

State Senator

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Appropriately Appropriating

JEFFERSON CITY—A baker's dozen of bills detailing the allotted budget for state departments and agencies received the majority of lawmakers' attention this week. The budget bills typically begin in the House, and once approved, they head to the Senate for similar consideration. This week the Senate Appropriations Committee put its versions of the budget bills before the Senate. Within two days of thorough debate, we determined how much money to allocate to which state-sponsored programs and services. The \$19.2-billion budget we passed meshes well with Missouri's available funding and also is representative of responsible spending.

Much of the deliberation on the Senate floor centered on Medicaid funding. My fellow senators and I tried to work within our financial means to give taxpayers their money's worth. Although we can't continue funding the current Medicaid program as has been done in the past, we have tried to mute the resounding whacks that the program would endure under the House's budget plan. The Senate's proposed budget increases the income level threshold of a family of three to 50 percent of the federal poverty level, as opposed to the House plan's eligibility level of 23 percent. This means that under the Senate's budget plan, one-third of the 100,000 Medicaid recipients dropped by the House's appropriations would maintain their coverage.

Because of the Senate's less drastic budget cuts, fewer children, seniors and disabled adults will lose coverage. The Senate's budget also calls for restoration of some optional services, such as dental and podiatry benefits, and adds funding for contracted foster care and adoptive parent training services.

In other areas of state funding, the plan moves to consolidate state-sponsored programs and services to increase each department's efficacy and decrease the unnecessary expenditures

to provide for the vital interests of Missouri and its citizens. In addition to our spending plan offering greater Medicaid eligibility than that of the House and governor, our budget also manages to increase funding for Missouri public schools by \$113 million. Departments of Agriculture, Conservation and Public Safety will also receive more funding than they did last year. Overall, this budget upholds our dedication to educating our children while eliminating undue cuts that cause Missouri's most needy citizens to suffer.

The package of budget bills is now sent to a dual-chamber, bipartisan conference committee, where the differences between House and Senate versions will be worked out. A final budget is due to the governor by May 6 and will go into effect July 1.

This week the Senate signed off on a final version of a bill preventing certain seemingly harmless remedies from being turned into societal maladies. Cold and sinus medicines were created to help us, but there are individuals who have been manipulating these over-the-counter cures to hurt themselves and others. The dangerous byproduct of these people's "need for speed" is methamphetamine, an extremely addictive drug that stimulates the central nervous system.

In recent years, there has been a surge in meth manufacturing and abuse. This measure would curb the production of the addictive stimulant by toughening restrictions on the sale of over-the-counter cold medicines such as Actifed, Sudafed and Nyquil because they contain pseudoephedrine, which is used in the meth production. The high number of meth-lab busts are filling Missouri's prisons with addicts and adding to the already high cost of incarceration. Because taking the drug is so addictive and making the drug is so profitable, meth cooks and users end up behind bars more than once. The dangers of the drug seep beyond the individual who is producing it or getting high. Because meth is extremely explosive, it causes many fires—and not just in isolated buildings, but in vehicles on our streets and in our neighbors' homes.

The legislation, which has already been passed by the House and is on its way to the governor, changes the law so medicine containing pseudoephedrine in the tablet form (not liquid or gel capsules) can only be purchased from pharmacists, and no more than nine grams of the medicine can be bought within a 30-day period. Consumers' identities will be logged in a database, which the police can access. We are just waiting for the governor's signature so we can begin to nip the meth problem in its illegal and perilous bud.

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