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## **Local MS Advocates Head to Richmond for Legislative Day**

*MS VA CAN to urge \$2 million appropriation for the Virginia Caregivers Grant Program*

WASHINGTON, D.C. – On January 18, nearly 40 advocates from the National Multiple Sclerosis Society visited the Virginia General Assembly to discuss the Virginia Caregivers Grant Program and other issues that directly affect people living with multiple sclerosis in Virginia. The group included staff members and volunteers from four Society chapters, including the National Capital Chapter, who serve as members of the Multiple Sclerosis Virginia Consumer and Caregiver Action Network (MS VA CAN).

One of the priority objectives of the MS VA CAN is to increase annual funding for the Virginia Caregivers Grant Program to \$2 million in 2007. The group met with approximately 40 legislators to emphasize the importance of additional caregiver assistance.

“We were able to share personal experiences and stories that don’t often come attached to government policy reports,” said Matt Murray, a volunteer and advocate at the National Capital Chapter who met with several legislative aides and delegates, including the Chairman of the House Appropriations Committee. “The delegates, senators and staff we spoke with seemed very receptive and often responded with stories of their own. As a group we were surprised to learn just how many of the policy players in Richmond have dealt with multiple sclerosis in their personal lives.”

The MS VA CAN estimates that the Virginia Caregivers Grant Program will need \$2 million of funding to serve all qualified Virginians, many of whom live with MS. If these funds are appropriated by the General Assembly, approved applicants will receive a grant of up to \$500 by December 31, 2007.

The Virginia Caregivers Grant Program was established in 1999 to provide annual grant payments of up to \$500 for caregivers who provide unreimbursed care to a relative with a mental or physical impairment and who earn a Virginia adjusted gross income of \$50,000 or less. Both the caregiver and the relative receiving care must meet certain eligibility requirements.

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The program offers valuable support to family caregivers; however, it has yet to be fully funded. In the 2000 fiscal year, the program received an initial appropriation of \$1.5 million, which was not enough to provide full grants to each approved applicant. Instead of receiving the full \$500, each of the 2,961 recipients received \$318. Funding for the program has been inconsistent since then. No payments were made to caregivers between the 2001 and 2003 fiscal years. The program received appropriations of \$100,000 in the 2004 fiscal year, \$150,000 in 2005 and \$350,000 in 2006.

The MS VA CAN officially represents more than 10,000 Virginians living with MS, though many more are likely affected by the disease. Many people with MS experience physical and sensory disabilities, so MS advocates often support many of the same issues as arthritis, spinal cord injury and vision impairment advocates.

### **About Multiple Sclerosis**

Multiple sclerosis interrupts the flow of information from the brain to the body and stops people from moving. Every hour in the United States, someone is newly diagnosed with MS, an unpredictable, often disabling disease of the central nervous system. Symptoms range from numbness and tingling to blindness and paralysis. The progress, severity and specific symptoms of MS in any one person cannot yet be predicted, but advances in research and treatment are moving us closer to a world free of MS. Most people with MS are diagnosed between the ages of 20 and 50, with more than twice as many women as men being diagnosed with the disease. MS affects more than 400,000 people in the U.S., and 2.5 million worldwide.

Studies show that early and ongoing treatment with an FDA-approved therapy can reduce future disease activity and improve quality of life for many people with multiple sclerosis. Talk to your health care professional and contact the National MS Society at [www.MSandYOU.org](http://www.MSandYOU.org) or (202) 296-5363 to learn about ways to help manage multiple sclerosis and about current research that may one day reveal a cure.

### **About the National Multiple Sclerosis Society**

MS stops people from moving. The National MS Society exists to make sure it doesn't. Locally, the National Capital Chapter provides a wide range of vital services in the areas of counseling, education, employment, information and referral, public policy development and advocacy, and financial assistance to the more than 18,000 people with MS and their families who live in the Washington, D.C. metropolitan area. For more information about MS or the National Capital Chapter, please call (202) 296-5363 or visit [www.MSandYOU.org](http://www.MSandYOU.org).

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