



## Family Values, Revisited

April 30, 2009

While the Missouri House had a tough time trying to decide how to spend federal stimulus money, I'm pleased to say the House passed two of my bills with overwhelming support.

One of them is [Senate Bill 140](#), which creates a statewide infrastructure for “parenting courts.” (I want to thank the House bill handler Rep. Tim Jones and House Majority Leader Rep. Steve Tilley for helping shepherd these bills through the House.)

Currently, fathers who fall behind on child support payments can face jail time and felony charges on their record. But common sense tells us that you can't pay child support from jail, and it's not easy—especially in today's job market—for ex-felons to find decent-paying work. I knew there had to be a better way.

With the help of the [Fathers' Support Center](#) of St. Louis and prosecutors, judges, and public defenders across the state, we crafted an alternative sentencing plan to divert these men from prison to programs that help them get job training, find employment, improve their parenting skills, and create better futures for themselves and their children. Nearly 500 men have participated in a similar pilot program in Kansas City since 1998, and the graduates have made nearly \$3 million in child support payments. Expanding this program throughout the state just makes sense.

We have high hopes for these courts. It is estimated that SB 140 will save the state \$1.5 million annually because of reduced incarceration costs. It will also alleviate the estimated 7-year backlog on child support court cases in Missouri. This backlog has caused many men who have been laid off to suffer because they cannot get their child support obligations adjusted in a timely manner. These new courts will allow men who lose their jobs to fairly adjust their monthly obligations so they don't fall behind on

payments and end up in a modern-day debtor's prison.

By signing SB 140 into law, we won't be letting "deadbeat dads" off the hook. We'll be helping fathers reconnect with their children, giving them the tools to be better parents and more productive citizens, and breaking the cycle of jail and unemployment that severs the relationship between fathers and children. And in these tight budget times, we'll be saving the state millions over the next few years—a win for fathers, for children, and for all Missouri taxpayers.

I'd love your feedback on this—just reply to this email. Also, the St. Louis Beacon published [an op-ed piece](#) in which I outline my views on education reform, another subject on which I value your thoughts.

If you see something in the news that we're working on and you want to weigh in, just email me @ [jeff.smith@senate.mo.gov](mailto:jeff.smith@senate.mo.gov).

Best,  
JRS

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