

Castle: New Patient Navigator Legislation Will Help Those in Need - June 20, 2005

by Delaware Congressman Mike Castle

There is no question that our healthcare system is complex and the ability to navigate through an intimidating matrix of doctors, health care providers, nurses, and insurance companies is ever challenging. This is especially true for those who face certain barriers, including geographic isolation, cultural and linguistic barriers, limited transportation services, lack of health insurance and lack of information about health options. The bottom line is we can all use lessons on managing our health care, but its particularly important for low income Delawareans and those who are chronically ill.

The U.S. House of Representatives recently passed an important piece of legislation aimed at helping patients learn about and take advantage of the health care resources available to them. The Patient Navigator Outreach and Chronic Disease Prevention Act of 2005, which passed with overwhelming support from Democrats and Republicans alike, aims to improve outreach and coordination of health care services for chronically ill, uninsured patients in low-income and rural areas. And Congress is not alone in its' unanimous support of helping those who need it. The legislation has also been promoted by patient advocacy groups such as the American Cancer Society, American Medical Association and the American Diabetes Association and is on its way to passage in the U.S. Senate.

The bill would authorize \$25 million over five years for grants to "patient navigator" programs. Through educational outreach and prevention techniques, the navigators would help patients learn about treatment options, find clinical trials and obtain referrals and they would help ensure prompt diagnostic care and treatment, coordinate with appropriate health insurance ombudsman programs and conduct outreach to health disparity populations. The programs also would alert patients to government aid and help them apply for financial assistance.

I believe in this piece of legislation, in the mission it is trying to achieve, and in the benefit it can have here in Delaware. Our invaluable community health centers including La Red, Delmarva Rural Ministries, West Side Health, and Henrietta Johnson, are taking major steps toward providing quality care. I commend each and every one of these centers for their outstanding work in providing for the uninsured and underinsured communities they serve. They deserve our constant recognition and support. Together with these community health centers and all of the quality hospitals, doctors, and nurses in Delaware, we can overcome the struggles of healthcare disparities and help those most in need, our chronically ill and uninsured, to receive the care they deserve to have.