



Empowering Families Living with Autism

JEFFERSON CITY — Today, almost everyone can put a face to the name of autism. Thanks to the efforts of many, Missouri is taking aggressive steps to enhance autism healthcare services and empower families to improve the quality of life for Missourians of all ages living with autism. Recently, the Senate approved my proposal (Senate Bill 768) to create the Missouri Commission on Autism Spectrum Disorders, one of the recommendations of the statewide Blue Ribbon Panel on Autism formed last year by Senate leader Mike Gibbons, R-Kirkwood, of which I chaired. The bill is in the House for similar consideration.

Forming a statewide commission to make recommendations about all levels of Autism Spectrum Disorders (ASD) is really essential to developing a comprehensive, coordinated system of healthcare, education and services for people living with ASD. The need is obviously great. According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, autism affects one in 150 children — more than AIDS, juvenile diabetes and pediatric cancer combined.

Missouri is poised to become a leader in addressing the growing concerns of autism and has a strong foundation to build on. Missouri first began services for individuals with ASD in the early 1970s. And then in 1991, the first regional Parent Advisory Council was formed and eventually grew into the Missouri Autism Project, which now encompasses every county in the state. The Judevine Center for Autism, with four offices across the state, has also served as a longtime leader in providing a network of resources to help families and individuals living with autism. The newly established Missouri ASD commission will provide another much-needed resource for families who deserve the best resources available for diagnosis, treatment and support services.

Another autism-related proposal (my Senate Bill 1127) is also under consideration (another recommended by the Blue Ribbon Panel) and complements the recently approved bill. The measure would expand the Office of Autism Services within the Missouri Department of Mental Health to provide more programs and services for families dealing with ASD. The office would also serve as an entry point to help direct families to diagnosis and care services and make it easier for them to navigate the system and quickly find the resources they need. Under that proposal, approximately 375 children currently on a waiting list for services would receive immediate care. A vote by the Senate's Seniors, Families and Public Health Committee would send the bill to the floor for debate.

In another matter, the Senate gave first-round approval last week to my Senate Bill 846 that will allow more high schools, community colleges and technical schools to participate in the state's A+ Schools scholarship program. The program allows qualifying high school students who graduate from designated A+ high schools to receive state scholarships to community colleges or career or technical schools in Missouri. The measure expands the program to include eligible provisionally accredited and unaccredited high schools and would allow both qualifying public and private two-year vocational and technical schools to receive the A+ Schools designation.

In addition, the bill extends funding to the Kids' Chance Scholarship Program — a not-for-profit fund that provides scholarships to children of Missouri workers disabled or killed during work-related accidents covered by workers' compensation benefits. Under the proposal, the Missouri Division of Workers' Compensation will continue to direct \$50,000 a year to the scholarship fund through 2018. Interest earned from the scholarship fund would be directed to the Missouri Department of Higher Education to award scholarships to college, university or accredited vocational institutions.

The changes to the scholarship program are designed to better prepare students for college and for their lives after graduation. We all know that an educated and skilled workforce contributes to the quality of life and is necessary to sustain a strong economy.

With just five weeks left in the legislative season, it's a busy time at the Capitol and I am working diligently to forward bills that will positively impact the lives of residents in St. Charles and Lincoln counties and other areas across the state.

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 phone at (866) 271-2844.

###