature and the Missouri Collectors' Association. No one testified in opposition.

I believe that the Ways and Means Committee will pass this bill at our next meeting and send it to the floor to be debated.

Missouri State Senators and Representatives met in a joint session mid-week to hear the Governor's State-of-the-State address. The state constitution requires the Governor to present an annual budget message to the legislature within 30 days after the regular session convenes. Though local, state and national economic indicators show signs of improvement, Missouri continues to face budget deficits. Deficit estimates for the budget year beginning July 1 range from \$200 million to \$1 billion. (The current state budget as adopted last May totaled \$19.1 billion.) Missouri's constitution prohibits deficit spending.

In his remarks, the Governor proposed a tax and revenue package of \$520 million along with spending cuts of \$137 million. Voter approval is required on any tax proposal raising more than \$75 million.

Last year, the Governor proposed a tax and revenue package of more than \$700 million. However, a majority of lawmakers, mindful of voter rejection of three tax proposals in 2002, instead worked to cut expenses and streamline state government. One Senate measure now in committee, SJR 41, would ask voters to amend the constitution to prohibit governors from submitting budgets based on tax revenue not yet approved by voters and lawmakers. A Senate measure introduced this week, SJR 43, would amend the way the state's budget reserve fund is managed.

If you are in Jefferson City, please feel free to stop by my office in Room 226 at the State Capitol. You may call me anytime at (800) 247-6102 or (573) 751-3678, or you may call my home at 239-2521 or 239-2523. My cell phone number is (314) 650-5777.