

**By Russ Pankonin**

**The Imperial Republican**

Senator Mark Christensen of Imperial makes no bones about how he feels about one of state government's largest agencies—Health and Human Services (HHS).

On Monday, the Legislature passed a resolution on a 43-0 vote to authorize the Legislature's HHS Committee to "review, investigate, and assess the effect of the child welfare reform initiative implemented by the Dept. of Health and Human Services."

In his weekly Tuesday morning telephone conference with constituents, Christensen noted he was absent Monday due to a funeral, but indicated he would have joined his colleagues in the vote and would have spoken on the floor about his experiences with HHS.

Christensen said the amount of money wasted in HHS from inefficiencies and policy miscues could go a long ways toward balancing the state budget deficit.

In this year's proposed budget, HHS submitted a budget proposal that totals \$2.869 billion. That dwarfs state aid to education and the Dept. of Education which came in with a \$1.379 billion budget request.

### **Foster parent situation**

The senator said the current reforms are not working. Much of the casework for the foster parent program has been farmed out to private contractors.

Christensen said these private contractors are more concerned with their bottom line than serving the children.

In the southeast Nebraska HHS service area, Christensen said 10 percent of the kids in the system were either neglected or re-abused under HHS supervision.

Foster parents are becoming fed up with the demands and practices set forth by these private contractors. There's more shuffling of foster kids and foster parents find themselves without rights, he said.

In Dawson County, the number of foster homes has declined from 45 to 11, Christensen said.

### **First-hand experience**

Christensen has seen first-hand what he calls abuses and inefficiencies of the system.

His daughter, Erica, and her husband, Sam Haberman, were foster parents in Omaha. The helped get a foster child off drugs and were making a difference in a life that had been turned around.

They found an adoptive home for the child but instead, the child was returned to the parental home and all progress was lost.

The Habermans also wanted to adopt two siblings under their foster care.

All due to the decision of one caseworker, the children were moved to another home with only 2.5 hours notice.

The Habermans went to court to challenge the removal. However, the judge ruled that since they didn't file suit during the 2.5 hours before the kids were removed, they had no standing as foster parents.

That's one of the reasons Christensen has introduced four bills dealing with foster parenting and adoption.

LB 650 would create a statement of rights and responsibilities for foster parents. No such rights exist now.

Overall, Christensen said there are 10 bills this session that address the foster care process in

Nebraska.

He said when he tries to question officials in HHS, he gets stonewalled.

He noted he was warned by others outside the system that if he challenged HHS, his daughter and son-in-law would have their foster kids taken away. Ultimately, that's what happened.

During their court challenge, Christensen said HHS was represented by nine different individuals. What he learned is that's the case all the time. That's just one of the inefficiencies he sees within the system.

People within the HHS system who have come forth with problems in the agency have been fired, Christensen said.

He said the agency needs far more oversight than it's getting now.

### **Feedback on enviro funds**

Christensen said he's seeking input from constituents on whether to allocate \$7 million of Environmental Trust Fund money annually for the next 10 years to a special water fund.

Money from the trust fund has benefitted the Republican River Basin in the form of grants for vegetation control and surface water leasing.

However, some of the money used by the state for surface water leases must be paid back next year.

Presently, he's on the fence on the bill, LB 229. As a "water senator," his colleagues are wondering why he hasn't jumped on board, Christensen said.

He noted the Republican Basin has implemented occupation taxes to help pay for compliance efforts in its basin.

His fear about the new water fund is that a lion's share of the money will go to the Platte River basin. He noted no NRD in the Platte has an occupation tax in place to pay for future compliance or appropriation issues.

"We've had to do it ourselves," he said, referring to the Republican Basin. "Now the Platte wants the state to bail them out."

He said he wants more feedback from the 44th District before taking a solid stand on the bill.