

Written by Jack D'Annibale
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By Jack d'Annibale, Communications Director

WASHINGTON DC – Today, Congressman Michael Honda (CA-15), Congressman Bill Cassidy M.D. (LA-6) and Senator John Kerry of Massachusetts introduced the Viral Hepatitis Testing Act of 2011, a giant leap forward in our concerted national effort to fight – and ultimately eradicate – Hepatitis B and C in America.

“I have worked for many years, through numerous bills and letters, to champion the issue of viral hepatitis,” said Congressman Honda. “Today’s updated bi-partisan legislation, along with strategic investments in public health and prevention programs, will save billions of dollars and the lives of tens of thousands of Americans. Today, we sound the alarm – louder than ever before – on this silent killer. Today, in the name of over five million Americans who suffer from viral hepatitis, we break the silence and we fight back.”

“As a doctor who treats liver disease, I know the harm caused by viral hepatitis and the importance of increased screening and knowledge of the liver disease,” said Dr. Bill Cassidy. “Millions of Americans and American families are affected by liver disease. Billions of taxpayer dollars are spent on hospitalizations that could have been avoided by earlier detection. This bi-partisan legislation will help identify and treat hepatitis before it’s too late – saving lives, money and hopefully stopping this killer.”

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Viral hepatitis is more common than HIV/AIDs but remains unrecognized as a serious threat to public health. In addition, viral hepatitis disproportionately impacts racial and ethnic populations. For example, Hepatitis C virus is twice as prevalent among African Americans as among Caucasians. Asian Americans comprise more than half of the known hepatitis B population in the United States and consequently maintain the highest rate of liver cancer among all ethnic groups. Despite the pervasive nature of Hepatitis B and C, health providers do not screen Americans at high-risk for hepatitis. There is no federal funding for core public health services for viral hepatitis. Nor is there any federal funding to educate the public about the risks of chronic hepatitis B and C or get people proper treatment once they're infected.

"Viral hepatitis is a silent killer," said Senator Kerry. "Many people don't even know they have hepatitis B or C until it causes liver damage or even cancer years after the initial infection. Today as many as 5.3 million Americans are battling this disease, but we still don't have a national strategy to back them up in their fight. This bill will strengthen awareness, prevention, and treatment, hopefully stopping this silent disease from spreading further and claiming more lives."

The Viral Hepatitis Testing Act of 2011 will establish four measurable goals to keep track of progress in the fight against this silent killer:

- **Authorize testing programs.**

This will increase the number of individuals who are aware of their infection. Today around 75 percent of people carrying viral hepatitis don't know they are infected. In five years, improved testing can flip that statistic - with an estimated 75 percent of infected people aware of their status by 2016. Testing Programs will also focus these efforts on minority communities that are at higher risk of infection.

· Authorize the development and distribution of public information about viral hepatitis detection and control of infections .

Education is a crucial step in making hepatitis a detectable and manageable disease.

· Authorize better coordination of medical treatment and counseling so that infected people have access to the best services.

· Improve the education, training, and skills of health professionals in the detection and control of viral hepatitis infections

Providers must have the skills they need to tackle this public health threat.

Additional Background

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According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), viral hepatitis is a top 10 infectious disease killer and the leading cause of liver cancer and cirrhosis worldwide. Hepatitis B and Hepatitis C alone cause approximately 80% of the world's liver cancer. Approximately 500 million people, or 1 in 12 persons worldwide, suffer from chronic viral hepatitis infections. A million of those who are infected die each year from liver issues caused by the disease. Many of those who are chronically infected with viral hepatitis are unaware of their infection, which is why it is often referred to as a “silent killer.”