

Smith Introduces Bill to Combat Skyrocketing Lyme Disease Cases

February 6, 2007 - WASHINGTON, D.C. – In an effort to address the escalating number of Lyme disease cases in New Jersey and across the nation, U.S. Rep. Chris Smith (R-NJ) announced today that he has introduced bipartisan legislation to authorize a \$100 million, five-year plan to dramatically expand Lyme disease research and education.

Smith's bill—the “Lyme and Tick-Borne Disease Prevention, Education, and Research Act of 2007” (H.R. 741)—would improve tests used to diagnose Lyme disease, enhance the public health surveillance systems and improve our public education campaign to prevent new cases of Lyme disease. It also would create an advisory committee on Lyme and other tick-borne diseases.

“The number of reported Lyme disease cases in New Jersey has skyrocketed in recent years. Our state currently ranks third in the nation in the number of reported cases, trailing only our regional neighbors, New York and Pennsylvania. We must increase our investment in understanding and combating Lyme disease before these numbers reach epidemic proportions,” said Smith.

In 2005, the number of reported cases of Lyme disease climbed to a record high of 3,372 in New Jersey and approximately 22,000 nationally. Since only 10% of cases are actually reported, approximately 220,000 Americans developed Lyme disease in 2005 (the most current numbers available).

“The US Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) admits that if more accurate diagnosis and reporting procedures were in place, their own data would peg the actual number of cases in New Jersey at over 30,000 in 2005. Improving testing and surveillance should lead us to a more accurate reflection of the extent of the outbreak in our state and across the nation,” said Smith.

Symptoms of Lyme disease may include fever, headache, fatigue, and sometimes a rash, which may be an expanding bull's eye shape. If not diagnosed and treated early, Lyme disease can lead to chronic illness and can affect every system in the body, including the central nervous system and cardiac systems. Due to the debilitating affects of Lyme, many patients lose their jobs and must apply for disability.

A long-time advocate of Lyme disease research and prevention funding, Smith has introduced legislation aimed at increasing Lyme disease research and awareness in previous sessions of Congress. Last July, Smith convened a Lyme disease summit, bringing together the national director of the Center for Disease Control (CDC) Julie Gerberding, other lawmakers, doctors and activists to discuss ways patient and physician needs could be better met.

The “Lyme and Tick-Borne Disease Prevention, Education, and Research Act of 2007” (H.R. 741) is the first legislation in the 110th Congress to specifically address Lyme disease. Thirteen members of the House signed on as original cosponsors, four Republicans and nine Democrats.

“As the numbers show, the Lyme disease outbreak is only going to get worse the longer we wait to address it. I will continue to vigorously work with my colleagues in Congress to secure passage of this important bill to enhance our ability to treat this debilitating disease and begin to reverse the trend of record Lyme disease cases,” said Smith.