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Protecting Kids from Internet Predators

One of the primary duties of government is to provide for the safety of its citizens. With the arrival of the Internet this has become more of a challenge as criminals have found that they no longer need to lurk in dark alleys but can stalk their victims from any available computer terminal. This past session the legislature passed a bill to fund a very vital state initiative – the Cyber Crime Grant Program. This is a \$1.25 million program that gives police and sheriff departments the money and tools to go after Internet predators who stalk cyber space waiting to pounce on unsuspecting children.

Another important measure passed by the legislature during the recently completed session was legislation to provide funding for Missouri's basic legal services fund. Senate Bill 163 renews for another five years this fund which was scheduled to terminate at the end of this year. This bill allows the state legal services programs to represent eligible, low-income citizens with equal access to the civil justice system. It puts a high priority on children and families, domestic violence cases, the elderly, and qualifications for Social Security benefits. The program also helps people get their lawful state benefits but keeps them from using state funds to sue the state or its officials.

The money for the basic legal services fund ensures that everyone, no matter their financial means, has access to our courts. Without this guarantee, our system of fair and equal justice for everyone would be meaningless, and only those with money could afford to bring their case before the courts.

We also have to recognize those who serve as public defenders – a job that brings them an overworked caseload for relatively little pay. They perform their duties with the skills and knowledge that far outweigh the compensation they receive, and my hat is off to them for performing this vital civic duty.

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 e-mail at matt_bartle@senate.mo.gov or by phone at (888) 711-9278. My web address is <http://www.senate.mo.gov/bartle>.