



Health care and Education are Top Priorities in 2007

JEFFERSON CITY — Lawmakers recently convened in Jefferson City to kick off the 2007 legislative session, and this year there will be a wide variety of issues for lawmakers to consider. Hundreds of bills are filed each year, and few of those are passed into law. However, there are several major issues that will be on the minds of all lawmakers. Health care and education will see much debate in the coming months as the Legislature works to make improvements in these areas for the people of Missouri.

Lawmakers are again working to lower costs and improve quality at Missouri health-care facilities. In 2007, the Legislature will continue efforts to expand health-care coverage while relieving Missouri's overburdened public health system. To achieve this, lawmakers are promoting consumer choice, wellness and preventive care, rather than expensive emergency care, as ways to lower health-care costs for consumers.

In addition to the cost of health care, preventing abuse and neglect at mental health facilities and providing improved safety at group homes will also be on the agenda. One measure already introduced in the Senate implements several recommendations of a task force formed to study problems at mental health facilities. In addition, the tragic fire at the Anderson Guest House near Joplin earlier this year raised awareness of the need for stricter safety standards at state-licensed group homes.

Education at all levels also will be a top issue. The governor's plan for selling assets of the Missouri Higher Education Loan Authority (MOHELA) to provide \$350 million for campus construction projects will see much debate, and other lawmakers are looking at entirely new ways to fund higher education.

Meanwhile, the issue of school choice for K-12 education in urban areas also will demand a lot of attention. Supporters of school choice want to allow students in underperforming districts to be able to qualify for tax credits to private schools. Opponents say the system would divert funds from public schools.

In addition to these wide-ranging issues, lawmakers are also expected to address legislation dealing with illegal immigrants, establishing a prescription drug-monitoring program and setting goals for the use of renewable fuels by regulated utilities, among other matters.

To follow these and other issues facing the Missouri Senate, visit www.senate.mo.gov. Visitors can track legislation as it passes through the General Assembly, learn more about their Senate district, or listen to streaming audio of legislative debate as it happens.

I look forward to a productive session this year, and I encourage all members of the 2nd District to let me know what you think about legislative matters.

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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