

Murphy Questions Bush Administration's Commitment to ER Preparedness for Catastrophic Events

Contact: Kristen Bossi

(202) 225-4476

WASHINGTON, D.C. - Today, Congressman Chris Murphy (CT-5) questioned two Cabinet Secretaries at a House Oversight and Government Reform Committee hearing on how the President's proposed Medicaid cuts will affect the ability of emergency rooms nationwide to absorb a surge in patients produced by a natural disaster or a terrorist attack.

"Our community hospitals will be asked to do the impossible in the event of another terrorist attack or other catastrophic event. We know that right now, as hospitals close or decrease their hours and capacity, we aren't capable of fulfilling our responsibility to treat those in need. And the Medicaid cuts proposed by President Bush will only exacerbate the problem," said Murphy, who served as the Chairman of the Public Health Committee for four years when he was in the state legislature.

Department of Homeland Security Secretary Michael Chertoff and Department of Health and Human Services Secretary Michael Leavitt were invited to discuss the Committee's survey of hospitals in cities deemed at risk of a terrorist attack. The report concluded that more than half of 34 hospitals in seven cities, including the two that will host this summer's presidential nominating conventions, do not have the ER space to accept severely injured patients.

The President has proposed seven damaging Medicaid cuts, three of which will directly affect ERs by cutting funding for public and teaching hospitals which are major providers of emergency care. According to Families USA, the implementation of the seven new Medicaid regulations in Connecticut would result in a loss of \$83.5 million in federal funding, about \$174 million in business activity, and approximately 1,500 jobs in the first year. In April, the House passed H.R. 5613, the Protecting the Medicaid Safety Net Act, placing a moratorium until March 2009 on the cuts. President Bush has threatened

to veto the bill, despite the fact that it is supported by all 50 Governors, both Democratic and Republican.

Between 1993 and 2003, ER use nationwide grew by 26%, twice the rate of population growth. At the same time ER utilization was increasing, 425 hospitals closed their ERs and the health care industry reduced inpatient capacity by 198,000 inpatient beds. With more patients going to the emergency room, and fewer beds to accommodate them, ER crowding became a visible problem.

"As a state policy maker, I knew that Medicaid was about more than helping people - we help the institutions that serve people. It is harder these days for hospitals to keep their doors open, so these dangerous Medicaid cuts will further hurt our hospitals and our ability to respond in a crisis," said Murphy.

###