NEW YORK STATE SENATOR

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Oppenheimer and Latimer Team Up to Require Insurance Companies to Cover Cost of Bone Marrow Testing

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Legislation will eliminate financial burden on potential donors

Each year, more than 10,000 people require bone marrow transplants to treat life-threatening diseases such as lymphomas, leukemias, anemias, immune deficiency disorders, multiple myeloma and tumors. Approximately 70% of them cannot find a suitable match within their own families and must look elsewhere. To encourage new bone marrow donors, Senator Suzi Oppenheimer (D-Mamaroneck) and Assemblyman George Latimer (D-Rye) have introduced legislation (S.4350/A.6459) that would require health insurers to cover the cost of testing potential donors.

The stem cells found in human bone marrow offer the most effective form of treatment for many life-threatening blood illnesses. Unfortunately, patients in need of stem cells must find a suitable match of human leukocyte antigens. While the National Marrow Donor Program (NMDP) was established to facilitate bone marrow transplants, the cost of testing potential new donors remains an obstacle, limiting the number of individuals in the NMDP. Since most insurance companies do not cover the expense of tissue typing, willing donors must expend $50-100 in out-of-pocket costs just to place their names in the registry.

The NMDP has about 9 million possible donors in its registry, with about 723,000 potential donors joining in 2010. The NMDP's Be the Match Foundation Patient Assistance Program helped secure many of these donors, but more must be done to attract even more registrants.

"No one should have to pay for the privilege of helping to save another's life," said Senator Oppenheimer. "The cost of testing potential new donors pales in comparison to that of treating patients while they await a transplant," she observed, "so expanding the national bone marrow registry will not only saves lives, but medical costs as well."

Assemblyman Latimer noted that "We owe a significant debt of gratitude to citizens like Marcy Kalkut of Rye and Elisabeth Radow of Larchmont, who have taken voluntary action to bring this issue to attention in New York State. They have advanced the expansion of the bone marrow registry by sponsoring local donor drives in our Sound Shore communities, and it was their separate energies that led to this legislation. I am encouraged by the bi-partisan legislative support we are receiving for this common sense initiative."

In these tough economic times, we cannot allow the cost of tissue typing to deter generous donors from offering their potentially life-saving bone marrow to those suffering from devastating blood disorders. "Requiring health insurance coverage for this one-time testing procedure is not only the logical and responsible course, but the humane one as well," said the legislators.

The legislation is currently pending before the Insurance Committees of both the Senate and Assembly. Senator Oppenheimer and Assemblyman Latimer vowed to work to bring the bill before their respective houses for a full vote before the end of the 2011 legislative session.