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Capitol Report February 14th, 2019

Happy Valentine's Day! We have been very busy at the Capitol this week, passing several bills out of the House. Also, the Department of Revenue answered several questions concerning their failure to collect sufficient tax withholdings this past year. This is the first piece of news in the detailed sections below.

Special Committee on Government Oversight Examines Department of Revenue Issues

House members investigating the Department of Revenue say it hasn't prepared Missourians for owing more income tax or getting smaller tax refunds this year, and that many Missourians could suffer because of it.

An error in Missouri tax code that dates back at least to 2004 was only recently discovered. The error was revealed because of the federal tax relief plan that was passed in 2017. As a result of the combination of the tax change and the error, Missourians' overall tax debt will decrease, but some could see a greater remaining income tax bill or a smaller refund than they anticipated. During the hearing, members of the House Special Committee on Government Oversight looked back over the Department of Revenue's efforts to alert Missourians about how the tax code has changed and what it could mean for them.

"The department was proud to send out press releases to talk about the bicentennial license plate that we switched over to ... they spread the news whether it be on social media, whether it be in press releases, you read about that in the paper, there were different TV interviews; there was a lot of notoriety about a new license plate, however now that this mistake has occurred the Department of Revenue does not want to 'fess up,'" said the chairman of the committee. "Let the taxpayer know that an error occurred and what they should be expecting as we get closer to April."

The DOR Director Joel Walters told the committee he agrees that communication should be improved. He also stressed that he believes it is a minority of Missouri taxpayers who will experience a significant change in their tax returns, "but those are important people and people that we stand ready to work with."

"We've created a dedicated phone line to help individuals with this. We consistently work with taxpayers who need more time to pay their taxes or are struggling to pay their taxes, and we've put a page right up front on our website where immediately you go there, you can say if you need assistance – here's where you can go to get assistance," he said.

Lawmakers also asked the department for examples of how taxpayers might be affected. The director said his department has declined to offer examples because the many variables in filing means any two people filing the same way, with the same annual income, could see wildly different impacts. Legislators told him they still want examples so they have a better idea what some Missourians might face.

The committee will meet again next week when it will ask more questions of the department director and review the examples that legislators have requested, which he urged the department to prepare.

Missourians who have questions about their 2018 return can contact the Department of Revenue for assistance at (573) 522-0967 or visit the department's website at <https://dor.mo.gov/>.

House Sends Prescription Drug Monitoring Program Legislation to the Senate (HB 188)

The House gave final approval this week to legislation that would create a statewide monitoring program for drug prescriptions. The program is designed to combat the abuse of prescription drugs and help prevent potentially dangerous conflicts between medications. Opponents question how effective such a program is in fighting the opioid epidemic, and worry that it would violate Missourians' constitutional right to privacy.

Known as the Narcotics Control Act, the bill would require the Missouri Department of Health and Senior Services to establish and maintain a program to monitor the prescribing and dispensing of all Schedule II through Schedule IV controlled substances. The bill would require information on these drugs being prescribed and dispensed to be reported within 24 hours. By the year 2022 the information would be updated in real time. In response to the security concerns, the bill contains numerous protections to ensure data is encrypted so that private information remains private, and other provisions that are not incorporated into the now nearly statewide used system from St. Louis County. I voted for the bill on this basis in an effort to provide more privacy, but yet protection for Missourians.

The bill now moves to the Senate for consideration.

House Approves Legislation to Raise Awareness of Celiac Disease (HB 72)

House members gave approval this week to legislation meant to raise awareness of celiac disease, which is an immune disorder that leaves a person unable to eat wheat, rye, or barley. A person with celiac can go through a broad variety of uncomfortable symptoms, but a lack of awareness about the disease can cause it to go undiagnosed for years.

The legislation would designate the second Wednesday in May as “Celiac Awareness Day” in Missouri. The date would fall during national Celiac Awareness Month. Under the bill, citizens of the state would be encouraged to participate in appropriate events and activities that increase awareness of celiac disease.

This disease has been on the rise for a number of years. The culprit is the presence of gluten in much of our processed foods. The only treatment for sufferers is closely watching what they eat and avoiding even the smallest amounts of gluten. The bill sponsor hopes that passing the legislation would make more people – particularly doctors – aware of celiac and shorten the time it takes for a person to be tested for it.

The bill now moves to the Senate for consideration.

Legislation Approved to Create Mental Health Awareness Month (HB 108)

The House gave approval this week to legislation that would have Missouri join the federal government in making May “Mental Health Awareness Month,” and in making July “Minority Mental Health Awareness Month.”

The bill is designed to raise awareness because untreated mental health issues contribute to things like unemployment, disability, homelessness, incarceration, substance abuse, and suicide.

This bill also moves to the Senate for consideration.

House Approves Bill to Enact “Hailey’s Law” (HB 185)

Another bill headed to the Senate is meant to better protect children by improving the state’s Amber Alert system. The bill is known as “Hailey’s Law” in honor of Hailey Owens, who was abducted and murdered at the age of 10 while walking home from a friend’s house.

Soon after the arrest of her killer, state officials and lawmakers turned their attention to the Amber Alert System. Though witnesses saw Owens being abducted, more than two hours passed before an Amber Alert was issued to let authorities and the public statewide know to look for her, and what her kidnapper and his vehicle looked like.

Legislators then and now said that faster issuance of an Amber Alert is unlikely to have changed the outcome in Owens’ case. She is believed to have been killed too soon after her abduction. However, the tragedy highlighted a need to expedite the issuance of alerts.

The legislation would require the Amber Alert System to be tied into the Missouri Uniform Law Enforcement System (MULES), which is the computer system that allows all law enforcement in Missouri to communicate. That means once an officer enters information about a missing child into MULES, it would at the same time be available to the Amber Alert system.

The bill would also require the state’s Amber Alert System Oversight Committee to meet at least once a year to discuss ways to improve the system. Currently there is no requirement for that committee to meet. The sponsor said that having the committee meet regularly to evaluate the system means there will be an ongoing effort toward getting alerts out more quickly.

Serving the Constituents of the 51st District,



State Representative

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