



MISSOURI SENATE

JEFFERSON CITY

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**A Weekly Column for the
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Health Care in Rural Missouri

JEFFERSON CITY – If you follow the news, you may have heard about a dust-up this week between the Governor and Lt. Governor about funding for the Caring for Missourians program. Since January, the Governor has been working with the state’s universities to encourage students to pursue careers in health care to meet a growing need for doctors, nurses, dentists and other health care professionals – the Caring for Missourians proposal. The budget passed by lawmakers in May distributes more than \$33-million in federal stimulus dollars to our public universities and colleges for “any one-time purpose.” The Governor’s office says our public universities have agreed to use that money to implement Caring for Missourians, and a number of university officials have publicly pledged to do just that. I think this program is critical for rural Missouri, which suffers from a lack of access to affordable medical care.

According to the Missouri Department of Health and Senior Services, 40% of rural counties in Missouri do not have a hospital. The lack of hospitals means a lack of certain services such as emergency room care and specialty care. It also means folks must travel great distances to get the care they need. Since a large proportion of our rural population is elderly or in poverty and might not have access to transportation, too many of our citizens are not getting the basic health care services they need to live a full and productive life.

State health officials estimate that 28% of Missourians lack access to adequate health care, and that was in 2007, before the economic collapse caused many to lose their jobs and their employer-sponsored health coverage. Most small business owners simply cannot afford to provide health coverage for their employees because of the rising costs of health care.

The projected increase in the rural elderly population adds another dimension to our health care crisis. More and more of our older citizens are making ends meet on one income and are skipping trips to the doctor or not filling needed prescriptions. DHSS officials say the senior population in Missouri is expected to rise to 15% by next year and climb to 18% by 2020, which is higher than the national average. Again, the lack of transportation prevents too many older Missourians from receiving the care they need.

Our rural communities are rich in resources, traditions and family values. I can think of no better place to raise a family, but the lack of health care in rural areas remains a challenge. That's why I support the Governor's effort to increase the number of students entering the health care fields at our public colleges and universities. Some of these graduates will choose to practice in underserved areas of our state – typically rural areas and our urban cores.

Right now, President Obama and Congress are trying to develop some type of health care plan that offers coverage to all Americans, and this plan might address some of the issues we face in rural Missouri. Until then, however, we should do everything in our power to expand access to timely, affordable health care for our citizens, and I think Caring for Missourians is a step in the right direction.

If you have any questions or comments about this or any other issue, give my Capitol office a call at (573) 751-7852, send me an email at wes.shoemyer@senate.mo.gov, or drop a line to Room 434, State Capitol, 201 West Capitol Ave., Jefferson City, MO 65101.