



Gibbons Capitol Report
June 26, 2006

Protecting Our Most Vulnerable Citizens

Last week the *St. Louis Post-Dispatch* printed a series of articles that were alarming. Two reporters highlighted the shortcomings of mental health care in our state. First and foremost, we have a basic obligation to protect the most vulnerable people of our society.

A few weeks ago I shared a great success story with you. We started with a system that took kids away from their families and turned it into a national model on how children and families with mental health needs should be helped. We must do the same for the mental health system as a whole.

What They Found

The Post-Dispatch investigation showed that there have been 21 deaths linked to abuse and neglect between 2000 and 2005 at both privately-run and state-run homes. These centers are supposed to care for our most vulnerable citizens, and finding that there have been more than 2,000 confirmed cases of abuse and neglect in the past 5 years is quite disheartening. Even more disturbing, is that officials broke the law more than half the time by not calling law enforcement to investigate allegations of sexual assaults and serious injuries. This type of behavior must not be tolerated. The problems with our state's mental health system must be addressed.

Tackling the Problems

Last week, Gov. Blunt created a task force headed by Lt. Gov. Peter Kinder to oversee a study of the Department of Mental Health's problems. The task force includes the Department of Public Safety, and the Department of Health and Senior Services. The task force has already identified five short term action items to improve investigations of abuse, neglect and fatalities at state mental health facilities and independent living centers. These changes are just the beginning.

Reforming the System

I will follow the task force with great interest and look forward to reviewing their findings. I intend to use these findings to explore ways to improve the mental health system as we begin discussing legislative ideas for 2007. By building on the task force's findings, the Senate can make great strides in improving the mental health system in our state.

We can also draw on our history of successfully reforming our state's mental health system for children. These tools will allow us to reach the best solution and comprehensively reform our mental health system to protect our most vulnerable Missourians.