

March of Dimes

July 2002

Advocacy Update *from the Office of Government Affairs*



Dr. Howse Speaks at CARE Act Press Conference

On July 18, 2002, March of Dimes President Dr. Jennifer L. Howse represented the Foundation at a press conference to encourage swift action by the Senate on the "Charity Aid, Recovery, and Empowerment Act of 2002" (CARE Act) authored by Senators Joseph Lieberman (D-Conn.) and Rick Santorum (R-Penn.). Dr. Howse stated that "This bipartisan legislation providing tax incentives to encourage chari-



table giving is critical to the non-profit community. It holds promise as a stimulus for increasing resources that we can devote to strengthening our



communities at a time when the soft economy is affecting families across America."

Joining Dr. Howse in this call to action were leaders of the American Heart Association, the United Way, and the Council on Foundations.

The bill, which is awaiting action by the full Senate, includes two amendments to the tax code which are strongly supported by the March of Dimes:

- A new deduction of up to \$250 for charitable contributions made by

single filers (\$500 for joint) who file the short form; and,

- a provision that would allow individuals age 59 ½ to use their IRA to create a life income gift. At age 70 ½, donors could give their IRA directly to charities without incurring income tax on the gift.

A recent study projects that enactment of a non-itemizer deduction



could generate up to \$14 billion in new donations each year and add nearly 12 million new donors to the rolls.



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Senate Finance Cmte Approves Provision to Cover Pregnant Immigrant Women

A provision of the welfare reauthorization bill reported by the Senate Finance Committee on June 26, 2002 would restore Medicaid and SCHIP benefits to immigrant pregnant women and children who legally reside in the U.S.

The March of Dimes supports this provision, as it is an important step in extending health coverage to women and children who are currently uninsured.

The bill is awaiting action by the full Senate.

SC Takes First Step To Expand BDS

On May 1, 2002, Gov. Jim Hodges (D) signed into law legislation, S. 986, that will pave the way for a more comprehensive birth defects surveillance system in South Carolina. The measure creates the South Carolina Birth Defects Monitoring Task Force which will be responsible for developing recommendations to improve the state's current monitoring system. The March of Dimes was consulted by the governor's office on the selection of task force members. The members include representatives from the governor's office, state agencies, the Senate and House committees on health and finance, research institutions, the hospital association, family advocacy organizations, and others.

Recognizing that the state faces a difficult budget situation and that it is

critical to expand the state's BDS program, the SC Chapter developed an advocacy strategy to build support for the expansion by ensuring that all stakeholders participated in the process. The Chapter began by obtaining support from Gov. Hodges staff, including the Director of Health and Human Services, and from members and chairmen of key legislative committees. Next, the March of Dimes secured sponsors and bipartisan support for the legislation. The Chapter then began to raise the visibility of the issue through media events including a news conference and a legislative day.

The Chapter is looking toward February 2003 when the task force delivers its programmatic and budget recommendations to the governor and to members of the legislature.

Colorado Moves to Extend Health Coverage to Pregnant Women

On October 30, 2001, Colorado Gov. Bill Owens (R) announced his intention to expand Colorado's Children's Health Insurance Program (CHIP) to cover income eligible pregnant women age 19 and older. In his announcement, the governor built on a March of Dimes proposal endorsed by the National Governors' Association (NGA) in August 2001. The governor outlined his initiative in greater detail on January 10 in the state of the state address.

Working with Gov. Owens, the Colorado March of Dimes Chapter used two complimentary strategies to obtain legislative approval of the proposal. A Chapter volunteer testified before the legislature and letters

to the editor were submitted to key newspapers. Bills to cover pregnant women through SCHIP were then introduced in the legislature by Rep. Lauri Clapp (R) and Sen. David T. Owen (R).

Gov. Owen signed the bill May 24 and earmarked tobacco funds for the state's share of the expansion. The Colorado health department is now preparing a waiver request for submission to the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services (HHS). If the March of Dimes proposal to make this option a permanent part of federal law is enacted this year, Colorado will be able to move forward without a waiver. For more information on this proposal, see the story on page three.

CDC Director Appointed

On July 3, 2002, HHS Secretary Tommy Thompson named Julie Gerberding MD, MPH as the next director of the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC). Dr. Gerberding is an infectious disease expert and had been leading CDC's efforts to prepare for and counter terrorism. The first ever female director of CDC, Dr. Gerberding assumed the position immediately since the appointment does not require congressional approval.

Dr. Gerberding had been acting principal deputy director of CDC, and had served as part of the leadership team named to direct the agency after former director Dr. Jeffrey Koplan resigned March 31.

Private Insurance Market's Maternity Care Coverage

As policy makers continue to explore ways to improve access to health insurance, availability of maternity coverage in private health plans is a key element of the debate. While most employer plans cover maternity care, this is not always the case, moreover maternity coverage is less available to women who purchase individual insurance plans.

- A March of Dimes sponsored survey of maternity coverage offered by small employers found that while plans offered by the largest firms include maternity benefits, 7% of plans in firms with 10-24 employees **do not cover** prenatal care and delivery. (Summary of the findings can be found at www.marchofdimes.com

titled “New Information on Maternity Benefits in Small Employer Health Plans.”)

- Maternity coverage is often unavailable to those buying in the individual market. A study by Families USA identifying the lowest-cost individual health insurance plans in each state offering a typical package of benefits, found that maternity care is **rarely** covered — plans in only 9 states included these benefits. That is, maternity care was **excluded** in 31 of the 40 states in which the study found any standard benefit package available to a 25-year old woman. Maternity coverage was not available in the remaining 11 states either, since the study found no standard insurance

package in the individual market.

- Maternity care is lacking even in state “high risk pools” — the insurer of last resort for those with significant medical expenses. A study of these programs found that 10 of the 29 state pools either exclude or limit coverage for maternity care.

In an effort to provide background on health insurance issues for March of Dimes staff and volunteers, the Office of Government Affairs is working with Karen Pollitz at Georgetown University to develop a primer on health insurance and relevant state and federal public policy issues. Look for the primer to be available by the end of this year.

Senate Finance Committee Approves March of Dimes SCHIP Proposal

On July 11, 2002, a critically important step toward giving states flexibility to cover pregnant women was taken by the Senate Finance Committee. Chairman Max Baucus (D-Mont.) laid down before the committee a proposal that included provisions from two bills, S. 724 and S. 1016, authored by Senators Christopher Bond (R-Mo.), John Breaux (D-La.), Jeff Bingaman (D-N.M.), and Richard Lugar (R-Ind.).

In his formal statement on the proposal the Chairman explained “We’re essentially telling families that we will cover children only after their mothers have gone through nine months of pregnancy without any health assistance. The bill before us today is designed to correct the imbalance, at least in part.”

If enacted, the bill reported by the committee would provide states the option to expand SCHIP to cover income eligible pregnant women age 19 and older. In addition, the bill calls for automatic enrollment of newborns.

The vote was unanimous and Senators Bingaman and Breaux, who are members of the committee, spoke in support of the legislation.

Unlike most legislation that requires a two step process for approval—authorization and appropriation—this bill combines the steps, making federal funding immediately available to states.

However, critical as this action is, committee approval is just one step toward final approval. The March of Dimes will continue to work toward

enactment of the bill before the end of this year.

March of Dimes Trustees Mary Ann Mobley Collins and Michael Sears as well as several March of Dimes Chapters—Louisiana, South Dakota, North Dakota, New Jersey, Arkansas, Iowa, Mississippi, Maine, Arizona, Wyoming and Montana—played key roles in securing Senators’ support for this measure.

While the March of Dimes is pursuing a change in federal law to make it easier for states to initiate SCHIP program expansions, a few states have used the only avenue now available to make such an expansion—obtaining a waiver from the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services (HHS). To learn more about what Colorado is doing, see the story on page two.

Senate Confirms Surgeon General

On July 23, the Senate confirmed Richard Carmona, MD as U.S. Surgeon General. Dr. Carmona is a trauma surgeon and former deputy sheriff from Tucson, Arizona as well as Clinical Professor of Surgery, Public Health, and Family and Community Medicine at the University of Arizona.

President Bush nominated Dr. Carmona on March 26 and his nomination was approved by the Senate Health, Education, Labor and Pensions Committee before he was confirmed by the Senate. Now confirmed he is awaiting his official swearing-in before taking the position.

Reminder:
The Next Issue of
***Advocacy Update* will be**
Published in September

The *Advocacy Update* delivers legislative news about March of Dimes issues on a monthly basis.

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