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Letter to the Alaska State Legislature

from

The Honorable Frank H. Murkowski

United States Senator

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April 26, 2001

Juneau, Alaska

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Dear Senator Halford and Representative Porter:

As you know, I have traditionally given great deference to the work of Alaska's state legislature, and it is not my custom to become involved with its activities. I believe it is my duty to respond to the state's concerns and calls for help--rather than to interject myself into internal debates. However, the needs of a small number of Alaskan women force me to diverge from my common practice. It is a very important priority for me to see that Alaska Senate Bill 38, extending Medicaid coverage to a few uninsured low income Alaskan women with breast or cervical cancer, is passed by the legislature before the end of this legislative session.

In 1990, Congress recognized the importance of screening and early detection--establishing the National Breast and Cervical Cancer Early Detection Program. This program provided screenings to uninsured, low income women across the country. Unfortunately, for those women who were diagnosed with cancer, the program failed to provide insurance coverage that would have allowed them to receive medical treatment.

Last year, Congress enacted the Breast and Cervical Cancer Prevention and Treatment Act, legislation I co-wrote. This law fulfilled Congress' 1990 commitment to the victims of these cancers by permitting states to extend Medicaid coverage to cover the costs of treating these illnesses which, untreated, are almost always fatal. We will continue to help lower-income, uninsured women access needed preventive health care services. But now our commitment will not stop with a screening. If problems are found, the federal government will work with the state to provide necessary treatment services to women facing cancer diagnoses. But to accomplish this, the state legislature must adopt SB 38. For this, I need your immediate help.

I recognize that there are concerns about creating disease-specific Medicaid eligibility categories. However, this legislation deals with a thoroughly unique set of circumstances. The new Medicaid eligibility category is specifically linked to a unique and existing federal screening program, and should not be viewed as a precedent for

extending Medicaid eligibility body-part by body-part. Additionally, Medicaid coverage would only be available during the period in which the individual requires breast or cervical cancer treatment.

As you know, I am very sensitive to the costs associated with the Medicaid program in Alaska. In 1997, I was able to change the federal government's Medicaid formula to enable the state to bear a smaller share of Medicaid costs. This saved the state approximately \$100 million over three years. Just last year, I won an additional \$200 million of federal dollars--a 20 percent increase above the previous adjustment--to expand our state's Medicaid program over the next five years. As a result, in FY 2002 alone, the state will receive an additional \$40 million from my legislation.

The cost of extending Medicaid coverage to the estimated 42 eligible women diagnosed under the CDC program in 2002 will be \$175,800, as the federal government will pay for 70.17% of total expenditures. In light of these facts, I strongly believe that the state can afford to extend Medicaid coverage to these women--and can use these additional funds to accomplish this goal.

We must work quickly to ensure that the state extends coverage to these women. We have the money, and there certainly is a need. While this is a small segment of Alaska's population, it is our duty to heed their call for help. It must be recognized that Alaskan women have the second highest rate of breast cancer in the nation. With such an epidemic in our state, I would hate for Alaska to stand out as one of the few states that fail to provide this life-or-death benefit.

Please feel free to call me or my staff if we can provide you with any additional information or to discuss the merits of this legislation. Together, we can ensure that needy women in Alaska receive the care and coverage they deserve.

Sincerely,

/s/

Frank H. Murkowski
United States Senator