“Freedom’s Victory” Not Found in President’s Pledge to Public Health Surveillance

St. Paul, Minnesota – For all his talk of liberty, President Bush appears to be pushing for ongoing government snooping in citizen lives, according to Citizens’ Council on Health Care (CCHC).

Although President Bush stated that “America will lead by defending liberty and justice, because they are right and true and unchanging for all people everywhere,” CCHC is concerned about a single sentence of the speech: “Knowledge gained from bioterrorism research will improve public health.”

“Liberty, by necessity, means freedom from ongoing and unwarranted government surveillance,” says Twila Brase, president of CCHC. “President Bush appears to support the mandatory reporting and the surveillance requirements of the CDC’s proposed Model State Emergency Health Powers Act.”

The Act, recently released by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) for consideration and implementation in every state, would require health care practitioners, health care facilities, and all pharmacies to report the names, addresses, occupations, and health care conditions of any individuals who “harbor any illness or health condition that may be potential cause of a public health emergency.”

“A direct line between governments, health plans and doctors would result. Enactment of the Health Powers Act would be the fulfillment of a dream for public health officials who have long claimed that that private medical records are public property. Unfortunately for citizens, the CDC plan appears to have the blessing of both the President and Congress,” Brase says.

The 2002 defense appropriations bill (H.R. 3338), approved by Congress before they adjourned in December 2001, provided $2.5 billion “to support activities related to countering potential biological, disease, and chemical threats to civilian populations.” Of that amount, the CDC received $100 million for upgrades and research and an additional $865 million for distribution to state and local public health agencies. The funds must divided between three programs, including existing grant programs that “address core public health capacity to identify, detect, monitor, and respond to threats to the public health.”

“The Health Powers Act, supported by $865 million, stands ready to place every citizen under surveillance through their doctor’s office. As of yet, the President shows no concern for tackling this threat to American freedom,” adds Brase.

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CCHC is an independent non-profit health care policy organization located in St. Paul, Minnesota