

Office of the Governor
NEWS RELEASE

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GOVERNOR SIGNS LEGISLATION EXPANDING REPORTING REQUIREMENTS FOR HEPATITIS C CASES AND FOR LOCAL AND COUNTY MAINTENANCE OF VETERANS' MEMORIALS

Gov. Christie Whitman today signed legislation, which expands requirements for reporting newly diagnosed cases of hepatitis C to the Department of Health and Senior Services, and provides information to physicians and public health officers about hepatitis C.

The Governor also signed legislation that permits county and municipal governments to appropriate funds to develop, construct and maintain veterans' memorials in the state. The appropriations can be made to any governmental or not-for-profit entity established to develop, construct or maintain a veterans' memorial.

"The purpose of the hepatitis reporting legislation is to stop what's been called a `sleeping giant,'" the Governor said. "In many parts of the world, particularly in developing countries, hepatitis C equals or surpasses the HIV epidemic."

"It has struck almost four million Americans and claims between 8,000 and 10,000 lives in this country each year," she said. "It infects at least 144,000 people in our state, and results in 450 deaths."

According to Gov. Whitman, hepatitis C mostly affects individuals who received contaminated blood transfusions before 1990, or those who come in contact with contaminated blood through abuse of intravenous drugs, through body tattooing and body piercing, or on the job as health care employees.

She said the virus attacks up to 50 percent of veterans in veterans' hospitals, mainly because many patients in those hospitals had blood transfusions before 1990.

"It's estimated that almost 300,000 Americans got hepatitis C from transfusions before the first tests for the virus were created in 1990," the Governor said. "And that put a lot of our veterans right in the line of fire for this dreaded disease."

"And in this week when we celebrate Veterans Day and honor all those who served this nation so nobly in military service, we must rivet our attention on protecting their health," Gov. Whitman said. "They placed their nation first. We must place their health first on our list of priorities. They made the world safe for democracy. We must make their world safe from this dreaded disease."

The legislation, A-1860, requires hospitals and outpatient settings to report newly diagnosed cases of hepatitis C to the Department of Health and Senior Services

(DHSS). Previously, the law required only clinical laboratories to report the disease to DHSS.

It also requires the Commissioner of DHSS to provide written guidelines on hepatitis C to physicians and public health officers. The guidelines will encourage screening and diagnosis of those at high risk of contracting the disease.

The bill also requires DHSS to provide widespread educational and prevention materials on this infection.

The legislation was sponsored by Assembly Members Francis J. Blee (R-Atlantic) and Joan M. Quigley (D-Bergen/Hudson) and Senators John J. Matheussen (R-Camden/Gloucester) and Joseph F. Vitale (D-Middlesex).

The bill permitting county and municipal governments to appropriate funds for the development and maintenance of veterans' memorials, A-1987, was sponsored by Assembly Members Connie Myers (R-Warren/Hunterdon/Mercer) and George F. Geist (R-Camden/Gloucester). Under previous law municipalities were not permitted to appropriate such funds, while counties were permitted to do so only for the Vietnam Veterans' Memorial Foundation and maintenance of the Vietnam Veterans' Memorial at the Garden State

Arts Center.