



WEEKLY REPORT

State Senator Gary Nodler
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Recapping Senate Success

JEFFERSON CITY – This week has been a productive one for the Missouri Senate as we have moved ahead on four of our legislative aims. After 16 hours of debate, we are one step closer to guaranteeing that the state’s most vulnerable citizens will be able to receive unhindered Medicaid benefits in the future. Senate Bill 539 overhauls Missouri’s out-of-control Medicaid system. Currently, more than one-fourth of the state’s \$19-billion budget goes toward the social services program. Missouri has seen Medicaid grow at a faster rate than any other state in the union.

SB 539 requires an annual verification process of Medicaid recipients to assure that individuals aren’t scamming the system. But to further reorganize the system and renew a sense of optimism for the future of state-funded healthcare, the bill also creates a commission of five senators and five representatives who 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. Taking this recent legislative step brings Missouri closer to having a more accountable, more available and more affordable social welfare system. Having cleared the Senate, the legislation now goes to the House for similar consideration.

Both chambers of the legislature this week cast a final vote of approval for legislation that rewrites Missouri’s workers’ compensation laws. The bill redefines what a work-related injury is by including only injuries in which work is the “prevailing factor” and increases the penalties for system fraud. This measure is good for Missouri’s economy because we will no longer be driving businesses away with high costs of workers’ compensation insurance. The governor is expected to sign the bill into law in the near future.

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My fellow senators and I have also granted final passage to yet another measure this week that will enhance Missouri's business-friendly atmosphere. As I covered last week, our tort system is in dire need of reform. The House and Senate mutually agreed on provisions altering the state's civil litigation system so that outrageous jury awards are eradicated in lawsuits dealing with such cases as medical malpractice, wrongful death, product liability and car accidents. With this legislation, non-economic damages, which are allocated for pain and suffering, are now capped at \$350,000, and "venue shopping," a practice in which trials are moved to jurisdictions known for awarding plaintiffs with extremely generous amounts, are now prohibited. The principle of "joint and several liability" now kicks in when the jury finds a defendant to be at least 51 percent at fault for the injury. Diligent deliberation and negotiations in the House and the Senate have enabled the bill to head to the governor, who supports the proposal.

Also this week, the Senate Education Committee, of which I am chairman, held a public hearing on a bill that is based on the Joint Committee on Education's recommendations for distributing funding to Missouri public schools more fairly. The current foundation formula allocates state money according to property values and taxes in each of Missouri's 524 school districts. Under SB 287, each school district would be guaranteed a base amount of approximately \$6,100 per pupil. Because the cost of education, much like the cost of living, varies dramatically between districts, the plan also implements a value index to take purchasing power disparities into account. This legislation is the product of collective efforts to address the problems of our current public school funding method. Once the Education Committee approves the measure, it will head to the Senate floor for debate by the full body.

Next week is the Senate's annual mid-session break, which will give us time to regroup before we reconvene on March 29 to advance our remaining legislative priorities.

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*Senator Gary Nodler represents the people of Dade, Jasper
and Newton counties in the Missouri Senate.*