

CAPITOL COMMENTS

**Nita Jane Ayres
State Representative
District 62**

**Office Phone: 573-751-2492
Office Fax: 573-526-9794**

**State Capitol, Jefferson City, MO 65101
Home Phone: 417-272-8111**

May 6, 2010

Missouri Ahead of the Game in Dealing with Illegal Immigrants

We're down to one week to go in the legislative session and bills are moving through the process at a remarkable pace. My goal is to keep you updated on all the pieces of legislation that may be of interest to you and your family. In the coming weeks, I hope to do that. However, this week I want to talk about an issue that Missouri has already addressed in a variety of ways – the issue of illegal immigration. I'm sure you've seen the headlines about Arizona's new law aimed at dealing with those who enter our country illegally. It has been called the strictest immigration law in generations. While Missouri hasn't gone to the same lengths as Arizona, our state has made significant policy changes that effectively deal with illegal immigrants who enter our state. Because of those changes, Missouri is ahead of the game when compared to many other states that are now dealing with this issue.

In 2007, the Missouri General Assembly approved HJR 7 to place on the ballot a proposed constitutional amendment designating English as the official language of Missouri. Voters then went to the polls and approved the measure with nearly 90 percent voting in favor. With that, English became the official language for all governmental proceedings in Missouri. It also means no individual has the right to demand government services in a language other than English. A common language is the cornerstone of a cohesive and united state and country. Ensuring that English is our official language is simply common sense.

Another measure that directly addresses the issue of illegal immigration was passed in 2008. HB 1549 requires our Highway Patrol and other law enforcement officials to verify the immigration status of any person arrested, and inform federal authorities if the person is found to be here illegally. It also allows Missouri law enforcement officers to receive training to enforce federal immigration laws. Furthermore, the bill makes it clear that illegal immigrants will not have access to taxpayer benefits such as food stamps and health care through MO HealthNet. With the passage of this legislation, Missouri sent a clear message that illegal immigrants are not welcome in our state, and that they are certainly not welcome to receive public benefits at the cost of Missouri taxpayers.

2009 saw another significant piece of legislation passed dealing with illegal immigration. HB 390 ensures Missouri's public institutions of higher education do not award financial aid to individuals who are here illegally. The law also requires all postsecondary institutions of higher

education to annually certify to the Missouri Department of Higher Education that they have not knowingly awarded financial aid to students who are unlawfully present in the United States. The bill represents another common sense approach to the issue as it ensures taxpayer dollars are not used to subsidize the education of someone who is in our country illegally.

So while Arizona has made national news for its new law, it's important to remember Missouri has been proactive in addressing this growing problem. The laws we have on the books help ensure the rights and benefits of Missourians are preserved for actual Missouri citizens. It's also important to remember that this country has always opened its arms to immigrants, which is why our nation is often referred to as the great melting pot. Immigrants from all parts of the world have helped make our country what it is today. However, our doors are not open to those who try to live in our country illegally. I believe Missouri's laws make that very clear and give our law enforcement officials the authority they need to deal with the problem.