

CASTLE: STUDENTS SHOULDN'T HAVE TO CHOOSE BETWEEN THEIR HEALTH AND HEALTH INSURANCE -- July 30, 2008

Need to ensure health insurance coverage when it is needed most for seriously ill students

Washington, DC -- This morning at a press conference, Rep. Mike Castle (R-DE) and Rep. Paul Hodes (D-NH) urged the House to vote today in favor of Michelle's Law (H.R. 2851), legislation the two introduced to enable students who are seriously ill or injured to take up to one year of medical leave without losing their insurance coverage by amending the Employee Retirement Income Security Act (ERISA). Joining Reps. Castle and Hodes at the press conference was Anne Marie Morse, the mother of Michelle Morse -- the bill's namesake -- and Dick Woodruff, the Senior Director for Legislative Affairs of the American Red Cross to highlight the great need for this legislation. The bill passed the House today by voice vote.

The majority of college students receive their health insurance through their parents' plan, with most covering full-time students up to the age of 25. However, if the student becomes severely ill, they must choose to continue with a full-time course load or lose their healthcare eligibility and purchase an expensive COBRA plan. Michelle's Law expands these options by allowing students to maintain their parents' health insurance for up to one year for a physician-certified severe medical condition. Michelle's Law is inspired by the life and the memory of Michelle Morse, who was a full-time college student when she was diagnosed with colon cancer. Michelle died as she struggled to attend college full-time to maintain her health insurance.

In Delaware, Michelle Rigney, a student at the University of Delaware, passed away last month after a courageous three-year battle with Melanoma. Last spring, at a skin cancer awareness event at Rehoboth Beach in Delaware, Rep. Castle met Michelle and learned of her fight with cancer and struggle to maintain insurance coverage. Michelle was an advocate of this legislation and hoped to ensure that students in similar situations did not struggle to maintain health insurance when it is most necessary. Rep. Castle believes this legislation will help countless college students across the country and hopes to see this legislation through for both Michelles.

"I am so pleased that this legislation passed the House today," Rep. Castle said. "It is vital to the health and well-being of future generations that we give college students the opportunity to take care of their health while continuing to pursue a degree. Michelle Rigney often spoke of her choice of pushing herself with school to maintain health insurance or taking leave from classes to receive treatment while potentially losing her health insurance. I believe Michelle's Law provides the necessary provisions to allow students to make their health a priority and postpone their education for a year."

"No college student should be forced to undergo a full course load while being treated for a serious illness," Rep. Hodes said. "Today, we took another step forward in passing this legislation in honor of Michelle's (Morse) memory and to ensure that no American student ever has to suffer her fate."

Groups that have already endorsed Michelle's Law include the American Cancer Society Cancer Action Network (ACSCAN), American College Health Association, American Diabetes Association, America's Health Insurance Plans (AHIP), American Heart/Stroke Association, American Hospital Association, American Medical Student Association, American Nurses Association, Colorectal Cancer Coalition, Leukemia and Lymphoma Society, National Association of Graduate Professional Students, National Association of Social Workers, National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA), National Education Association (NEA), National Health Council, National Kidney Foundation, and National Patient Advocate Foundation.

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