

Democrats Tout CLASS Act

Goal Is For People With Disabilities To Live Independently

Senate Democrats are promoting the Community Living Assistance Services and Supports (CLASS) Act in any final congressional health reform legislation, saying the provision is not only a legacy of the late Sen. Edward Kennedy (D-Mass.) but also a fulfillment of the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) that will not cost taxpayers any money.

Sens. Tom Harkin (D-Iowa), Christopher Dodd (D-Conn.), Robert Casey (D-Pa.), and Paul Kirk (D-Mass.) were joined by advocates for the CLASS Act at a Capitol Hill press conference on Dec. 11 to bolster support for the new federal insurance program for long term care.

Intense debate and political wrangling by Senate leaders may have led to its inclusion in the health reform

measure, which was passed on Christmas Eve.

At its heart, the CLASS Act gives people with severe disabilities an opportunity to live independently by providing cash benefits from their

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own voluntary savings to pay for nurse assistants and equipment that would allow them to perform activities of daily living, like bathing, eating, and going to the bathroom.

The individuals would pay premiums to the government for their indepen-

dent care needs, which proponents said will save the government billions in saved benefit expenditures.

The CLASS Act, first introduced by Sen. Kennedy, is in the Senate health reform bill as well as the House version, but the four Democrats wanted to take the time to explain its necessity and answer critics who think the program is unsustainable and fiscally risky. They also depicted the program as a major cost saver.

“Not one penny of taxpayer money goes into this program,” Dodd said, in calling the act a “very simple, cost-effective, and practical step to allow millions of Americans to maintain their dignity.”

The Congressional Budget Office estimates that the Senate version of the program will save \$72 billion over 10 years (2010-2019) and the House, \$102 billion.

Still, opponents think the program will not be able to sustain itself over time, as people with less than severe disabilities become qualified and/or costs become overwhelming.

The fear is that the program would only draw a small, sicker portion of the population and cause soaring premiums.

The private long term care insurance industry is also against the measure, fearing its business will get crowded out by a large new government program.

Harkin stressed the program’s promise in meeting the final two of the ADA’s long-held goals of providing people with disabilities with economic self-sufficiency and independent living. These individuals, he said, can maintain their jobs while benefitting from their own savings to stay out of nursing facilities.

—Patrick Connole

Nursing Home Week Theme Chosen

National Nursing Home Week (NNHW) 2010 will be celebrated in nursing and rehabilitation facilities nationwide, beginning Mother’s Day, May 9, and continuing through May 15, 2010. The theme of the event, which is sponsored by the American Health Care Association (AHCA), is *Enriching Every Day*, selected to honor those who are “enriching every day” for others, thus adding value to life and overcoming many of the infirmities of age and disability.

NNHW spotlights nursing facility residents and staff and encourages all to celebrate those that make a positive difference in their lives every day.

As it does each year, AHCA has developed a planning guide and promotional products for this observance, including thought-provoking activities to celebrate the lives of residents and to



recognize the quality of care provided in America’s nursing and rehabilitation facilities.

The planning guide activities will be designed to foster intergenerational connections, strengthen relationships with family members, recognize all staff members and volunteers who demonstrate exceptional caregiving, and define quality on a day-to-day basis.

—Meg LaPorte