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Missouri's Department of Social Services: Touching Lives in So Many Ways

This week I'd like to finish up this series of columns featuring some of the state's many different departments. There are many departments that we didn't mention in this series, and all of them serve very important functions. However, I hope this series has been informative.

In this column, I'd like to talk about a state agency that touches one in five Missourians each year through the programs and services it provides. Those services range from child welfare to health care coverage for the low-income and disabled. It's Missouri's largest state department with a \$6-billion annual budget. It is the Missouri Department of Social Services (DSS).

There are seven different divisions within Social Services. The Children's Division is responsible for handling child abuse and neglect cases as well as foster care, adoption, and early childhood programs. The professionals who work in this division have a very difficult job. They are charged with protecting the kids of this state from dangerous situations and, when necessary, helping abused children start their lives over in the care of foster parents.

In addition to taking care of kids, DSS (through its Family Support Division) determines eligibility for all the programs offered by the department. This division also handles food stamps, the Low Income Energy Heating Assistance Program (LIHEAP), Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF, formerly welfare), and the Blind Pension. In addition, the division is in charge of the Child Support Program. Family Support workers determine paternity, carry out court orders, and receive and distribute payments.

This past session, we as lawmakers took the initiative and came up with a new, pro-active healthcare plan to replace the faltering Medicaid program. The new Mo HealthNet program will serve approximately 800,000 low-income Missourians and stresses personal responsibility for participants. Social Services has taken on that responsibility with its new MO HealthNet Division.

The new division also runs the MoRx program, which offers seniors a supplemental wrap around for the Medicare Part D Prescription Plan. MoRx helps fill the "donut hole" that some seniors found themselves in regarding some prescription drug costs. It pays 50 percent of out-of-pocket costs that are not currently paid by the Medicare Part D program, excluding the monthly premium; 50 percent of a senior's deductible; 50 percent of the gap in coverage in Medicare Part D (in 2007, the "gap" begins after drug costs reach \$2,400 and ends when costs exceed \$5,451 in a year; in 2008, it's

between \$2,510 and \$5,726); and 50 percent of a senior's co-pay before the gap in coverage in Medicare Part D.

As you can see, the more than 8,200 employees of your Department of Social Services have a lot on their plates, whether it is making sure Missouri's youngest children get the support they deserve or our most elderly citizens have the medications they need.

If you have comments or questions about any of these services or about this week's column, 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>.