



First Steps Reforms Improve Services, Feasibility of Program

JEFFERSON CITY — Health care is undoubtedly one of the most important issues facing citizens throughout our state and nation. Due to rising health-care costs and a slow economy, it is harder than ever for Missourians to receive affordable health coverage. However, smart fiscal policies and a resurging economy have allowed lawmakers to improve the effectiveness and efficiency of health-care services. A prime example of that is First Steps, Missouri's program providing early intervention services to more than 8,000 Missouri infants and toddlers with developmental disabilities. Due to recent reforms within the program, it is performing better than ever, and as a member of an agency working with First Steps issues, I will work to continue improving the program.

First Steps, which operates within the Missouri Department of Elementary and Secondary Education's (DESE) Division of Special Education, offers coordinated services and assistance to young children with special needs and their families. First Steps is designed for children, from birth to age 3, who have delayed development or conditions that are associated with developmental disabilities.

In 2005, lawmakers approved legislation making First Steps more efficient. The new policies shifted oversight of program services to regional centers established by the bill, introduced a participation fee for families above a certain income level, and required health insurance companies to cover program costs of up to \$3,000 a year per child for three years.

Because of improved efficiencies in the First Steps program, the Legislature this year was able to direct to the program \$1.6 million more in funding than it did for the 2006 fiscal year. Meanwhile, FY 2008 projections show a decrease in state expenditures for the program along with steady federal subsidies and no decrease in the number of children served. That means we are maintaining quality services while reducing costs.

Further, the State Interagency Coordinating Council (SICC), which I was appointed to by the governor on Sept. 13, is continuing efforts to ensure proper functioning of First Steps and other programs. The SICC works with DESE to oversee programs for infants and toddlers with disabilities. The council promotes interagency agreements, monitors the transition of toddlers with disabilities to preschool, reports annually to the governor and secretary of education on the status of early intervention programs, and advises other appropriate state agencies about the integration of services for infants and toddlers and their families. It is an honor to serve on this council for the benefit of Missouri families.

By implementing common-sense reforms to the First Steps program, lawmakers are allowing it to continue providing needed services to children with developmental disabilities without imposing undue burdens on taxpayers. Families can contact their county First Steps office for more information by calling toll free (866) 583-2392.

If you have comments or questions about this week's column or any other matter involving state government, please do not hesitate to contact me. You can reach my office by phone at (866) 271-2844.

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