

Published: Friday, September 26, 2008

## Health-care bill passes U.S. Senate

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CONCORD – New Hampshire's bipartisan congressional delegation and a plucky Manchester mother celebrated Thursday after a federal bill protecting health-care coverage for sick college students passed the U.S. Senate.

The Senate endorsed House-passed legislation Democratic congressman Paul Hodes championed to allow seriously ill college students to take a one-year leave of absence without losing health coverage under their parents' insurance policy.

AnnMarie Morse, whose daughter Michelle Morse died of colon cancer, lobbied the New Hampshire Legislature to provide this protection and then engaged in a two-year battle to gain federal law protection.

"As a teacher, I can't believe that I am speechless," AnnMarie Morse said during a conference call with reporters after the Senate vote.

"I never would have dreamed five years ago that we would be in this situation. Wouldn't it be great if a college student never had to use it?"

"I am very proud and honored that this bill has passed."

Michelle Morse, 22, was a Plymouth State University student when she was diagnosed with an advancing case of colon cancer in 2004.

Doctors recommended Michelle reduce her course load, but her mother's insurance plan required she be a full-time student.

AnnMarie Morse won the support of Gov. John Lynch and the Legislature for the New Hampshire law six months after Michelle had lost her battle with cancer in November 2005.

The Morse story is featured in the first campaign ad for Hodes' re-election that began airing last week.

Rewriting Employee Retirement Income Security Act insurance law was complex, Hodes told reporters. The basic fairness of the issue, however, helped build an "unusual" coalition of 18 organizations that included the American Association of Health Plans and some of the largest

companies in the insurance industry along with the teachers union and American Cancer Society.

"This is an example of the best work that we do in Congress," Hodes said noting there was bipartisan sponsorship for the measure in both the House and the Senate.

Hodes said the tireless advocacy of Michelle's mother made both women heroes in his book.

"With Michelle as a hero and her mom, AnnMarie, I say she's a true hero, too, who has showed extraordinary courage," Hodes said.

"It is perhaps one of the best examples I have come across that change really happens in Washington."

Sen. John E. Sununu was the lead Senate sponsor along with Hillary Clinton, D-N.Y., and fellow Sen. Judd Gregg and called Morse right after the Senate vote.

"Passage of this legislation is a fitting tribute to Michelle's fight against cancer and her family's commitment to ensuring that full-time college students covered by federally regulated health plans receive the coverage they need to handle a serious illness," Sununu said in a statement.

"I have been proud to work with Michelle's mother AnnMarie, who deserves tremendous credit and our deep gratitude for her tireless efforts on behalf of her daughter. The strong bipartisan support for Michelle's Law demonstrates a broad agreement among health, education and insurance groups that ailing students should be able to focus on recovering."

Gregg said the law would give families some window of peace while dealing with a child's medical crisis.

"Because of the Morse's commitment, families will now be able to focus on the care and recovery of their college-age child, instead of worrying about how to pay the health-care costs when insurance will no longer cover their care," Gregg said.

The federal law that takes effect a year after President Bush signs it requires students to show written proof from a doctor explaining the need for the temporary medical leave and only applies to full-time students already covered under their parents' insurance plan.

It does not require insurers to cover any new procedures or new individuals but prevents them from dropping existing coverage.

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