



---

## **A Blue Ribbon Start**

JEFFERSON CITY — Right now, this country faces an epidemic that strikes one out of every 150 children... more than AIDS, more than juvenile diabetes, and more than cancer... combined. This epidemic is called autism, and one of the worst things about it is, we don't know enough about it to even get a good handle on how to help those affected... the children and adults with autism, or their parents. But last week, the Blue Ribbon Panel on Autism, which I chair, met for the first time at the State Capitol to try to get its arms around the problem and what we can do to help.

This diverse group of 16 lawmakers, parents, physicians, and government officials spent the first meeting defining what the group will be exploring in the meetings in the weeks to come. First and foremost, we're trying to determine the state of autism in Missouri. As I had the members introduce themselves in that first meeting, I also asked them to identify their goals for what they would like the meetings to accomplish. Answers ranged from identifying gaps in government services to finding ways to help autistic adults secure private employment.

Next up, parents and medical professionals testified before our group so we could better understand the impact autism has on the family members. They told us of the need for comprehensive diagnoses and treatments no matter if the person affected is in urban or rural areas of the state. We heard heartbreaking and heartwarming tales of family members in the depths of disparity not being able to help their child who seemed trapped behind some kind of façade, to warm thoughts of the special something these children with autism brought to each and every family.

In the coming weeks and months, as my 16-member troupe crisscrosses the state, we'll hear more testimony — some of it from professionals in the field; some of it from more parents who just want to understand and help their children grow up as normally as possible. We'll be stopping in Cape Girardeau on July 20<sup>th</sup>, in Springfield on August 10<sup>th</sup>, August 31<sup>st</sup> in St. Louis, and a date in September or October in Kansas City. Exact times and locations are to be determined, so check back with my office at (866) 271-2844 to schedule a time to testify if you have anything you think we need to hear. When we're all done, the panel will put together a report and turn it in to Senate President Pro Tem Michael Gibbons so the full Senate can look at our findings and determine the steps we need to take as a state to best address the problem of autism in Missouri.

During our first meeting, one parent urged the panel members to make sure they do more than produce a report that will just collect dust somewhere on a shelf. I promise you this Blue Ribbon Panel on Autism will do more than just that, and hopefully, find a solution to one of the biggest crises facing our state today.

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.

###