



*Nothing is politically right
that is morally wrong.*

MISSOURI SENATE
JEFFERSON CITY

*Free and fair discussion
is the firmest friend of truth.*

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**Legislation Saving Reformed First Steps Program and
Building Children's Mental Health Services Signed Into Law**

JEFFERSON CITY – Reforms saving a program that provides more than 8,000 developmentally disabled Missouri infants and toddlers with early intervention services and the establishment of a new office to address mental health needs of Missouri children were signed into law today thanks to legislation sponsored by Senate President Pro Tem Michael R. Gibbons, R-Kirkwood. Senate Bill 500 protects and improves the state's First Steps program while Senate Bill 501 creates an "Office of Comprehensive Child Mental Health" within the Missouri Department of Mental Health to implement a mental health service system plan for children.

“Both these bills protect our children by establishing services or making current services better for the children who benefit from it, all while making it more cost effective for the taxpayers,” Gibbons said. “The savings generated from the First Steps reforms will help ensure this valuable children's program is not on the chopping block year after year.”

SB 500 shifts oversight of care services to regional centers that would be created under the bill. Other aspects, including billing of providers, would remain centralized under the direction of the Department of Elementary and Secondary Education.

Another reform aspect is the introduction of a participation fee based on a family's income and size. Families that qualify for Medicaid would not be subject to the fee while families that make more than 200 percent of the federal poverty level, or \$38,700 for a family of four, would pay a fee starting at \$5 based on a sliding scale. Families experiencing economic hardships defined by new program guidelines would be exempt from paying the participation fee as well.

“We heard from several therapists that a minimal participation fee would encourage a better partnership between care providers and the families seeking services for their children,” Gibbons said.

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“And by engaging sources of payment outside of the state program, including requiring insurance companies to cover these early services, we will give parents more options and help more children with less cost to the state.”

The bill mandates private health insurance companies to provide coverage of early intervention services for children medically diagnosed with delayed development. The measure calls for coverage up to \$3,000 a year per child, with a total of \$9,000 over three years. Any co-payments required by private health insurance providers as well as any costs above the \$3,000 insurance allotment per child per year would be paid for by the program.

SB 501 establishes the “Office of Comprehensive Child Mental Health” within the Department of Mental Health to provide oversight, support, training, and coordination with other teams in the implementation of a children’s mental health service system plan. The office builds on the creation of the Comprehensive Children’s Mental Health System created by the passage of SB 1003, also sponsored by Gibbons, in 2004. Since it took effect last August, protocols have been developed by the state’s children’s mental health system, Children’s Division and representatives from juvenile justice and have been fully implemented in all 45 circuit court systems in Missouri to divert children from having to go into state custody. As a result, 74 children with serious mental health needs have been diverted from going into state custody and 51 of these children will remain in their family home and in their community while receiving the mental health services they need. In addition, 32 children have been returned from state custody to the legal custody of their parents. Currently, the system is working to identify children before they are turned over to the Children’s Division by having Family Support Teams create individualized plans to help them.

“By establishing an office dedicated to children’s mental health needs we can better help these children and their families across the board,” Gibbons said. “The advisory council goes one step further by making sure we are leading the way in the nation in addressing our children’s mental health needs rather than playing catch-up.”

This act also creates the Comprehensive Child Mental Health Clinical Advisory Council made up of at least ten members ranging from pediatricians, child psychiatrists and psychologists, social workers, counselors, and researchers. The council is charged with sharing information, identifying funding and research opportunities, and advising the department on how to provide a comprehensive child mental health system.

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