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District 8 – Capitol Building, Room 319 Jefferson City, MO 65101

**Column for Week of:
September 3, 2007**

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Missouri's Health Department – Serving Seniors and Protecting the Homeland

This week, we resume our series discussing the various state agencies that impact the lives of all Missouri citizens. Today, I want to talk about the work of an agency that we often take for granted — the Missouri's Department of Health and Senior Services (DHSS). Some important missions I'd like to highlight here are the agency's service to our senior citizens and the department's efforts to fight terrorism and infectious diseases.

As the name implies, much of the focus for the Department of Health and Senior Services is on the services provided for our seniors. Programs such as the Elder Abuse and Neglect Hotline (1-800-392-0210), which responds to reports of alleged abuse, neglect or financial exploitation of persons 60 years of age or older and other eligible adults between age 18 and 59, is just one example of those services. DHSS's Division of Senior and Disability Services helps older Missourians remain in their own homes by providing professional staff to help in personal care, chores, nursing, respite care, adult day health care, counseling, and consumer-directed services right in the individuals' homes. For those who cannot remain in their homes, DHSS has the Long-Term Care Ombudsman Program that provides important information on nursing homes and reinforces the federally- and state-protected rights of nursing home residents.

Another valuable service is the CLAIM (Community Leaders Assisting the Insured of Missouri) Program that has volunteers available to explain the options and benefits of the federal Medicare system. Similarly, the Missouri Seniors Organized to Restore Trust (SORT) Program is comprised of retired professionals who volunteer to assist beneficiaries with concerns about Medicare and Medicaid (soon to be MO HealthNet) error, fraud, and abuses as well as their coverage and the process of filing benefit claims.

Not only does DHSS serve Missouri's seniors but it forms an important part of our nation's efforts to combat the spread of infectious diseases as well as threats to the public health from terrorist organizations. The people of the department, along with law enforcement agencies, form the first line of defense against a bioterrorism attack. Since the attacks of six years ago there have been new emergency and anti-terrorism procedures put in place to respond more quickly in the unlikely event that there is a terrorist attack here in Missouri. We are better prepared in all aspects — including planning, surveillance, epidemiology, laboratory capacity and communications with the public.

Outside of the terrorist threat, there is also the very real threat of communicable diseases having a great impact on the state. Pandemic disease, such as the Bird Flu, could have devastating consequences for not only the large domestic fowl industry in Missouri, but also the humans who come in contact with infected birds. A multi-component surveillance system that watches and analyzes data that includes demographic, geographic, and disease/condition-specific information is up and running. This will ensure that timely and accurate reporting is part of controlling any disease that might strike. This increased vigilance, along with the 1.5 million tests the State Health Labs perform each year, helps protect all Missourians from threats to the public health, whether introduced naturally or through some despicable terrorist act.

There are many more functions your Missouri Department of Health and Senior Services provides to keep you safe and healthy. You can check them out on the web at <http://www.dhss.mo.gov/> or give them a call at (573) 751-6400.

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>.