



MISSOURI SENATE

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**A Column for the Week
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Lawmakers Debate Bills on Child Care and Access to Contraceptives, Education

JEFFERSON CITY — Lawmakers stayed busy in committees this week, working to send important legislation to the Senate floor for debate by the full body. My colleagues and I on the Senate Committee on Seniors, Families and Public Health were able to pass legislation I am co-sponsoring that expands eligibility for state-sponsored child care to lift working families to a better quality of life. Meanwhile, two measures in the Senate Judiciary and Civil and Criminal Jurisprudence Committee take opposing positions on access to contraceptives and safe-sex education, and I am working with fellow members to make the right decision for Missourians.

Sometimes working families need help to pay for important needs, services they cannot get by without. When government steps in to help families obtain those services, it should view assistance as a way to uplift these families. Unfortunately, this is not always the case, and families get stuck turning down job opportunities to continue receiving state subsidies. However, legislation I am co-sponsoring that made its way to the full Senate this week expands child-care eligibility to allow families to move ahead.

SB 260, spearheaded by Senators Chris Koster and Jolie Justus, is a bipartisan measure aimed at easing the strain on working families with children. Currently, parents with income levels above 108 percent of the poverty line are ineligible for child-care assistance. That means that a family of three earning more than \$18,216 a year must cover their own child-care costs.

This is the strictest standard in the nation and has led parents to decline promotions at their workplace because the additional earnings would disqualify them from child-care services. Clearly, we are sending the wrong message to families working to move up in life. The new legislation increases the income threshold to 130 percent of the poverty line. Additionally, parents with incomes of up to 185 percent of the poverty level also can qualify for benefits on a sliding-scale basis.

This legislation helps fix a backward system. Providing child-care assistance helps families find good jobs to pay the bills. But when working parents deny pay raises to continue receiving child-care assistance, the system is broken. SB 260 offers incentives to strengthen families and improve Missouri communities.

My colleagues and I on the Judiciary committee were not able to reach such a bipartisan consensus when it comes to preventing unwanted pregnancies and sexually transmitted diseases (STDs). A measure I am co-sponsoring works to ensure access to legally prescribed contraceptives. Another bill introduced this week would limit safe-sex education.

Senate Bill 72, which I am working with my colleagues to pass into law, requires pharmacists to dispense contraceptives that have been legally prescribed by a doctor. Pharmacists do not have the right to refuse filling prescriptions that prevent pregnancies or the spread of STDs. However, there have been instances when pharmacists have asserted a right to do so. Further, legislation has been filed allowing pharmacists to refuse filling contraceptive prescriptions if they have a moral objection.

The Legislature needs to make state law abundantly clear — Missourians have the right to fill legal prescriptions. Under SB 72, pharmacies must fill the prescription or provide a suitable alternative within a normal time frame. The legislation also contains language stating that pharmacies have a duty to ensure customers are not subjected to indignity, humiliation, breaches of confidentiality, or pressure not to request the prescription.

On the other side of the spectrum, committee members heard testimony on a bill placing firm restrictions on safe-sex education in public schools. SB 432 would revise state law requiring students to be provided the latest medically factual information regarding the prevention of pregnancy and sexually transmitted diseases. Under the legislation, sex education would instead focus on abstinence from sexual activity and teach children that sex outside marriage is abnormal and can have profoundly harmful effects. This focus on abstinence is myopic and impractical. Lawmakers should be working to offer more opportunities for Missourians, not stifling education, and I will continue my efforts to find a positive resolution to this debate.

These issues are important for Missourians, and I will work hard to see that the Legislature makes the right decisions on child care and access to legal contraceptives and quality education.

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