

March of Dimes Foundation

Massachusetts Chapter
March of Dimes
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Chairman Sanchez, Chairman Keenan, and members of the Public Health Committee:

Thank you for the opportunity to testify in front of you today. My name is Dr. Marianne Felice and I am a Professor of Pediatrics and Obstetrics/Gynecology at the University of Massachusetts Medical School and the former Chair of Pediatrics at the University of Massachusetts Medical School. I have spent most of my career addressing the problems associated with teenage pregnancy as well as investigating the disparity in mortality rates of infants born to Non-Hispanic White women and Non-Hispanic Black Infants. So, preventing neural tube defects in infants of all races and ethnic groups is an issue that is important to me.

I am here to add support to the testimony of the March of Dimes in favor of House Bill 2103 - An Act Relative to Folic Acid Awareness and Birth Defects Prevention, sponsored by Representative Aaron Vega.

Neural Tube Defects are birth defects of the brain, spine, or spinal cord. They occur very early in pregnancy, within the first month of pregnancy, often before a woman even realizes that she is pregnant. The two most common defects are spina bifida and anencephaly. In spina bifida, the fetal spinal column does not completely close and infants are born with permanent nerve damage that causes partial or full paralysis of the legs. In anencephaly, much of the brain and skull does not develop. These babies are either stillborn or die shortly after birth. One can only imagine the emotional, physical, and financial burden of these defects.

In 1991, approximately 25 babies out of 100,000 births were born with spina bifida and 18 babies out of 100,000 were born with anencephaly. By 2006, these numbers had decreased to 18 for spina bifida and 11 for anencephaly. The numbers have not changed much since then. There are no cures for neural tube defects at this time. That is why prevention is so important. When prevention is as simple as taking folic acid on a daily basis, it seems reasonable that as a group of concerned citizens, we would advocate strongly for such a measure.

Passage of this bill would give the Department of Public Health the mandate and the opportunity to work with colleagues throughout the state to educate women of child bearing age to consume folic acid as a preventative measure to further reduce the occurrence of neural tube defects.

Thank you for the opportunity to present to you.

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