

June 2, 2009

Understanding “Caring for Missourians”

Recently, Governor Nixon has been promoting the “Caring for Missourians” initiative that he asked the General Assembly to approve this past session. The program diverts \$40 million over 26 higher education institutions to address the ever thinning health-care professional shortage throughout the state, but places no specific requirement to Universities that the funds be used for “Caring for Missourians”. It is the sole discretion of our Universities and Colleges on how to use these one-time funds.

Funding for “Caring for Missourians” has been appropriated through Fiscal Year 2010 Federal one-time stabilization funds. Southeast Missouri residents will benefit by Southeast Missouri State University receiving \$1,66,806, Three Rivers Community College receiving \$363,924, and Mineral Area Community College receiving \$338,100. Governor Nixon hopes of the additional money to eventually train and graduate more than 900 additional Missouri students in the field of health-care over the next five years; a very worthy priority.

It is no secret that our state is in dire need of more health professionals. According to the Nixon Administration, Missouri hospitals are facing a shortage of more than 7% for Registered Nurses, 6% shortage of pharmacists, 8% for both physical and occupational therapists, and a 7% shortage of medical laboratory technicians. The “Caring for Missourians” program stands to not only train and educate medical professionals to meet the drastically high demand for health-care; it also stands to bolster our struggling economy.

The logistics of the initiative will be to hold each individual college or university responsible for spending the increased appropriation on developing a specific plan to maximize the benefit of those funds for expanding healthcare training programs. Several institutions have already suggested that they will implement the money by using various methods such as increasing the total number of students entering specific healthcare programs, boosting online enrollment, offering accelerated undergraduate classes, and expanding graduate degree programs. Others have announced they will go with more of a capital improvement approach to addressing the healthcare worker deficiency by renovating classroom buildings, providing additional laboratory space, and upgrading to more cutting-edge clinical facilities and equipment. Either way, our Missouri economy should be stimulated with the creation of new faculty and staff positions at the higher education institutions, as well as fulfilling the high-paying, high demand jobs in a variety of health care fields.

“Caring for Missourians” is clearly a commendable program. However, I am concerned with a few issues. The first being the potential lack of oversight and eligibility requirements. As of now, there are no measures to ensure that only Missouri residents will be selected to fill the increased educational slots. Missouri taxpayer dollars could very well be paying to help students from all around the country or world to have

increased access to education and training. The second issue of concern I have is that the program offers no safeguard from students leaving our state once they have obtained their education via “Caring for Missourians”. It does Missouri no good to use taxpayer dollars to educate individuals, only to have them go work in Kansas or Illinois immediately upon graduation. Lastly, I am concerned with sustainable funding for the program. It is the General Assembly’s position that the funding for “Caring for Missouri” comes from Federal one-time funds and is not supposed to be recurrent in nature.

Overall, I believe that the program is more than worthy of the one-time Federal stimulation dollars spent. The money will go a long way in not only meeting our high demand for health professionals, but will also move our economy forward. I just sincerely hope that the colleges and universities will incorporate internal rules and regulations to address my concerns.

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