



Bringing Common Sense to Lawsuit Reform

JEFFERSON CITY —One of the biggest crises facing our health care industry today is the threat of frivolous lawsuits with outrageous award amounts. They are threatening to cripple healthcare in this country, as well as the business community that has to deal with the rising costs of insurance premiums to cover these unwarranted costs. But a new study shows that, in Missouri, legislation we passed is making a difference to get this problem under control.

The Missouri Department of Insurance, Financial Institutions & Professional Registration's 2006 Medical Malpractice Report is showing the comprehensive lawsuit reforms I supported and helped pass in 2005 are making a difference. According to the report, newly reported claims declined by 61 percent from 2,822 claims in 2005 to 1,113 in 2006. That's the lowest ever recorded in the department's database. The number of closed claims rose from nearly 1,800 in 2005 to almost 2,300 in 2006, an increase of 27 percent. Finally, the amounts being awarded in tort cases have declined an average of 13.8 percent from \$246,775 in 2005 to \$212,658 in 2006 (you can view the entire report at www.insurance.mo.gov).

These are encouraging numbers on two fronts: First, with the stoppage of these frivolous lawsuits, doctors are coming back to Missouri. That means we'll obtain and keep the best medical professionals in this state, which translates into better healthcare access for all Missourians. Second, businesses, especially small businesses trying to offer their employees health insurance, will be able to better afford the lower premiums that have resulted from the downturn in claims and amounts. Once again, that will mean more hard-working Missourians will be able to get coverage for themselves and their families. And since there are more doctors, they'll have more places where they can go to get the care they need.

I'm proud we've been able to make the changes we needed to make to ensure our healthcare and insurance industries are viable in Missouri. There's still more work to do, and it will be an issue I'll look forward to tackling in the coming session. But for now, I'm just happy that we are eliminating the threat of people "winning the lottery by lawsuit" and that all Missourians will have access to health insurance they and their families need.

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.