

Office of the Governor

PO BOX 004
TRENTON, NJ 08625

NEWS RELEASE

CONTACT: Jayne O'Connor
Gene Herman
609-777-2600

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GOVERNOR MARKS TENTH YEAR OF SERVICE OF CATASTROPHIC ILLNESS RELIEF FUND; FUND HAS PROVIDED \$51 MILLION TO 2,200 FAMILIES FOR CHILDREN'S MEDICAL BILLS

Gov. Christie Whitman today emphasized her commitment to helping New Jersey families when she helped mark ten years of service by the Catastrophic Illness in Children Relief Fund. The fund provides financial assistance to families with uncovered medical bills related to their children's illnesses. The Governor also announced awards from the fund to families from Montvale and Robbinsville.

"When a child gets ill or injured, the cost of medical care can be devastating to a family. It's hard enough to deal with the medical problem, which deserves their full attention; the financial burden can be more than some families can possibly bear," the Governor said.

"We are proud that this fund is available -- and more than 2,200 families have benefited from the more than \$51 million we have awarded over the past decade," she said. "New Jersey is one family with many faces. What better way to honor that motto than to reach out a helping hand to families that are facing some of the toughest times of their lives?"

"As long as there are children and families in medical and financial need, I know the people of New Jersey will always support this wonderful and compassionate program. The care and concern New Jersey has for its citizens are some of the reasons why our state is such a great place to live, work and raise a family," the Governor said.

Gov. Whitman said so far this fiscal year, the fund has provided \$3.7 million to help 169 families pay the costs that insurance and other programs can't cover.

The Governor announced financial awards from the fund to two families at a State House ceremony. Robert and Gina DeCesare, of Montvale, and Don and Cathy Robbins, of Robbinsville, received awards of \$31,000 and \$46,900, respectively.

The DeCesares had health insurance when Mrs. DeCesare gave birth to their triplets, Natalie, Thomas and James, in October, 1996.

The children were born prematurely and required a two-month hospitalization. Although their insurance paid most of their medical expenses, the family was left with significant balances for each of their children. After hearing about the fund, the DeCesares applied for each child. The commission approved the award for the uncovered medical expenses of \$31,000.

The Robbins were uninsured this past summer when their eight-year-old daughter, Kelly, accidentally sustained severe lacerations to her left wrist and forearm from a glass storm door in their home. She required emergency room treatment, then was hospitalized for extensive surgery. She is currently continuing with physical therapy. The commission approved the award of \$46,900 to help the family with its outstanding medical expenses.

Senator Donald T. DiFrancisco (R-Middlesex/Morris/Somerset/Union), who sponsored the legislation that created the fund, joined the Governor at a State House ceremony.

"Providing much needed assistance to families who are struggling through a time of personal and financial crisis is what the Catastrophic Illness in Children Relief Fund Commission is all about, and reaching the greatest number of families in need has always been central to its mission," he said.

"The fund serves as a safety net for families," said Jane Lorber, chairperson of the commission. "It allows them to continue productive lives while caring for a sick child and coping with mounting medical bills."

The Catastrophic Illness in Children Relief Fund Commission is responsible for administering the fund and distributing the awards.

Families of any income level may qualify for assistance, and the fund does not limit coverage to specific diseases or diagnoses. As an example, expenses as a result of prematurity, appendicitis, asthma, cancer, mental health conditions, injuries, and congenital birth defects have been paid by the fund. Eligible medical and related expenses are those not fully covered by insurance, state or federal programs, or other sources such as fundraising, and include hospital and physician bills, medications, medical equipment, psychiatric care, home health care, and specialized home and vehicle modifications.

"We define catastrophic in terms of the economic impact the child's illness has on the family," explained Mary Ann Whiteman, executive director of the fund. "A family may have health insurance, but coverage can be inadequate when a child has a serious, expensive illness or injury. "With the help of the fund, families can avoid a financial crisis and return to the routine responsibilities of their lives."

Awards have ranged from \$476 to \$591,423.

The fund is maintained by an annual surcharge of \$1 per employee levied on all employers who are subject to the New Jersey Unemployment Compensation Law.

To be eligible, a child must have been 18 or younger when the medical expenses were incurred. In any prior, consecutive, 12-month period, dating back to 1988, eligible expenses must exceed 10 percent of the first \$100,000 of annual family income plus 15 percent of the excess income over \$100,000. To be eligible, a family must have lived in New Jersey for three months prior to the date of application to the fund.

For more information about the fund, persons can contact Mary Ann Whiteman at 609-292-0600 or call the Family Information Line at 800-335- FUND (3863).

