



*Nothing is politically right
that is morally wrong.*

MISSOURI SENATE
JEFFERSON CITY

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is the firmest friend of truth.*

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

March 15, 2005

**Families and Therapists Testify in Support of Legislation to
Reform and Save First Steps Program**

JEFFERSON CITY – Parents and workers involved in the First Steps Program gave overwhelming testimony in support of Senate Bill 500, a measure sponsored by Senate President Pro Tem Michael Gibbons, R-Kirkwood, which protects more than 8,000 developmentally disabled Missouri infants and toddlers from losing access to the program. The First Steps Program offers early intervention services to children from birth to three years old that show signs of delayed development.

Gibbons presented the bill before the Senate Committee on Pensions, Veterans' Affairs and General Laws and outlined a number of reforms to the program provided for in SB 500.

“This bill protects these children and the services they are receiving,” Gibbons said. “But it’s important to also recognize this bill goes further by adding provisions to give families the best care overseen by people in their communities.”

SB 500 shifts oversight of services to regional centers that would be created under the bill. Another reform aspect is the introduction of a participation fee based on a family’s income and size. Susan Allen, a therapist who has worked with the First Steps Program for more than a decade, said participation fees help enforce the idea of a partnership between families and program providers.

“Therapy is not just an appointment once a week for these children, it is a full-time commitment from the family,” Allen said. “Now you have therapists who show up for a visit and no one’s home. If someone is paying for a service, as little as \$5 a month, it will lead to a better commitment.”

Families that qualify for Medicaid would not be subject to the fee while other families would pay no more than \$100 per month on a sliding scale. Also, those families that are deemed “unable to pay” by new program guidelines would be exempt from paying the participation fee as well.

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“Those families that have no other options will be guaranteed treatment,” Gibbons said. “But the families who do have other means, especially medical insurance, will now be asked to help pay for this assistance.”

Currently, the First Steps program has no income cap meaning all participants are covered at the state’s expense. Senate Bill 500 looks at mandating private health insurance companies to providing coverage of early intervention services. The measure calls for insurance coverage up to \$3,000 a year per child, with a total of \$9,000 over three years.

The committee is scheduled to vote on the measure as early as the end of this week. If passed, it will move to the floor for debate by the entire Senate.

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