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Senate Gives Final Approval to Sen. Jeff Smith's Bill to Improve Criminal Non-Support Laws *SB 140 Provides More Options for Parents to Meet Child Support Obligation*

JEFFERSON CITY — The Missouri Senate today passed a bill sponsored by Senator Jeff Smith, D-St. Louis, that would provide Missouri parents struggling to pay child support with more options to begin or resume financial support of their children, while saving the state millions of dollars.

Senator Smith's [Senate Bill 140](#) would allow circuit courts that deal with criminal nonsupport cases to create special courts to assign nonviolent defendants to court-supervised educational, vocational or employment training, substance abuse treatment or work programs. Under the proposal, defendants could have criminal penalties dismissed, reduced or modified if they successfully complete court-ordered treatment or training programs and begin or resume child support payments.

“We hope to provide non-custodial parents who are struggling with an opportunity to help themselves so that they can deepen their parental commitment and financial support of their children,” Sen. Smith said. “If we just lock them up, no one wins — they can’t pay child support from jail, and when they reenter society, their record makes it difficult to find work. But if we can help them get back on their feet through vocational training and job placement services, they’re much more likely to be able to meet their obligations.”

The bill would facilitate the creation of special child support dockets known as “Fathering Courts,” an alternative to prosecution and incarceration for men with child support debt who meet criteria established by the Department of Corrections. The program can significantly increase the number of fathers who support their children and help men overcome obstacles to payment of child support.

“Nearly 500 men have participated in Jackson County’s Fathering Court since 1998, and the graduates have made nearly \$3 million in child support payments,” Sen. Smith said. “That’s \$3 million that the state did

not have to pay in the form of public assistance. Clearly, this innovative program is working and should be expanded.”

While the bill allows the courts flexibility to place nonviolent defendants under court supervision, defendants placed on probation who fail to resume support payments could have probation revoked and receive an appropriate sentence.

“This bill was inspired by great work of the Fathers’ Support Center in St. Louis, which has helped thousands of men get their lives back on track,” said Sen. Smith. “This would bring relief to an overburdened criminal justice system while providing alternatives to help parents — and since court-supervised probation is only one-seventh the cost of a minimum-security prison cell, this will save the state \$1.5 million annually. It’s a great example of efficient government in lean budget times.”

The bill now moves to the House for similar consideration.

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