



February 14, 2008

Public Defender Funding Bill Advances in Committee

The first month of session was largely spent in committee hearings, where Senators determine the legislation that will eventually be debated on the Senate floor. So far, nine of my bills have advanced in the legislative process and were heard in their respective committees.

This week my Senate Bill 767 was heard in the Senate Judiciary Committee. The bill is designed to address a crisis in Missouri's system of justice. Missouri's public defenders are facing unmanageable caseloads. This often leads to convictions being overturned due to inadequate assistance of counsel. Additionally, crime victims and hard-working prosecutors are facing unacceptable delays in bringing criminals to justice because the understaffed public defender system is so backlogged. Statewide public defenders' offices handle approximately 90,000 cases per year. In 2006, the average Missouri public defender handled about 300 cases, while the American Bar association recommends each attorney take on only around 225 cases. As an attorney, I understand the importance of spending time with my clients. Public defenders, however, spend an average of just 12 minutes with each client on probation violation cases before heading to court. By distributing additional funds to the Public Defenders' System for the hiring of contract attorneys, public defenders will be able to devote more of their time and attention to complex cases while contract counsel will handle less serious cases.

Missourians expect criminals to be punished and to pay for their crimes. By streamlining the workload of Missouri's public defenders, we enable the legal system to serve justice more efficiently and fairly. All of us dearly value the rights guaranteed to us by our state and federal constitutions. These rights are simply empty words if we do not have a functional judicial system to protect us when our rights are challenged. I filed SB 767 to protect these rights and help preserve the process that is essential to safeguarding those rights.

When this bill is passed by the Judiciary committee, it will move to the Senate Calendar for debate on the Senate floor later in the session. As always, I welcome your ideas, questions and concerns about Missouri government. You may contact me at the Capitol as follows: (573) 751.2234, jack.goodman@senate.mo.gov or by writing to Senator Jack Goodman, Missouri State Capitol, Room 331A, Jefferson City, MO 65101.

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