

Senator Stouffer on Medicaid Reform

Last week several of my colleagues heard seven hours of testimony regarding abuses against the state Medicaid program that have put the program, and thousands of Missourians benefiting from it, in danger. I supported legislation this week after 16 hours of debate that Medicaid benefits go only to those eligible for the program, get rid of Medicaid abuses and sustain the program for those genuinely in need of its services.

The Missouri Constitution requires the state to maintain a balanced budget. Some estimates show a deficit for this year of \$300 million. Because voters have repeatedly (and rightly) rejected statewide tax increases, measures will have to be taken to lower expenditures. One area where simple oversight could save money for the state and its taxpayers is Missouri's Medicaid program.

Nearly one of every five Missourians receives Medicaid benefits, which is equal to the populations of Kansas City, St. Louis, and Springfield combined. About one quarter of the state's \$19 billion budget goes to pay for these services. Missouri leads the nation in Medicaid growth; with a growth rate of about 16 percent a year. The legislation I am supporting would reduce that growth by keeping ineligible recipients of Medicaid services from taking advantage of the program and state taxpayers.

Medicaid is an essential program. It allows low-income seniors and disabled citizens to receive needed services. However, some people are abusing the system. Some are hiding assets. Individuals have refused to report income. Some have even moved to Missouri for the very purpose of fraudulently receiving benefits.

Senate Bill 539 requires that those who receive Medicaid coverage are qualified for the program. Currently there is no verification policy. We don't know who is receiving benefits justly or unjustly because applicants are taken at their word. Applications are submitted and accepted, and then the checks are soon in the mail.

Many Missourians are worried they will lose the health care they depend on. The way the program is now, year after year we will be forced to make more cuts, and year after year, Medicaid recipients will wonder if their coverage is the next to go. To achieve

our goal of creating an entirely new system that uses each tax dollar to its fullest to provide health care to Missouri's neediest citizens, a commission of five senators and five representatives will study and review the current Medicaid program in-depth to recommend innovative ways to redesign a new state Medicaid system for completion by July 2008. I hope to be able to be a part of this progress in some way.

This legislation will have no effect on those deservedly receiving Medicaid benefits. But if nothing is done, there might not be funds available to maintain the program. In fact, it will keep the much-needed program properly serving those in need, as it was designed to do.

If you have questions or comments about this issue or any other issue please feel free to contact my office toll free at 866-768-3987 or email at bstouffer@senate.mo.gov.