

For Immediate Release

Feb. 14, 2011

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American Association of Poison Control Centers:

House Proposal to Cut Poison Centers Would Devastate Public Health

Alexandria, Va. – The House of Representatives late last week announced plans to cut \$27 million from the federal poison control program – a move that would effectively lead to the closure of many U.S. poison centers, cause health care costs to skyrocket and erode the nation's public health system.

"For decades, the public has relied on poison centers to offer advice on how to treat exposures to the deadliest of substances," said Richard Dart, MD, PhD, president of the American Association of Poison Control Centers and the director of the Rocky Mountain Poison and Drug Center in Denver, Colo. "This move would be beyond devastating for public health."

According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, accidental poisoning is the second-leading cause of unintentional injury death in the United States, trailing only automobile accidents. U.S. poison centers took more than four million calls in fiscal year 2009, offering free, confidential information and professional medical advice to those exposed to poisons ranging from carbon monoxide to snake bites to food poisoning.

As part of a sweeping series of proposed budget cuts announced last week, House Appropriations Committee Chairman Hal Rogers, (R-KY), announced that the committee had proposed eliminating \$27 million from the federal poison control program in the continuing resolution – a bill that would fund the government after March 4, 2011. In recent years, poison centers have emerged as a leader in public health surveillance, thanks to the National Poison Data System, the only near-real time data system containing all poison exposures reported to the U.S. poison centers. In addition, poison centers provided support to state and local governments responding to the H1N1 flu pandemic. In 2010, they managed health exposures and collected invaluable data for public health agencies on the impact of the Gulf Oil Spill. Poison centers recently were also the *first* to raise the alarm about the toxic effects of synthetic marijuana and products marketed as bath salts.

"Poison centers detect public health threats as they emerge," said Alvin C. Bronstein, MD, acting director of toxicosurveillance for the American Association of Poison Control Centers and medical director of the Rocky Mountain Poison and Drug Center. "Without poison centers, Americans will lack a key tool in detecting biological, chemical and other emerging threats to public health."

Study after study has illustrated the cost-benefit of poison centers. A 2008 study conducted in Arizona and published in the *Journal of Medical Toxicology* found that 70 percent of patients treated at home with the help of a poison center would've otherwise paid unnecessary medical expenses at their local hospital. That study estimated that poison centers saved \$33 million in state-funded health care costs in one year. Put another way: For every dollar the state of Arizona spent on the poison center, it saved about \$36 in unnecessary health care charges. And in Louisiana, poison center administrators estimate that a call to the state's poison center costs around \$33. An uncomplicated emergency department visit in that state costs between \$600 and \$800.

"Poison centers treat nearly 75 percent of all exposure cases at home, without the patient having to go to a health care facility," said Jim Hirt, executive director of the American Association of Poison Control Centers. "And in 2009, more than 16 percent of all poison center exposure calls came from a health care facility, meaning doctors, nurses and other medical professionals rely upon the poison center for professional advice. If that line goes dead, it will be disastrous."

Currently, 57 poison centers cover all 50 states as well as the District of Columbia, Puerto Rico, American Samoa, the Federated States of Micronesia, Guam and the U.S. Virgin Islands.

Even before the House bill was introduced, many poison centers have endured years of damaging budget cuts. At the end of 2010, New York closed three of its five poison centers.

"For centers already facing budgetary pressure, the loss of federal funding will mean certain closure," Dart said. "The costs of this cut would ultimately far exceed the \$27 million saved."

About the American Association of Poison Control Centers:

The American Association of Poison Control Centers supports the nation's 57 poison centers in their efforts to treat and prevent poisoning. Poison centers offer free, confidential medical advice 24 hours a day, seven days a week.

If you have questions about poisons, or you believe you've been exposed to something that could be bad for you, call your poison center at 1-800-222-1222.