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Protecting our Children

During the 2009 legislative session, the General Assembly truly agreed and finally passed 162 bills. According to Missouri's constitution, the governor had until July 14 to sign or veto bills this year, or the legislation would become law without his signature. Over the next several weeks, I will discuss some of these new laws. Several of the bills recently signed by Governor Nixon work to make sure that our judicial system provides for the rights and needs of children in our state.

Grandparents as Foster Parents



It is my deepest hope that no child in our state has to face a dangerous situation at home, but there are times when children have to be removed from their homes because they are unsafe.

[House Bill 154](#) requires the state to make diligent efforts to locate the grandparents of a child needing emergency

placement. This makes sure that when a child is put into protective custody, officials work hard to contact their grandparents. The bill also specifies that the grandparents be given first consideration for foster child placement so that these children feel they are in safe and familiar

surroundings after what is often an earth-shattering experience.

Children's Rights in the Courtroom

[House Bill 863](#) is a bill to protect children testifying in Missouri courtrooms. The senator who handled the bill told the story of Peyton on the Senate floor, a four year old little girl who was molested by her school bus driver. Peyton had to undergo multiple dispositions and interviews before the trial, which were long, uncomfortable, lonely, confusing, and downright terrifying. During the trial, she was the only witness, although she was not the only victim. This brave little girl is one of many children who have the strength to stand up against their accused.

A solution to this disturbing situation is provided by HB 863. The bill requires the court to make sure children are spoken to in an age appropriate way, allows the court to limit the duration and time of interviews, and allows children to have a comfort item while testifying. The bill also allows children to have a support person close by while they are testifying and prevents intimidation or harassment of the child. The court can also make adjustments for the comfort of the child including changing the courtroom layout, conducting the proceedings outside of a courtroom, or relaxing the formalities of the proceedings. The goal of this bill is to make sure children testifying are not victimized twice.



An Unthinkable Crime

To forcibly rape a child is one of the most reprehensible crimes imaginable. It is a crime that causes irreparable damage to the young, innocent victim, and those who are convicted of this crime deserve the most serious punishment we can administer for destroying the innocence of a child. [Senate Bill 36](#) allows criminals convicted of violently raping or sodomizing children 11 years of age or younger to be sentenced to prison with no possibility of probation or parole — ever! This truth in life sentence ensures that the offender will never again be able to harm a

child.

These new laws to focus on helping to make sure Missouri's children are protected by our judicial system will go into effect on August 28, 2009.

Contact Me

As always, I appreciate hearing your comments, opinions, and concerns. Please feel free to contact me in Jefferson City at (573) 751-2459. You may write to me at Jason Crowell; Missouri Senate; State Capitol; Jefferson City, MO 65101, or email me at: jcrowell@senate.mo.gov or visit me on the web at <http://www.senate.mo.gov/crowell>.

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