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Leading Learning and Developmental Disabilities Organizations Welcome Landmark Chemical Legislation Introduced to Protect Health and Healthy Development

Coalition Supports Bill, But Seeks Improvements

April 22 - Leaders in the learning and developmental disabilities sector welcome the landmark “Safe Chemicals Act of 2010,” introduced today by Senator Lautenberg and Congressmen Waxman and Rush. The event marks a long path to legislation that would reform the way the federal government protects the public from toxic chemicals, currently regulated by the Toxic Substances Control Act of 1976 (TSCA).

“Our organizations have been working on Capitol Hill to drive home the message that developing brains need protection from toxic chemicals and that the health cost of continuing present policy is too high in intellectual damage and in dollars” said Maureen Swanson, Director of the Healthy Children Project of the Learning Disabilities Association of America (LDA). In addition to LDA, the American Association on Intellectual and Developmental Disabilities, The Autism Society, and the National Association for the Dually Diagnosed, along with partners in the Safer Chemicals Healthy Families coalition have been pressing for chemical policy reform.

“The Safe Chemicals Act goes a long way toward bringing chemical policy into the 21st century,” said Andy Igrejas, Director of Safer Chemicals, Healthy Families. “We look forward to working with Congress to strengthen the bill to keep dangerous chemicals out of the marketplace.” The effects of toxic chemicals on public health are outlined in the coalition’s Health Report (<http://healthreport.saferchemicals.org/>).

The new legislation would amend the Toxic Substances Control Act, which has never been significantly changed since its adoption in 1976. Of the 80,000 chemicals available for use in the U.S., the Environmental Protection Agency has been able to require safety testing of only 200. Since its passage, evidence has been accumulating that chemicals such as lead, mercury, bisphenol A (BPA), and polybrominated diphenylethers (flame retardants) may harm the developing brain at levels much lower than those previously considered safe.

“We have been working toward this day with a focus on chemicals that may impact brain development, but really our shared and urgent concern is that our children are so vulnerable to harm from toxic chemical exposures,” said Joyce Martin, Director of Environmental Health at the American Association for Intellectual and Developmental Disabilities.

As detailed in “Mind, Disrupted: How Toxic Chemicals May Affect Who We Are and How We Think,” a report issued by national leaders in the learning and developmental sector, [<http://www.minddisrupted.org/>], certain diseases and disabilities are increasing, including autism and ADHD, cancers in children, breast and prostate cancer, infertility and reproductive health problems, and asthma. The science now shows that some portion of these serious illnesses and conditions are linked to toxic chemical exposures, and often have their roots in toxic chemical exposures that took place during prenatal development or early childhood.

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The newly introduced Safe Chemicals Act includes a number of essential reforms that would substantially improve public health protections to help reduce the incidence of disease and disability linked to toxic chemical exposures. While there are differences between the House and Senate versions of the legislation, the bills would:

- Require chemical companies to develop and make publicly available basic health and safety information for all chemicals;
- Require chemicals to meet a safety standard that protects vulnerable sub-populations, including pregnant women and children;
- Establish a new program to identify communities that are “hot spots” for toxic chemicals and to take action to reduce exposures; and
- Expedite safety determinations and actions to restrict some of the most notorious chemicals, like formaldehyde, vinyl chloride, and flame retardants.

While supporting the legislation, leading learning and developmental disabilities organizations and many environmental health colleagues would like to see improvements in three critical areas. As currently drafted, the legislation would:

- Allow hundreds of new chemicals to enter the market and be used in products for many years without first requiring them to be shown to be safe;
- Not provide clear authority for EPA to immediately restrict production and use of the most dangerous chemicals, even persistent, bioaccumulative and toxic (PBT) chemicals like asbestos and lead, which already have been extensively studied and are restricted by governments around the world; and
- Would not require EPA to adopt the National Academy of Sciences’ recommendations to incorporate the best and latest science when determining the safety of chemicals, although the Senate bill does call on EPA to consider those recommendations.

“We look forward to working with Congress to develop a workable and defensible chemical policy for the nation,” said Donna Ferulo, ASA. “This can best be accomplished by closing loopholes for review of new chemicals, strengthening EPA’s authority to take swift action on the worst chemicals, and moving forward aggressively to protect our children from unregulated toxic chemicals.”

For more information and to take action to urge Congress to support the Safe Chemicals Act, go to www.saferchemicals.org.