

WHITE PLAINS, MD - Congressman Steny Hoyer today met with Charles County Health Officer, Dr. Chinnadurai Devadason (Dr. D), and more than 100 Charles County Public Health Department Employees to discuss with them the importance of investing in our public health. Rep. Hoyer met with the Health Department in recognition of National Public Health Week, observed this year from April 5 through April 11. Following are Congressman Hoyer's remarks as prepared for delivery:

"In celebration of Public Health Week, I am pleased to be here with you - the professionals that ensure the health of our citizens. "Look to your health," said Izaak Walton nearly 400 years ago, "and if you have it, praise God and value it next to conscience."

"I would like to begin by speaking about some of the federal issues we are working on in Washington and would like to start with the federal budget. Three and one-half years ago, we had a projected 10-year budget surplus of \$5.6 trillion - money over and beyond what we needed. But today, we face a record budget deficit of more than half a trillion dollars and estimated deficits over the next decade of more than \$4 trillion.

"On March 25, we had one of our biggest votes of the year on the fiscal 2005 budget resolution. But, rather than honestly addressing this record deficit spending, some have prescribed another round of tax cuts that make it virtually impossible to address crucial national issues and will force our children to pay our bills for decades to come - the House Republicans' budget would actually increase deficits over the next five years by nearly \$250 billion.

"The fiscal health national budget has a direct impact on our nation's health care. There are nearly 44 million Americans without health insurance today -- an increase of 4 million since 2001 -- including 700,000 Marylanders. We are the richest, most talented, most powerful nation on earth. And yet, one in six of us has no health insurance.

"This year, I supported a wide array of proposals to expand health coverage - but some have opposed these proposals, for one, because we don't have the resources to do that. However, I don't believe that an appropriate solution is proposing deep, unacceptable cuts to health care. The budget in front of us would require more than \$2 billion in cuts to Medicaid. You know Maryland could not sustain this cut.

"The budget also allows more than \$1 billion in SCHIP funding to expire on September 30th -- funds that would otherwise be redistributed to the states to cover low-income children. Maryland could use a portion of that funding because the state's budget is squeezed. And, the federal budget ignores the needs of the public health system. Funding for public health programs would be reduced by \$1.1 billion below last year's level when you factor in inflation.

"I sit on the committee that funds discretionary health programs at the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services. I know how important they are: public health programs require a relatively small investment up front, but they pay big dividends for our society in the long run.

"For instance, I am pleased that Secretary Tommy Thompson has worked with our committee to focus on the epidemic of obesity. If we could prevent more childhood obesity, we could drastically improve the health of our nation, and reduce the incidence of diabetes and other chronic conditions.

"I have also worked with my colleagues to increase funding for childhood immunizations. We spend about \$630 million a year on this, much of which goes directly to local health departments so that you can purchase vaccinations and immunize children. Last year's flu epidemic took 93 children and highlighted the importance of this local immunization infrastructure. I am anxious to hear from you on how we can further improve this important effort.

"I have also worked with our Committee to provide funding for state and local preparedness, to prepare for a biological or chemical attack. Since September 11, we've sent about \$2 billion dollars to the states for this purpose, but recent reports from health organizations, have shown that there is still much more work to be done. Unfortunately, I am dismayed that this year the President has proposed to slash these preparedness dollars by about \$130 million. I will be working to restore those funds.

"Let me also briefly talk about health disparities, as it is the theme of this year's public health week. In 2002, the Institute of Medicine issued a report that found that minorities are less likely than whites to have private health insurance, and, even if they have insurance, minorities are less likely to receive the same quality of care.

"In Maryland, African Americans account for 84% of all new AIDS cases, even though they comprise less than 27% of the population. And, death from diabetes occurs twice as frequently among African Americans as it does among whites. Last year, I joined the Congressional Black Caucus, the Congressional Hispanic Caucus, and the Congressional Asian Pacific American Caucus in introducing the "Healthcare Equality and Accountability Act of 2003." This comprehensive piece of legislation takes major steps towards eliminating these disparities.

"Let me conclude by saying that a nation's support for improving their health care is a matter of choice. We as a nation can choose to make this a priority, or we can ignore it. Our long-term budget decisions reveal our values and priorities and I am concerned that the budget decisions made by the current Republican leadership and President unfortunately have put health care in jeopardy.

"I don't believe health care is a right, but I do believe that any society that does not invest in the health of its people is a society that will suffer. Some countries cannot afford to provide their citizens with health care, but in the United States, the wealthiest nation in the world, that is neither a reason nor an excuse. What I do believe is that our people have the right to expect a solid return on their investment in our federal government in the way of quality and affordable health services.

"I will continue to fight to make health care a priority and look forward to working with you to ensure that is the case. Thank you for all that you do."

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