



Senate Leaders Hold Press Conference on the CLASS Act

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Washington, D.C. – Before a crowd of over 50 members of the media and general public, four leading Senate HELP Committee Democrats; Senator Paul Kirk (D-MA), Senator Tom Harkin (D-IA), Senator Robert Casey (D-PA) and Senator Chris Dodd (D-CT) held a press conference addressing a significant health care reform provision – the CLASS Act.

The Community Living Assistance Supports and Services Act (CLASS Act) creates a national, voluntary disability insurance program where individuals have the option to pay into a fund and receive one of two tiered benefit plans. The money provided through the Act will then be able to be used to purchase supports and services that are often times not paid for through Medicaid or other long term supports and services insurance.

Members of both the disability and aging communities have endorsed the CLASS Act citing its importance in ensuring that all Americans are able to be independent and productive members of society. Hopeful of its passage, Senator Harkin noted that it's "Incogitable that 20 years after the Americans with Disabilities Act, four goals have not been met." Those goals being independent living and economic self-sufficiency, of which the ADA, passed in 1990, intended to achieve for the millions of Americans living with a disability.

Echoing the words of Harkin, Senator Casey remarked that the CLASS Act is "really about independence...it's also about the dignity of being able to work..." A barrier to employment for so many individuals with disabilities is accessibility to quality and affordable health care. Despite the fact that many individuals with disabilities seek to become active and engaged members in America's workforce, many of them rely on Social Security benefits and Medicaid and ultimately face the possibility of losing health benefits if they become employed and begin generating too much income.

Seeing the CLASS Act as one solution to overcoming a barrier to employment, Senator Casey explained that the CLASS Act "is a bridge, a pathway and on one end there's a person who wants to work...but can't get there...this is but a bridge." Much credit was given where perhaps it's due most, to the late Senator Ted Kennedy (D-MA) who has been a pioneer on behalf of the disability community for years. Speaking with high regard towards Ted Kennedy, each Senator explained that if hadn't been for his innovative strategies and strong desire to see that every person has access to affordable health care, the CLASS Act may be nothing more than a concept.

As a matter of personalizing the press conference and bringing to life the true reality of the CLASS Act, members of the disability and aging communities told their personal life stories. Kelly Buckland, Executive Director for the National Council on Independent Living, shared his story of suffering a spinal cord injury. For him, the CLASS Act will mean he can continue to work and live an independent life. As a middle-aged woman living with Cerebral Palsy, Elizabeth Prio expressed the importance of planning for your future. As she explained, “you never know when you may become disabled” and preparing for the long-term is important. The CLASS Act will allow individuals to do just that, save money for services that may be needed later on down the road because of disability or old age. Speaking on behalf of the aging community was the daughter of an elderly woman who shared her story of how she has been forced to balance two lives – her family’s life and the life of taking care of her mother. Representing an important yet often times forgotten viewpoint was that of those who are providing the daily personal care services. A vibrant personal care attendant gave her account of what the CLASS Act will mean for so many of the individuals that she cares for – the chance to stay at home near their family versus being placed in a nursing home.

Following the personal stories that shed light on what the reality is for many Americans today, the Senators took a brief moment to address questions from the media. Reiterating the fact that the CLASS Act is economically sound and will not require any tax payer dollars to operate, Senators Harkin and Dodd explained that its fiscal solvency is what is so remarkable about the Act. Its ability to sustain itself over the years is what many believe will make it a strong program.

While no one knows exactly when Congress will have a final piece of health care reform legislation completed, one thing is for sure, the CLASS Act has many supporters and the momentum to continue to move things forward is strong. Those who left the press conference undoubtedly had Senator Harkin’s initial remarks regarding the CLASS Act ringing in their ears, “We’re gonna get this over the finish line – mark my words.”