



Week of March 14, 2005

With a Clean Slate, Let's Start Again

JEFFERSON CITY – The governor made it clear earlier this year that to sufficiently fund vital areas, such as education, we must cut state spending. Unfortunately, the program in the most need of reform and with the most room for eliminating waste is Medicaid. The federal government created Medicaid 40 years ago to use federal and state money to provide health care services to people with disabilities, the poor and the elderly. In the past decade, Medicaid enrollment soared and now, 1 out of 5 Missouri citizens receives Medicaid benefits. Every five years, an additional \$1 billion is needed to cover the costs of Medicaid. We, as a state, can no longer afford to continue on this same path to insolvency.

Over the past few months, my fellow lawmakers and I have been trying to renew a positive outlook on the future of our state-funded health care system that helps Missouri's most vulnerable. Our state's constitution requires that we fund education first and forbids us to raise taxes without the consent of the people. Like so many other states, we are left with the hardest decision to make—one that is seemingly callous, but undeniably inevitable, if we want to save Missouri's social welfare system.

This week my Senate colleagues and I debated for 16 hours Senate Bill 539, which modifies the Medicaid program. As much as it pains me to admit, the bill does impact many Missourians. None of us likes to drop people from the program. It's the only part of this job that I do not enjoy. But because the Medicaid system has gotten out of hand, we are out of money to work with. It is time to stop and restructure Medicaid from the ground up.

SB 539 streamlines services so that those who need it most can still be guaranteed health care. By requiring each Medicaid recipient to be checked for eligibility each year, we can better ensure that taxpayers' money is used to cover only qualified, legal citizens of Missouri. However, reform beyond eligibility verification is needed to significantly improve our situation.

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 the current Medicaid program in-depth to recommend innovative ways to redesign a new state Medicaid system for completion by July 2008.

Our education funding formula has been going through a major overhaul this year, and now it is time to put the Medicaid system through a similar process. We need to move forward to balance our state budget, which is another constitutional requirement. Because our current Medicaid system is broken, the only way to prevail over this economic and social challenge is to start back at square one. Taking this recent legislative step has brought us closer to implementing a more accountable and affordable social welfare system and has shown us that a more compassionate Missouri state-funded healthcare system can and will exist.

When we get back from our annual mid-session break, we will be taking up SB 50, which I drafted to require that people prove they are U.S. citizens before they can register to vote. I was shocked and disappointed to find that recently our Secretary of State Robin Carnahan had a staff member, paid by your tax dollars, actively lobbying against this bill. Their only objection is that if it passes, the law will cause more work for the elections officers and the county clerks. No county clerk in our area has complained—in fact, they support the legislation. Why Secretary of State Carnahan chooses to be in favor of giving voting rights to voters who are illegal immigrants—which is the equivalent to using false identification—is beyond me. I have faith in the legislative process that the commonsense of those elected to the General Assembly by the people of this good state of Missouri will prevail.

On a much more personal note, my new grandson, Owen Dean Corp, was born on March 16 to my daughter Chelsea Corp and her husband Brad. They live in Sparta, Missouri and have two other children, Hannah and Jack. I would like to express my congratulations to them and to share with you the pride that I have for my growing family.

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*Sen. Larry Gene Taylor represents the people of Ozark, Stone,
Taney, Lawrence, Barry and McDonald counties.*