

## **MASW State of the State 2008**

*Salus Populi Suprema Lex Esto.*

On behalf of the Missouri Association for Social Welfare welcome to our State of the State message for 2008. As a voice for social justice and the common good since 1901, MASW is proud to have the official motto of the state of Missouri, expressed in state statute in the Latin I tried to pronounce at the beginning of these remarks, as our own motto – The Welfare of the People Shall Be the Supreme Law.

We believe it is vital that our state policy makers call upon the best in all of us, to appeal, in President Lincoln’s memorable words, to “the better angels of our nature,” and not to resort to demagoguery that relies on fear and calls upon the worst in all of us.

We call upon lawmakers gathering for the new legislative session in Jefferson City to heed the words of Kit Bond, from his 1975 State of the State address, “...our constituents, the people of Missouri, have the right to expect us to turn our attention to the serious matters facing our state and to deal with them not as Republicans and Democrats but as responsible officials concerned with the welfare of the people.”

At the top of the list of problems to be addressed and solved in a bipartisan manner is the lack of health care for too many Missourians. Our state does not lack for health care providers – indeed, we are blessed with world class hospitals and dedicated doctors, nurses and other health care professionals.

No, what we lack in Missouri is a way to pay for health care for hundreds of thousands of our most vulnerable citizens. Some people, undoubtedly, find themselves without access to health care because of poor decisions on their part, but the fact is most people who lack care are in that position due to factors that are beyond their control.

As citizens, we have an obligation to do our part to provide for the common good, from which we all benefit. Governor Matt Blunt said in his 2006 State of the State address, “I recognize the importance of health care to every Missouri family, and I believe we have an obligation to provide assistance to those truly in need of help.” He went on to say, “Missourians by their nature are generous and compassionate to those in need. We must work together to create a new and better health care system in this state.”

MASW agrees completely with the philosophy Governor Blunt expressed with those words, and so we applaud his decision to reverse his

administration's earlier policy of taking medical assistance away from the poor, disabled, elderly and other vulnerable groups.

The Governor's plan called Insure Missouri will, if implemented, provide access to some of those Missourians that lost coverage due to the Medicaid cuts of 2005. Now this plan is by no means perfect. The 2005 Medicaid cuts caused real hardship and real pain to many of our most vulnerable people, and the Governor's plan does not restore all those who lost coverage and does not restore all the benefits – dental and vision, for example – but it is a start.

MASW will support the Governor's efforts in the 2008 legislative session to restore medical coverage for as many of those who are without coverage as we can. We know that the Governor is committed to this effort, and rely upon him to use all the tools he has, all the power of his office, to push this plan through the legislature. We know that many in the General Assembly have already expressed reservations about this plan, but we know that if Governor Blunt is truly committed to making it happen, he will see his new health plan passed.

This is in keeping with the first of MASW's three policy priorities for 2008, adopted at our 107<sup>th</sup> Annual Conference last fall. Let me share that policy priority with you:

**Help More Missourians Become and Stay Healthy** through universal access to affordable, quality healthcare, including mental health services, for all people in Missouri, starting with restoration of coverage to those who lost coverage due to changes in eligibility in 2005, and through increasing state support for nutrition assistance to those in need.

In addition to the health care question, we want to address in this message two other important issues for 2008.

The first is the lack of affordable housing and the related problem of homelessness. Again, we look to the words of Governor Blunt, this from his State of the State address last year.

“As a veteran, I am proud to lead a state that respects those who wear the uniform today.”

We at MASW agree, and truly appreciate the Governor’s service to our country – a graduate of the United States Naval Academy, who served as a naval officer. In last year’s address, he said of his fellow veterans, “These brave men and women have stood up for democracy. It is our duty to stand up for them.”

Yet we at MASW know, as do others who have studied homelessness in our state and across the nation, that about ONE in FOUR homeless persons is a veteran of our armed forces – and that ratio is ONE

in THREE of homeless adult men. In fact, a veteran is SEVEN TIMES more likely to experience homelessness than the general population – seven times.

This is unacceptable. Fortunately, our state has the Missouri Housing Trust Fund. Established in 1994 with the support of a coalition headed up by MASW, the fund pays for services which have succeeded in assisting low income families to remain in their homes in times of crisis, which is to say, it kept them from falling into foreclosure. It has also helped the dedicated people who work in our homeless shelters to provide more services to more homeless veterans, single moms with children, disabled and others who have been displaced from their homes. The fund also gives help to contractors who build or rehab housing units that are affordable for those with low incomes.

All this is paid for with a simple \$3 fee on real estate transactions; for most of us, this is something we pay as part of the closing costs on our house, and we probably don't notice it. My wife and I, for instance, bought our home in 1998, so we have contributed \$3 to the Missouri Housing Trust Fund.

Unfortunately, in the 14 years since the fund was established, the need for its services has grown, but the fee has stayed the same. Last

year, the fund had less than \$5 million available for the services it provides, but nearly \$20 in legitimate requests for help.

MASW supports increasing the revenue going into the Missouri Housing Trust Fund, because it is a proven success in helping those most in need. With so many new veterans coming home from our current armed conflicts, we believe the urgency is even greater in 2008 to increase funding. Raising that \$3 fee to something higher is the simplest way, but we are open to alternative ways to increase help for keeping people from losing their homes to foreclosure, and to provide for our homeless veterans.

This is in keeping with second policy priority adopted last year at our 107<sup>th</sup> Annual Conference:

**Help More Missourians Keep Their Homes** by increasing funding for the Missouri Housing Trust Fund, increasing protection and assistance for borrowers through legislation to ban predatory lending practices, and increasing opportunities for people to earn their way out of poverty.

Many important issues face Missouri in 2008, but the final one we wish to address in some detail today is Human Rights. MASW's third policy priority states:

**Help More Missourians Reach Their Full Potential** by supporting legislation that extends a helping hand to those who are too often made to feel unwelcome – those subjected to racial discrimination, those re-entering society from the corrections system, and those who were born in other nations – and by supporting legislation that protects them from exploitation and injustice.

Equality before the law, equal access to public services and accommodations, respect and dignity for those whose race, religion, sexual orientation or gender is different from that of the majority, different from those in power, different from us – these are the fundamental principles to which MASW adheres and calls upon our policy makers to observe.

There is much rhetoric, and many bills introduced in our State Capitol, regarding the issue of undocumented foreign nationals, or “illegal aliens” in the parlance of those introducing these bills.

MASW has been, in the course of our 107 years, accused of having a radical agenda. When we called for an end to forced child labor, for an end to legally mandated racial segregation, for an end to the state sales tax on food... at all those times our agenda was called radical, and it is again today.

We say the question of U.S. citizenship, and lawful or unlawful presence of foreign nationals in the United States, is a question to be decided by the national government, not by 50 state legislatures in 50 different ways. In that radical notion, we are joined by other organizations with radical agendas, like the U.S. Chamber of Commerce, and the Missouri Chamber of Commerce.

In our free market economy, if certain jobs are filled by immigrants because that is where our market forces take us, the fact that many of these immigrants do not have legal permission to come here and work, indicates a mismatch between our national immigration laws and the needs of our free market economy. That is a question, again, for our national government to address, and our federal policy makers need to do that, and soon.

“Immigrants figure significantly in the history of Missouri,” quoting from the lead article in the 2007-2008 Official State Manual or blue book, “They have contributed to the state’s culture, politics and economy. They came in search of economic opportunity, political freedom and religious liberty.”

That said, if an unscrupulous employer actively recruits among the poorest of the poor in foreign countries, and brings people who desire only

to work and make a better life for their families – brings these folks to our state, in many cases telling them all the legal paperwork has been taken care of – and then, once these immigrants are here and working, only then do they learn of their legal status, and the employer uses the fear that raises to pay substandard wages and impose poor working conditions – so I ask you, who is the criminal? Is it really the immigrant who came to make a better life for their family? Or is it the company with a building full of lawyers who knowingly break the law to gain cheap labor? Who is the criminal?

MASW believes there is a dignity and respect we must accord every one of our fellow human beings, and we urge our state policy makers to do the right thing regarding foreign nationals who came here to work, and address the behavior of those who exploit them.

In future messages, we will address additional issues, not the least of which is the legitimate question, “How would you pay for these additional government services?” For today, however, we have focused on asking our state policy makers to address health care for those who have none, housing for those who have none or are in imminent danger of losing their homes, and human rights for all who walk among us, even if they were born somewhere else.

This is not easy. None of it is. To our state legislators, Governor, and others in power, we know we are asking you to rise above the passion of the moment and do what is right, to serve the common good. You will be given no parades or celebrations for doing what is right.

In fact, you will be vilified, berated, cursed, even threatened. So, as Governor Warren Hearnes said in his final State of the State address, “To keep such incidents from affecting your thoughts and actions, and to retain your integrity, you must learn to bear the burdens unmoved and to walk steadily forward in the path of duty. You will be sustained only by the persistent thought that time may do you justice, and that if it does not, then even your personal hopes and aspirations and your own good name are of little consequence when weighed against the welfare of a people of whose destiny you are the constituted guardian and defender.”

For the Missouri Association for Social Welfare, I’m Bob Quinn. Please join us in our continuing mission to promote the common good, so that the welfare of the people shall be the supreme law.