Equity for seniors and people with disabilities

I have continually advocated for safe operations for our businesses to have the opportunity to economically support our families, and funding to ensure that we don’t lose our businesses and valuable services provided by so many who need it. We must balance the need for safety with the ability of Minnesotans to provide for themselves, their families and their communities.

In the complicated world of Medical Assistance (MA), there exists several provisions which put seniors and persons with disabilities at a significant disadvantage. We worked in a bipartisan manner that addresses the inequities in the current Medical Assistance “spenddown” system.

I was the chief author of the MA spenddown bill and was able to get relief by increasing MA spenddown from 75% to 100%. I tried to get my colleagues to go to 100% and due to combined targets no new money was given. Recently, I was one of the co-authors on a bill to get that to 100%. This would bring equity to people with disabilities and seniors who need MA, by increasing the income and asset limits for eligibility consistent with other MA eligible groups.

This legislation signed into law for 2022 will affect 40,000 people with disabilities and seniors and will make it much easier for them to remain as independent as possible in their communities.

When these people receive the care they need and maintain their financial independence, they can be more active members of our communities, which is good for everyone.

I have fought to ensure that we don’t lose vital services due to a lack of funding during the COVID Pandemic. Services such as Non-Emergency Medical Transportation (NEMT), Early Childhood Education, and Economic grants. The 2020 legislative session began on February 11 with a positive budget balance of $1.5 billion and a strong economic outlook for Utility Program that encourages lighting amended to include LED promotion.

As a result, the Governor noticed our work and set a process in place to hopefully address this and get Minnesota to where it needs to be. I am monitoring this situation closely as it progresses to ensure that our employees all have equal access to employment and their dignity understood and respected.

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• Co-Author SF 512 COVID-19 gambling control laws temporary adjustment; gambling control board annual reports filing requirement, SF 45.

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Champlin Mississippi Point Park: This bill would provide several million dollars to enhance our own Mississippi Point Park in Champlin, improving its facilities while making it more accessible to everyone in our community.

Mississippi Gateway Regional Park: This expansion increases that accessibility so that people of all ages can be apart of the world around them and enjoy all of our wonderful river and the environment it provides.

Enhancing the Coon Rapids Recycling Center: This gave funds to the Coon Rapids Recycling center for expanding and improving the Coon Rapids Recycling Center, including constructing, furnishing, and equipping a building for polystyrene foam processing, a cold storage building, a covered storage area, and constructing driving lanes and parking areas.

Anoka Ramsey Community College Campus Enhancements: Anoka Ramsey Community College has tried for years to replace their outdated Business and Nursing building to modify their facilities for more modern classrooms and curriculum. This will properly utilize the space they possess and create new opportunities for our developing students as they set their path into the world.

Highway 10/169 and 3rd Lane Traffic Mitigation

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Emergency Insulin Program: After failing to pass in the final days of the 2019 session, this year we were able to pass the Alec Smith Insulin Affordability Act. The act is named after Alec Smith who died in 2017 at the young age of 26 after being forced to ration his insulin due to the extremely high costs. This bill makes insulin available for eligible individuals who are in urgent need of insulin and limits the amount of the copay to $35. Along with emergency insulin, each manufacturer also must maintain an ongoing patient assistance program for qualifying individuals. This bill would not have been possible without the tireless work of Alec's parents and all the advocates who fought for this issue.

Public health emergency funding

Early in the COVID-19 pandemic, legislators quickly realized funding was needed for public health response activities. With the scope of this crisis still uncertain, the Legislature urgently passed $21 million in funding for Minnesota’s public health response contingency account. Funds were utilized by the Minnesota Department of Health to coordinate response activities, conduct lab testing, and contract for needed services, staffing, and supplies. As the harsh realities of this pandemic set in, the Legislature worked quickly to develop a bill appropriating $200 million in funding to support our state’s healthcare system, which passed the Senate with unanimous support. These resources were added to be used for short-term emergency funding and to create a health care response grant fund for the Minnesota Department of Health (MDH).

From this bill, $50 million was distributed on an emergency basis to provide cash flow relief to health care organizations to cover their highest priority needs. This money was awarded to nearly 350 provider organizations across the state for preparing for and responding to the COVID-19 pandemic. The remaining $150 million went to make and administer emergency insulin and related supplies to Minnesota residents.

Mental Health Awareness

As soon as the COVID-19 pandemic hit and Governor Walz announced the Peacetime Emergency, the Legislature worked to help schools, students, teachers, and families navigate distance learning and other changes to our educational delivery system.

We passed the following provisions:

- Provided $180,000 in savings due to the waiver of statewide testing requirements in the 2019-20 school year, as well as $9,000 in savings due to a hold-harmless formula adjustment for Developmental Screening aid
- Invested $49,000 in FY20 for the IT costs related to the implementation of the conditional Tier 3 license and $137,000 in the tails for the extension of the Early Middle College program
- Allowed for a delay in revenue related to Achievement and Integration aid that schools would otherwise have been unable to use
- Probationary teacher service day requirement waived: Reduced the service day requirement for probationary teachers interrupted by distance learning
- Student Statewide testing changes: Statewide testing requirement were waived for the 2019-20 school year
- Teacher Licensure: The public closed teacher licensure testing facilities and created delays in renewal options. The bill requires the Professional Educator Licensing and Standards Board (PELSB) to implement a six-month delay process for any renewal requirements

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The Minnesota Senate held a one week Special Session in mid-June. We unanimously passed more than $60 million in emergency small business grants to businesses affected by the COVID-19 pandemic. The money will be disbursed regionally across Minnesota and allocates funds to micro-businesses and businesses that are veteran, women, and minority owned. This move by the Minnesota legislature fills a gap created by the federal CARES Act that focused on S-Corp, sole proprietors, and LLC companies.

Several other provisions successfully passed through the Senate include Sen. John Hoffman’s legislation to extend waivers for Department of Human Services (DHS) to June 2021 passed the Minnesota Senate. This legislation provides continued state support to provide enhanced service delivery and efficiency to our most vulnerable during and after the pandemic.

Telemedicine used for health care, mental health, and substance use disorder treatments is now permissible as an ongoing basis. An increase in payment rates for the state’s child care assistance program was approved. A distance learning access grant program was established to provide wireless or wire-lined broadband to students currently without internet access. Money was also provided to Minnesota schools to address reading curriculum and training. Special session ended without the legislature agreeing on how to take meaningful action on a bonding bill, criminal justice and police reform measures, and local distribution of funds for the federal CARES Act.

After Special Session adjourned, Gov. Walz issued an Executive Order to that reflects the formula agreed upon by legislators during the recent Special Session. It delivers $841 million in federal CARES Act funding to Minnesota’s cities, counties, and towns. Cities would receive $350 million in aid, counties would receive $467 million, and towns would receive $24 million. As part of the package, the governor also announced $12 million in CARES Act funding will be allocated toward food shelves and food banks to help combat hunger across Minnesota.

Legislators are still working on a bonding bill to pass if we are called into a July Special Session. A bonding bill is especially important to help move our economy forward after the pandemic put businesses and people out of work.