

Senator Bill Stouffer on First Steps Program

“Several constituents have voiced their support for the First Steps program. I agree with the Governor that we must continue to provide assistance to families with young children with developmental disabilities as efficiently as possible.”

Mothers gathered, with their young special needs children, on the capitol steps to have their voices heard about the importance of First Steps this week. Also, many photos and letters about this early intervention program for developmentally disabled children between the ages of newborn to three-years-old have been received by my office.

The First Steps program is being abused because of mismanagement by its bureaucracy. The number of people participating in the program has remained stable over the years, but its budget grew nearly ten percent in the last year alone.

The governor and the legislative branch will use department heads, experts, and more importantly, taxpayers to help shape the budget for Fiscal Year 2006. The governor only gave a preliminary budget, and now it is time for the legislature to step up and make suggestions. Some ideas brought forward by constituents regarding First Steps include the following:

- 1. Requiring insurance as a first source of payment—if a person says they do not want insurance used then the state and federal government picks up the cost instead of private insurance.*
- 2. Returning “free” administrative services—before restructuring, service coordination was provided by local offices of the Department of Health for free through existing staff. Now the state pays administrative fees.*

3. *Using “Parents as Teachers” instructors as well as other existing programs to partner with therapists to work with the young people.*
4. *Downsizing the bureaucracy—regional centers coordinating with therapists working out of their homes add too much of an administrative cost and opportunities should be explored to work through one centralized center to administer this program.*

The governor has stated that he will work to fund the services that First Steps provides, but it will not be the same program. It is important to note that when states opt to use this federal program they must adhere to its mandates. Simply put, we need to continue to provide assistance to the children and families now serviced by First Steps in a more efficient way and the governor has committed to this as well.

I have appreciated constituent comments on this issue. Please feel free to continue to comment or ask questions on this issue or any other issue by calling toll free 866-768-3987 or email bstouffer@senate.mo.gov.

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