



Senator Matt Bartle – Serving Jackson County

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## Common-Sense Updates to Missouri's Child Support System

Last week the [Senate Judiciary Committee](#) held a hearing on a bill ([Senate Bill 140](#)) that proposes some common-sense updates to Missouri's child support laws. A considerable group of fathers traveled to the Capitol to tell their stories and voice their support for the legislation.

This hearing was quite eye-opening and touched on a powerful undercurrent in the struggle between rewarding good fathers who have fallen on hard times, and holding "deadbeat" dads responsible for neglecting their child support payments.

Many of the fathers spoke about how they found themselves in a situation where they had lost their jobs, but an inflexible system didn't allow them to get back on their feet. Ultimately, they were convicted of felonies for failure to pay child support fees that remained set at the same level, regardless of a job loss. Now, saddled with a felony conviction, they found it that much more difficult to find employment that allowed them to get back on track with their child support payments and be more actively involved in the lives of their children.

However, the hearing also brought to light one of the most fundamental issues facing our state—the breakdown of the two-parent home. One insightful witness testified that current social policies—established decades ago—now make a father financially "unnecessary" in the family structure. Social programs funded by tax dollars provide far more material things—housing, health care and food stamps, to name a few—for a child than a hard-working father making \$10 an hour ever could. We have created a strong financial incentive for a father to leave the home—or at least not to marry the mother of his children. And without the commitment of marriage, the family more easily dissolves.

Statistics show that more than half of the children in our state are born into single-parent families. In some communities, this number is closer to 70 percent. While my hat goes off to single parents struggling to raise their children, the ideal situation for every child is to have contact with a loving mother and father.

The bill itself sets up a pathway to help fathers—who really are making an effort to keep up with their child support obligations—to go through special court procedures that would let them enroll in intensive fatherhood training, including substance abuse treatment and job training, and even an educational program that would help them work toward a GED. In many cases, this approach makes more sense than throwing someone who has lost a job and cannot keep up with child support payments in jail, where he earns virtually nothing and is physically separated from his kids. It is critical to the future stability of our society that this trend of absentee fathers be reversed. The state of Missouri cannot replace the two-parent home.

Let me be clear. I'm not talking about being soft on “deadbeat” dads. But unless we can do more than make felons out of otherwise honest men, who are sincerely trying to meet their child support obligations, but have fallen on hard economic times, we have done ourselves a great disservice. We will have practically guaranteed yet another generation raised without the influence of fathers, who will then propagate future generations reliant on the taxpayers to financially help raise their children.

If you have any 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 e-mail at [matt\\_bartle@senate.mo.gov](mailto:matt_bartle@senate.mo.gov) or by phone at (888) 711-9278. My web address is <http://www.senate.mo.gov/bartle>.

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