



Column For Week of: **April 21, 2008**

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Health Care Bill Advances

This week the Senate gave first round approval to a major health care bill that does not go as far as some of us would like it to, but it does make some improvements. A lot of Senate Democrats have been trying to get the health care cuts of 2005 restored. Those cuts eliminated health care coverage for about 100,000 Missourians and eliminated health care services for thousands more. We tried to amend Senate Bill 1283 to reverse those cuts but were rejected each time.

However, I and others did manage to add a few amendments to the bill to improve it.

First of all, we were successful in expanding the MO HealthNet Committee, which oversees the state's new healthcare delivery system. When the members were named last fall, it was brought to our attention that rural Missouri was being under-represented. Right now there are four doctors on the committee. One amendment requires one of the two primary care physicians to be from rural Missouri and one of the two physicians to be from rural Missouri. The amendment also adds a representative from a rural health clinic, a not-for-profit health network serving rural counties, a mental health professional, a nurse, an optometrist, and patient advocates representing children, the disabled and the elderly. I think we should have a broad spectrum of representation, especially from the healthcare field, because there is no one better to provide us with information about how to manage our health than doctors.

The amendment expands the oversight committee to 29 members to provide a more rounded opinion while protecting the interests of rural Missouri.

We also added an amendment which regulates insurance agents selling Medicare Advantage plans. This bill creates a two-day waiting period before an insurance agent can complete the sale, it requires a statement that Medicare Advantage plans are not Medigap supplement plans, and it requires a statement advising the applicant to confirm with his or her health care providers whether or not the provider has contracted with the Medicare Advantage plan to provide medical services. It doesn't do any good to have health insurance if you cannot get healthcare services.

I also offered an amendment, which was adopted, that requires insurance companies to provide the same coverage for "telehealth" services as they do for doctor consultations or office visits. Telehealth utilizes today's technology to bring medical services to underserved areas, typically rural areas that lack hospitals or clinics. Telehealth delivery can be as simple as two health professionals discussing a case over the telephone, or as sophisticated as using videoconferencing between providers at health care facilities in two counties or two states. It allows a doctor to confer with a patient through streaming video over the Internet without requiring the patient to travel great distances for medical services.

Finally, SB 1283 provides wellness and prevention services for state employees. We successfully offered an amendment that says state employees don't have to pay out of pocket for these preventive services. We're trying to encourage healthy lifestyles, but given the rising cost of healthcare, folks are not going to shell out even more money for optional programs.

One of my goals is to help small employers provide health care coverage for their employees. Many small employers can't afford to provide health insurance for their employees. We have tried to include a plan allowing small business owners to partner with the state to provide health care for their workers,

with the business owner, the employee and the state each picking up one-third of the costs, but the effort has not passed yet. I will keep trying to include this idea in future legislation.

Contact Me

As always, I appreciate hearing your comments, opinions and concerns. Please feel free to call me in Jefferson City at (573) 751-2108. You can also write to me at Frank Barnitz, Missouri Senate, State Capitol, Jefferson City, MO 65101.

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