



Gibbons Capitol Report
June 8, 2006

Keeping Families Together

Last week I had the opportunity to participate in a panel discussion hosted by the Citizens for Missouri's Children organization. I was happy to share with them some of the positive steps we took this session for children, in particular the new Jessica's Law. I've worked with Beth Griffin and Citizens for Missouri's Children for several years on a variety of issues, including our work to address very difficult problems facing families with children with mental health needs. Our solution resulted in legislation that is making Missouri a national leader in providing mental health services for children.

A Constituent's Dilemma

I had a parent who came to me, asking me why she had to hand over custody of her child to the state in order to get her child mental health help. I didn't have an answer for her. No one did. Beth Griffin, executive director for Citizens for Missouri's Children worked with frustrated parents, like my constituent, to bring the problem to light. We joined forces and worked for two years to change the law so a child with only mental health needs will never be removed from their home again.

Changing the System

In 2004, we passed Senate Bill 1003 creating The Comprehensive Children's Mental Health System. Then in 2005, we established the Office of Comprehensive Child Mental Health within the Department of Mental Health. These names don't mean much, but the purpose of this system is to keep Missouri families together. Since they took effect, the state's children's mental health system, Children's Division and representatives from juvenile justice have developed criteria or protocols that are now used in all 45 circuit court systems in Missouri to divert children from having to go into state custody.

This system does two things: the first is to identify children who are currently in the state's custody only to receive mental health services and to return them to their families; the second is to identify children before they are turned over to the Children's Division by having Family Support Teams create individualized plans to help them while they remain at home.

Success Stories

As of last month, 216 children were assessed under the new diversion protocol. As a result, 198 children with mental health needs have been diverted from going into state custody and 102 of these children will remain in their family home and in their community while receiving the mental health services they need. The 96 other children diverted from entering the state's custody are receiving mental health services in residential or treatment family homes.

The new system has also worked to return children who were already in the state's custody. To date, at least 38 children have been identified as only needing mental health services and have been returned to the legal custody of their parents.

My goal as a lawmaker is to bring common-sense solutions to complex problems. The creation of the Comprehensive Children's Mental Health System is a great example of how that should work. From a handful of constituents' concerns, we were able to develop a program that has now helped more than 200 children and their families across our state. I am proud that parents, Citizens for Missouri's Children and I were able to make this happen. It has made Missouri a national leader in how to deliver mental health services while keeping families together.