



In This Issue

- President Bush Signs “PREEMIE”
- March of Dimes Speaks at Press Conference on SCHIP
- Congressional Actions
- Region reports

PRESIDENT BUSH SIGNS “PREEMIE”!



On Friday, December 22, 2006, President George W. Bush signed the “PREEMIE” Act into law. The United States Congress had approved the “PREEMIE” Act in the early morning hours of December 9, 2006.

Dr. Jennifer L. Howse, president of the March of Dimes, said, “Today President Bush responded to the growing crisis of premature birth by signing into law a bill that authorizes increased federal support for research and education on prematurity. Millions of active March of Dimes volunteers and staff across the nation have worked toward this day for more than 3 years. On their behalf, I thank the President and members of Congress for their willingness to work with us to put prematurity on the national health agenda.”

Although the “PREEMIE” Act is now law, our work is far from over. When the 110th Congress convenes in January, 2007, the March of Dimes will work with the Administration and Congress to fund the Surgeon General’s conference as well as the research and education called for in the bill.

MARCH OF DIMES SPEAKS AT SCHIP REAUTHORIZATION PRESS CONFERENCE

On December 12, 2006, Dr. Jennifer L. Howse, president of the March of Dimes, spoke at a press conference at the National Press Club in Washington D.C. Before an audience of over 70, including 15 reporters, she called for reauthorization of the State Children’s Health Insurance Program (SCHIP), and for allowing states to enroll pregnant women without first having to obtain a federal waiver or having to rely on a flawed and convoluted regulatory approach. SCHIP’s authorization runs out in 2007, and without Congressional action more than 6 million infants and children will be at risk for losing their health insurance.

The press conference was held jointly with the American Academy of Pediatrics (AAP), the National Association of Children’s Hospitals (N.A.C.H.), and the Georgetown University Center for Children and Families.

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Editor: Joseph Luchok

Direct Questions or Comments to:

March of Dimes Birth Defects Foundation
Office of Government Affairs
1146 19th Street N.W.
6th Floor
Washington D.C. 20036

Phone: (202) 659-1800
Fax: (202) 296-2964

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A webcast of the press conference is available at

http://www.kaisernetwork.org/health_cast/hcast_index.cfm?display=detail&hc=2001



Dr. Howse speaks about SCHIP as Lawrence A. McAndrews, president and CEO of the National Association of Children's Hospitals; Cindy Mann, executive director of the Georgetown University Center for Children and Families; and Jay E. Berkelhamer, president of the American Academy of Pediatrics listen.



The audience at the press conference (this is half of the room).

CONGRESS WRAPS UP YEAR WITH FLURRY OF ACTIVITY

In addition to passing the PREEMIE Act during the final hours of the session, the Congress also passed several provisions of interest to the March of Dimes:

Congress approved a bill to temporarily extend federal support of the State Children's Health Insurance Program (SCHIP), thereby avoiding a funding shortfall projected to impact 17 states, putting over 600,000 infants and children at risk of losing their health insurance. This temporary fix is expected to delay shortfalls until May of 2007.

Congress did not pass the Labor, Health and Human Services Appropriations bill, which funds most of the public health agencies including NIH, CDC and HRSA. Instead, Congress approved a Continuing Resolution that will fund these agencies at the FY2006 levels until February 15th. The new Congress will need to finish the remaining appropriations bills or pass a year-long continuing resolution.

Several technical corrections to the Deficit Reduction Act (DRA) were approved as part of the Tax-Trade-Medicare and Medicaid compromise package. Among the corrections is a provision clarifying that cost sharing cannot be required of Medicaid enrollees with incomes below the federal poverty level (133% of the poverty level for pregnant women and children under the age of 6).

After several years of debate Congress passed a postal reform bill that is expected to moderate future postal rate increases, a significant step that will benefit the March of Dimes and other tax-exempt organizations.

REGION REPORTS

NORTH

Pennsylvania's Allegheny County, which includes Pittsburgh, will be "smoke-free" starting January 1, 2007. Allegheny County Chief Executive Dan Onorato signed the initiative into law just weeks after the city of Philadelphia approved a similar measure. The new ordinance prohibits smoking in all public buildings. Pennsylvania March of Dimes Chapter volunteers galvanized support for the initiative. The Chapter recruited health and business professionals who testified in support of the ban before the Allegheny County Council. Also, the Chapter activated a wide range of volunteers, including WalkAmerica participants, who made phone calls, wrote letters and emails to register their views with the County Executive. Allegheny County's action helps pave the way for statewide legislation and has positioned the March of Dimes as a leader in the Pennsylvania's smoking prevention efforts aimed at women of childbearing age and infants.



The Wisconsin state capitol in Madison radiated pink and blue as March of Dimes volunteers and staff celebrated National Prematurity Awareness Day on November 14. Wisconsin Governor Jim Doyle issued a proclamation declaring November Prematurity Awareness Month.

SOUTH

As a result of advocacy efforts led by the March of Dimes, on November 8, 2006, the Columbia, SC, City Council approved a smoke-free workplace ordinance. The Chapter activated its advocacy network and testified at several council meetings. Additionally, volunteers, including Chapter Public Affairs Chair Jim Hart, contacted the Mayor and Council Members personally and via emails to register support of this important initiative. Chapter volunteers and staff also worked closely with the Tobacco Collaborative to include language in the organization's model ordinance that warns of the dangers of second hand smoke to pregnant women and the associated risks for low birth weight and preterm birth.



Virginia Governor Tim Kaine gives remarks at the Virginia Chapter's Prematurity Initiative Conference that was held in Richmond on November 10, 2006. Governor Kaine had recently declared state buildings smoke free. Chapter representatives provided the Governor with material on the effects of smoking on pregnancy and asked his support to expand the number of smoke free workplaces.

WEST

The Oregon Chapter, in its role as member of the Department of Human Services (DHS) Cystic Fibrosis Task Force, was instrumental in gaining approval of screening babies beginning in November of 2006. Oregon's decision has far-reaching implications for other states in the Western Region as the state handles lab work for babies screened in Alaska, Hawaii, Idaho, Nevada, and New Mexico as well.

Hawaii's Department of Health approved the addition of Cystic Fibrosis screening to the state's panel. The Hawaii Chapter, a member of the state's Cystic Fibrosis Task Force and Newborn Screening Advisory Committee played an important role in generating the votes necessary to make this change. With implementation of the Cystic Fibrosis screening in the fall of 2007, Hawaii will screen infants for the 29 treatable disorders as recommended by the American College of Medical Genetics and the March of Dimes.

On November 7, voters in South Dakota approved a Tobacco Tax Initiative, raising the tax on a pack of cigarettes by \$1. The Chapter represented pregnant women and babies on the coalition that developed the initiative which is expected to impact significantly the high rate of smoking during pregnancy. Of the \$40 million projected to be raised by this increase, \$5 million will be earmarked for tobacco prevention and cessation programs, and an additional 34% of the remaining revenue will be dedicated support other health care programs.

Several Chapters in the Western Region worked to light government buildings in pink and blue for Prematurity Awareness Day. On November 14th, Capitol buildings in Helena, Montana and Lincoln, Nebraska; City Hall in San Francisco, California; and the Governor's Mansion in Austin, Texas were lighted to call attention to the growing incidence of preterm birth and highlight March of Dimes efforts to address the problem.

Lincoln, Nebraska



San Francisco, California



Austin, Texas

