



MISSOURI SENATE

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**A Column for the Week
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Offense and Defense

JEFFERSON CITY — There are a couple of guarantees the government is obligated to give you: one, protection from those who would do you and your family harm; and two, the right to a free public counsel if you find yourself on the other end of the law. I'm proud to say the Missouri Legislature acted on two measures to strengthen those guarantees this year.

First, we funded the Cyber Crime Grant Program. This \$1.25 million program gets resources to law officers who try to shut down those predators who troll the Internet, looking to pounce on unsuspecting minors and exploit them for some perverse purpose. Too many times, these sick individuals are successful and end up molesting and doing unspeakable acts against those who are too young to defend themselves. To make matters worse, with the Internet, those crimes are horribly documented and made available in the form of child pornography that end up going around the world at the speed of light.

The Cyber Crime Grant Program will give our police officers, sheriffs' departments, and Highway Patrol the resources to set up stings to catch these bad guys in the act... before they can do more harm. In my district, the Southeast Missouri Cyber Crimes Task Force based out of Poplar Bluff will receive more than \$48,000 to set up operations where a law enforcement officer can pose as a 13-year-old girl and catch the 50-year-old predator before he can harm another child. Meanwhile, the State Department of Social Services gets nearly \$82,000 for its Operation Predator program and the Highway Patrol receives \$30,000 for its Computer Forensic Unit. It's not a lot, but it's a good start.

The other important guarantee I mentioned is the right to a free, public counsel if you are accused of some crime. It's so important, the founding fathers of this country put it in the Bill of Rights. To that end, my Senate Bill 163 has renewed Missouri's obligation to that right. The state's Basic Legal Services Fund ensures eligible, low-income citizens will have equal access to the civil justice system. It also gives a high priority to children and families, domestic violence

cases, the elderly, and Social Security benefits. It also helps people get their lawful state benefits but keeps them from using state funds to sue the state or its officials.

This legislation guarantees that everyone, no matter their financial means, has access to our courts. Without it, a system of fair and equal justice for all would be just a slogan and only the rich would enjoy this right.

Those are just two of the important programs your state provides to ensure that we catch those who would do you harm and make sure they are the ones who should be punished. These are your rights and expectations as citizens, and it is my duty and obligation as your public servant.

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Senator Robert Mayer represents the people of Wayne, Ripley, Butler, Stoddard, New Madrid, Pemiscot and Dunklin counties in the Missouri Senate.