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Democratic legislative leaders call for special session to restore working disabled program

JEFFERSON CITY – The Minority Floor Leaders of the Missouri Senate and House believe restoration of the Medical Assistance for Working Disabled program (MAWD) is vital, and they want it to occur this fall rather than waiting until 2007.

“We had a majority of both parties interested in restoring this program this year – Governor Blunt even called it a legislative priority – but somehow, nothing got done,” said Sen. Maida Coleman (D-St. Louis). “Rep. Jeff Harris and I are calling on senators and representatives of both parties to join with us and call ourselves into special session to address this important issue. We have sent letters of our intent to the majority leaders, and we have begun circulating the petitions.”

The Missouri Constitution, Article III, Section 20(b), allows the legislature to call itself into session by filing a petition signed by 75 percent of House and Senate members with the Secretary of State’s Office. The two floor leaders propose that the special session run concurrent with the annual veto session on Sept. 13-14. The special session would be limited solely to restoring the MAWD program, she said. Funding for the program is already in the state budget which begins July 1.

While the governor proudly signed into law Wednesday the voter photo ID law which has been widely criticized as stifling voter rights, Rep. Harris (D-Columbia) noted that the bill had not been mentioned by the governor as a priority last January, though the MAWD restoration had been.

“The governor had the opportunity to use the power of his office to get this legislation passed on the last day of session,” Rep. Harris said. “Instead, he left the Capitol early and was nowhere to be found when this bill ran into trouble. Had the governor shown leadership in May, there would have been no need for a special session in September. This vital program allows people with disabilities to live independent lives with dignity and must be restored.”

Sen. Coleman said the Medicaid cuts of 2005 were brutal, and they put previously working disabled people into a quandary – either quit their jobs and lose the self-esteem that comes from being self-supportive, or lose the essential health care services on which they depend. “Knocking willing workers into a state of dependence is morally reprehensible, and it is fiscally foolish,” she said.

The senator said that Democrats are tired of rampant partisanship in state government, and they see this as an opportunity for the legislature to work together and right the wrong done to the disabled community.

“Gov. Blunt doesn’t see the need to address this issue in a timely manner; we do, and I believe a majority of the legislature does as well,” she said. “We know what to do and how to do it, now all we have to do is *do* it.”