

HB 759 -- First Steps Program

Sponsor: Lager

This bill establishes the First Steps Program in law, as administered by the Department of Elementary and Secondary Education. Currently, the program exists as part of the department's special education plan, authorized through Part C of the federal Individuals with Disabilities Education Act, for children from birth to age three who are assessed as having certain developmental delays.

Under the bill, the department will first seek reimbursement from third-party payers, including the Missouri Medicaid Program and private insurance. Beginning January 1, 2006, insurance companies must provide coverage up to \$3,000 a year, for the duration of the program, for speech, physical and occupational therapy, and assistive technology and devices. Use of insurance will not affect any lifetime limits.

The program currently does not charge for its services; however, beginning October 1, 2005, families with incomes that are higher than the Medicaid eligibility level will pay a family cost participation fee on a sliding scale of \$5 to \$100 a month. Moneys collected from the fee and insurance reimbursements will be used to fund the program.

The delivery of program services will be organized on a regional basis as current contracts come up for rebid, with the department providing oversight. Extra weight will be given to proposals that coordinate with Department of Mental Health facilities and local Senate Bill 40 boards.

The program services will continue to emphasize the family's central role by using coaching approaches and focusing on implementing the child's developmental goals. The department may continue to use its contracted central finance office for administering the program. The bill also continues the "child-find" provisions of the current program. A presumptive eligibility provision and a prohibition on the reduction of state agency-provided medical services is included.

The bill contains an emergency clause.