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Missouri Capitol Updates by Tila Hubrecht

FEBRUARY 27TH 2017 BY DEE LOFLIN

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House Approves Unemployment System Reforms (HB 288)

The Missouri House recently approved legislation meant to keep the state's system of unemployment financially stable. The bill would link unemployment benefits to the rate of unemployment, and ensure the state keeps more money in the unemployment trust fund.

The bill is identical to legislation that was put into law in 2015. After being approved by the House and Senate, the bill was vetoed by Governor Jay Nixon. The House then took immediate action to override the governor's veto. The Senate, which was at a standstill in the final days of session because of a filibuster, did not complete the override motion until the annual Veto Session in September. Because of the timing of the veto override motions, the Missouri Supreme Court later struck down the law.

The legislation approved this session by the House is meant to put the law back into effect. It is designed to make sure the state has enough money in its unemployment trust fund so that businesses don't have to pay a penalty. Specifically, it will increase the minimum amount of money in the fund before employers' contribution rates decrease. For example, Missouri businesses would see their contribution rates decrease by 12 percent if the fund has a balance greater than \$870 million. Supporters note that Missouri is the only state that has been forced to borrow money from the federal government to pay for unemployment benefits during each of the last five economic downturns. As a result, employers have been forced to pay millions of dollars in interest.

The bill also ties unemployment benefits to the average unemployment rate so that more benefits are available when unemployment is high. If the state were in a position of high unemployment (9 percent or higher) benefits would be available for 20 weeks. In periods of low unemployment (lower than 6 percent) benefits would be available for 13 weeks. Supporters say the change is an important step toward ensuring Missouri can afford to help its citizens during times when they are without work.

Opponents say the change will make it even more difficult for unemployed Missourians to obtain the financial support they need to pay their bills and keep food on the table. They say it will make the length of Missouri's unemployment benefits one of the shortest in the nation.

House Approves Legislation to Stop Illegal Use of Herbicides (HB 662)

The members of the Missouri House approved legislation that is meant to stop the illegal use of herbicides that have caused widespread damage to crops in the Southeast Missouri.

According to experts from the University of Missouri, many farmers in that region lost an average of 35 percent of their crops when neighboring farmers used an outdated Dicamba product. Wind and temperature changes caused that product to spread onto nearby fields. Because the product was drifting onto fields not planted with seeds resistant to it, those crops were damaged. At least 150 farmers were impacted by the illegal use of the product.

The legislation approved by the House would allow the Department of Agriculture to issue a fine to any individual who knowingly applies a herbicide to a crop for which the herbicide is not labeled for use. The department could issue a fine of up to \$1,000 per acre on which a product is spread illegally. The per-acre fine would be doubled for those who repeatedly violate the new law. Under current law, the fine is a flat \$1,000, which the sponsor of the bill said is not a strong enough deterrent. The money collected in fines would go to the local school district in which the violation occurred.

The bill would also give the Department of Agriculture additional powers to investigate claims of illegal uses. The department would be able to subpoena witnesses and compel the production of certain records related to the misuse of herbicides. Farmers penalized for illegal use would be liable to the department for its expenses and for personal property affected.

The bill includes an emergency clause, which would make it effective immediately upon

being signed by the governor. The sponsor of the legislation told his colleagues, “If we do not raise the fine and the penalty for using illegal products, then we will have the same situation in 2017 that we had in 2016.”

Expanding Virtual School Options for Missouri Students (HB 138)

The Missouri House has approved legislation meant to expand course options and access for K-12 students. The bill would change the Missouri Virtual Instruction Program (MOVIP) to "The Missouri Course Access Program" (MCAP) and allows any K-12 student to enroll in MCAP courses.

The Missouri Virtual Instruction Program was established in 2007 to offer online courses to public, private, and home school students. The program allows students to take advanced courses that are not currently offered by their local school districts. As the sponsor of the legislation pointed out, there are 255 school districts in Missouri that have no students in calculus; 213 that have no students in physics, 105 that have none in chemistry; and there are 110 school districts that have ended their gifted programs.

In order to give students in all parts of the state access to advanced coursework, the legislation would allow students to take online courses that would be paid by the school district or charter school. Students would be eligible if they have attended the school for at least one semester, and the course is not available in the school district. The bill requires the Department of Elementary and Secondary Education to review the online courses to ensure they meet state standards.

The existing MOVIP has seen funding dwindle in recent years, which has limited free tuition to students who are unable to attend traditional schools because of health issues. The legislation that would change the program to MCAP would not rely on a direct appropriation, but would instead redirect a portion of the per-pupil funding provided by the state.

As the sponsor of the bill told his colleagues on the House floor, “Course access opens up possibilities for school districts. Course access makes education fair, equitable, and accessible.”

Missouri House Approves Perinatal Care Legislation (HB 58)

Members of the Missouri House gave bipartisan support this week to legislation meant to help reduce the incidence of preterm births and infant mortality in Missouri. The House

approved legislation that would require the Department of Health and Senior Services to establish levels of neonatal and maternal care available at each birthing center in the state.

The bill is meant to provide a referral system that would ensure high risk and other at-risk newborns receive consultation and access to risk-appropriate care. In effect, it would ensure moms and babies receive the right care at the right place. Supporters note that approximately 25 percent of at-risk newborns in Missouri are born at a facility that is not equipped to meet their needs. They say enacting the legislation will allow complex care to be delivered in a more timely fashion to babies and mothers in need.

The House approved similar legislation during the 2016 legislative session, but the Senate failed to send the bill to the governor's desk before time ran out.

Observing Missouri Memory Day

House members and visitors to the Capitol wore purple on Wednesday, Feb. 22 in honor of Missouri Memory Day. The annual event saw hundreds of advocates make their way to Jefferson City to educate elected officials about Alzheimer's disease and the need to enhance access to care, support and services for people with dementia and their families.

According to the Alzheimer's Association, Alzheimer's is the most expensive disease in America. Right now, there are 5.4 million Americans with Alzheimer's. By 2050, the number of people age 65 and older with Alzheimer's disease may increase dramatically to a projected 13.8 million. Over the next 40 years, caring for people with Alzheimer's will cost the United States \$20 trillion, with nearly 60 percent of that borne by Medicare. Advocates say that the development of a treatment that delayed onset of Alzheimer's by just five years would reduce Medicare spending on those with the disease by 45 percent in 2050.

House Members Recognize the Achievements of Eagle Scouts

House members took time this week to honor the hard work and success of Eagle Scouts from around the state. The young Scouts who achieved the rank of Eagle Scout during 2016 were on hand at the Capitol for Missouri Eagle Scout Recognition Day on Monday, Feb. 20.

Several of the scouts made their way to the House Chamber where they were recognized for reaching the highest achievement of any Scout. The Scouts also participated in a recognition program in the Capitol Rotunda that was highlighted by a keynote address

from Missouri Secretary of State Jay Ashcroft, who is himself an Eagle Scout.

The Eagle Scout award is a performance-based achievement. To earn the Eagle Scout rank, which is the highest advancement rank in Scouting, a Boy Scout must fulfill requirements in the areas of leadership, service, and outdoor skills. Research has demonstrated the significant, positive impact Eagle Scouts have on society — from holding leadership positions in their workplaces and neighborhoods to voting and volunteering, and from protecting the environment to being prepared for emergencies.

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