



WEEKLY REPORT

State Senator Gary Nodler
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Ensuring taxpayers get a fair deal

The \$19-billion budget balances education funding and health care concerns

JEFFERSON CITY –With the First Regular Session of the 93rd General Assembly coming to a close, the legislature is focusing on the state budget, which must be sent to the Governor by May 6. Missouri's thirteen-bill budget for the 2006 Fiscal Year is set at \$19.2 billion, and we have been devoting a lot of time to determining how much money to distribute to each program and service. The budget bills begin the deliberation process in the House, and after approval, they are then sent to the Senate for similar consideration. This week, after the Senate Appropriations Committee modified the House fiscal plan, the full Senate considered, debated and approved the budget bills.

The resulting Senate version of the budget for Missouri's upcoming fiscal year is as efficient as it is appropriate. We did our best to work within our fiscal constraints as we prioritized the appropriations. We fine-tuned the House budget to strike a finer balance between adequately funding education and effectively providing Medicaid for Missouri's most vulnerable, while continuing to fund programs and services that are worth taxpayers' investments.

As we have repeatedly made clear, we can no longer continue to pump money into the broken Medicaid system in the same way it was done in the past. The Senate version subdues the dramatic cuts that the Governor and the House have proposed. Under the House's version, a family of three could bring in no more than 23 percent of the federal poverty level to be eligible for Medicaid, which means a projected 100,000 Medicaid recipients would lose their coverage. The Senate's budget increases the income level threshold to 50 percent of the federal poverty level, saving more than 30,000 people from being dropped

from the Medicaid rolls. We also restored the previously cut dental and podiatry benefits, as well as increased funding for contracted foster and adoptive parent training services.

In other areas of state funding, the plan calls for a consolidation of 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. Our spending plan allocates \$37 million more for Medicaid than last year's budget and offers greater eligibility levels 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, and the First Steps program, which offers early intervention services to developmentally disabled infants and toddlers, will also be fully funded. As a whole, this budget furthers our commitment to Missouri students and protects Missouri's most needy citizens from overly drastic cuts.

I will now join four other senators and five representatives in a conference committee to work out the differences between the versions. Upon approval by the Governor, the final budget will go into effect July 1.

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