

The Honorable Harry Reid
United States Senate
Washington, DC 20510

The Honorable Mitch McConnell
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Dear Majority Leader Reid and Minority Leader McConnell:

As students across America are faced with sharply increasing student loan rates, we remain committed to enacting legislation that will maintain the student loan interest rate at 3.4 percent. With today's tough economy and high unemployment rate facing young Americans, we should not ask middle-class students and families to shoulder even more student loan debt.

Unfortunately, rather than finding common ground on a way to pay for this critical policy, the "Interest Rate Reduction Act," offered by Senate Republicans last week, includes an attempt to repeal the Prevention and Public Health Fund, which was created to help prevent disease, detect it early, and manage conditions before they become severe. This politically motivated proposal is both short-sighted and dangerously ill-advised, and as a result it fails to provide a serious response to addressing the approaching rate hike. For this reason, we write to strongly oppose any effort to pay for the cost of maintaining the 3.4 percent interest rate by cutting the Prevention and Public Health Fund.

The Prevention and Public Health Fund, which is critically important to protecting the health of all Americans, continues to save lives and dollars through important programs such as:

- \$226 million to reduce chronic diseases including diabetes and heart disease. Heart disease, which costs our nation about \$440 billion a year, disproportionately affects women and is the leading cause the death for women in this country. There are 42 million women that currently live with some form of heart disease in America.
- \$93 million for anti-tobacco education and support campaigns across the country. Cigarette smoking kills an estimated 400,000 people a year. If current smoking rates persist, more than 6 million kids living in the U.S. today will ultimately die from smoking. Right now this funding is supporting a national ad campaign, Tips From a Former Smoker. The ad campaign is expected to inspire half a million quit attempts and help at least 50,000 Americans quit smoking forever. Within two days of the first ad appearing, the number of calls to quit-lines nearly tripled. Tobacco use costs the U.S. almost \$96 billion annually in health care bills. Productivity losses from premature death total another \$97 billion.
- \$190 million for immunization programs. For every dollar spent on childhood immunizations, Americans save \$16 in costs to treat preventable illness. This modest investment will save our country over \$3 billion in unnecessary health care costs.

Right now, of the more than \$2.2 trillion spent nationally on health care in the U.S. every year, only four percent is estimated to be spent on prevention and public health. And yet, just as 92 percent of young Democrats and 78 percent of young Republicans say that making college loans affordable will help the economy, we know that that investing in prevention is one of our best bets for curtailing rising health care costs and saving money over the long term. Researchers at the New York Academy of Medicine have concluded that investments in proven community-based interventions to increase physical activity,

improve nutrition, and prevent smoking – the very programs supported by the Fund – will generate a return of \$5.60 for every \$1 spent.

For all of these reasons, we're far from alone in opposing this dangerous and short-sighted legislation. Student groups have joined hands with the nearly 800 national, state, and local organizations which are on record supporting this Fund. President Obama has made clear he would veto the proposal even if it passed the Congress.

College seniors who graduated in 2010 carried an average of \$25,250 in student loan debt; meanwhile, approximately 15% of young adults have a chronic disease, millions of whom stand to benefit from the Prevention Fund's evidence-based programs targeted at improving our nation's health status. To force our young people to choose between a healthy future and an affordable education is unconscionable. This is a time to help college students, not a time to fight old political battles over health care.

Sincerely,