

State Senator

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First Steps to More Home Rule

JEFFERSON CITY— A bill that received final passage from my fellow Senators and I this week was Senate Bill 500, which reforms the First Steps program. First Steps provides 8,000 developmentally disabled Missouri infants and toddlers with early intervention services. There is no denying the value of a program such as First Steps. The legislation saves the program from insolvency by making it more cost-effective for taxpayers, yet ever as beneficial for the children and families who participate in it. Under the bill, oversight for care services is shifted to regional centers, which reduces costs as well as brings the focus to a more local level.

The current First Steps program does not have a limit as to how much a family can make but still be covered at the state's expense. To address the costliness of not having a cap on family income, the legislation that has cleared the Senate transfers some of the responsibility to private health insurers and charges a participation fee for families that can afford it. Although Missouri lawmakers are involved in the ongoing challenge of balancing the budget, we feel this program is well-worth keeping, and we have found a way to save the program and save money. The bill now heads to the House where it will go through a similar consideration process.

Also this week, the Senate Economic Development, Tourism & Local Government committee, of which I am vice chairman, voted to pass a bill that changes the law regarding political subdivisions and helps bolster economic development at the county level. The most important of many provisions is one in which transfers the responsibility of

setting county officials' salaries from the state legislature to the county government. Once again, I am advocating a bill that restores local control. County governments know what they have to work with in terms of their budgets so to give them the say in determining how much their elected officials get paid within set parameters is only right.

As an update, my bill improving Missouri's voter registration process so that non-U.S. citizens can't tamper with American ideals, will be debated on the floor of the Senate soon. The measure's success depends on the desire of my fellow lawmakers to diminish the potential threat that illegal immigrants have on U.S. citizens' right to vote.

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