

Health

Congress pushes for defibrillators in schools

Bill would help pay for the lifesaving devices

By Robert Davis
USA TODAY

A grass-roots push to put defibrillators into every school — to revive children who suffer cardiac arrest as well as their teachers, custodians and visiting family members — may get a jolt from Congress.

Nobody knows today how many people collapse inside schools or at school sporting events from cardiac arrest, but cities and states have begun counting the numbers of lives saved by defibrillators in schools. The devices are required in federal buildings and airliners. An automated external defibrillator (AED) is a computerized device that talks users, including children, through lifesaving steps to zap a dying heart back to a normal beat during a cardiac arrest.

In Ohio, 13 lives have been saved with school defibrillators since 2005. In New York, 38 lives have been saved since 2002.

Schools are a logical place to put defibrillators, doctors say, because on any given day as much as 20% of a community's population passes through its schools.

Though many of the people saved by the defibrillators have been adults, the preventable deaths of children have fueled the grass-roots efforts. That includes 15-year-old Josh Miller of Barberton, Ohio, who died during a high school football game on Oct. 27, 2000.

His death is part of what is driving the effort in Congress to pass a bill that would provide federal matching money to help put the \$1,000 devices in every school. The bill, sponsored by Rep. Betty Sutton, D-Ohio, calls for 3-to-1 federal matching funds to pay for defibrillators in schools.

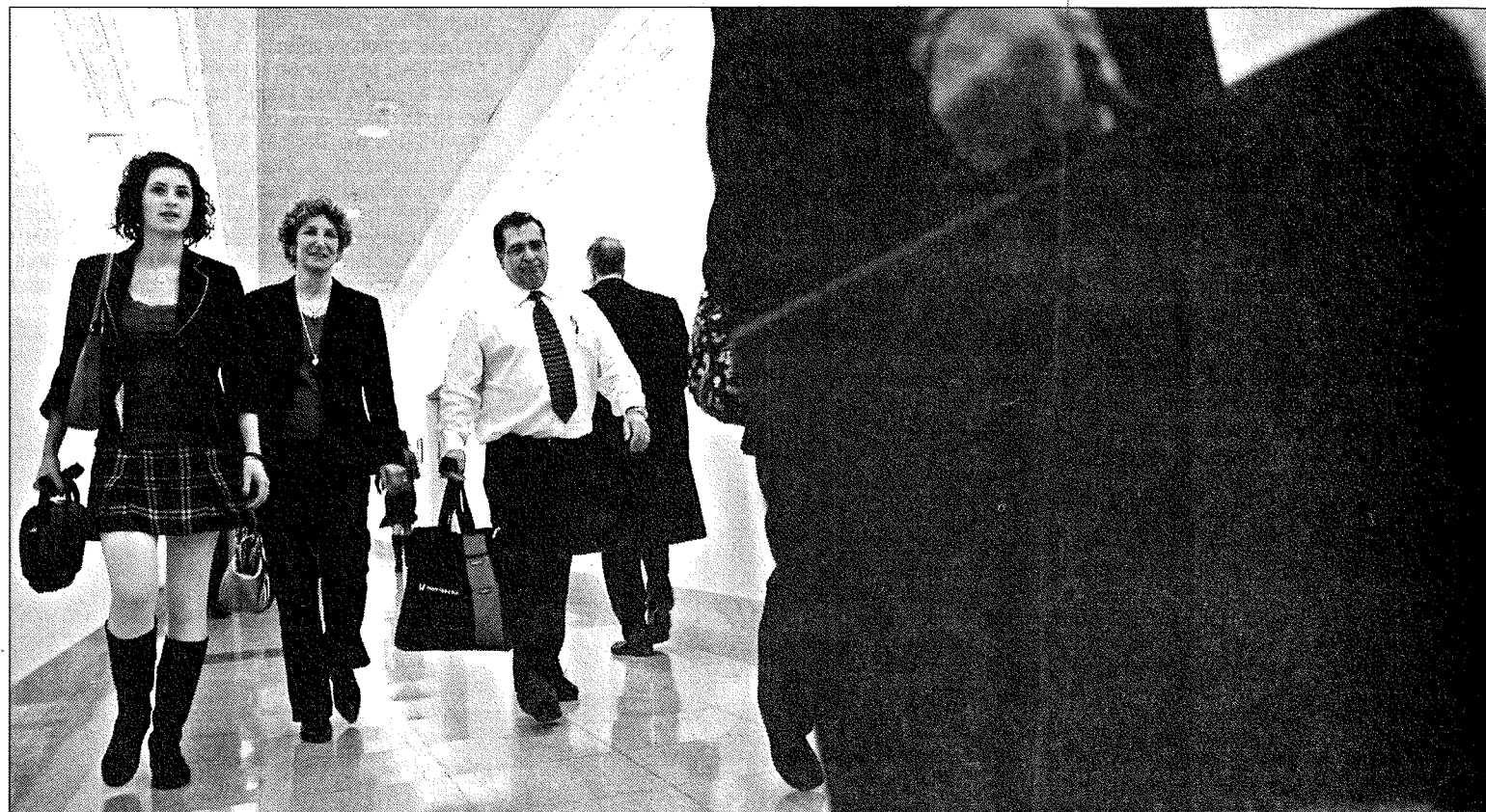
"It's a great idea," says Peter Moyer, Boston's medical director for the Emergency Medical Services. "It will save lives, it's good for student self-esteem and introduces students to health careers."

Boston — which has one of the best track records of saving victims of cardiac arrest — has had automated external defibrillators in all of its public high schools and some of its elementary schools. Medics teach CPR and defibrillator use at the high schools. Similar efforts are underway in Nashville, where the fire department has trained health teachers to become CPR and AED instructors. The goal is to certify every ninth- and 10th-grader in CPR and AED use. So far, 70 of 132 schools have the devices.

Across Tennessee, there have been 22 cardiac arrests at schools over the past five years, says Mark Meredith, medical director for Nashville's Public Access Defibrillation program. An AED was used to revive six of those people at the school.

Getting a defibrillator within just a few minutes of cardiac arrest is key to saving these people. The odds of survival decrease 10% for every minute that a victim goes without such a shock, meaning that waiting for the typical EMS response to a 911 call is most often fatal.

"We've got the best paramedics in the world," says Terry Gordon, an Akron cardiologist who pushed for every school in Ohio to have a defibrillator in the wake of Miller's death. "But they may be on another call or stuck in traffic, and they just can't get there fast enough."



By Andrew Council for USA TODAY

On Capitol Hill: Leah Olverd, her mother, Claudia, and John Acompora go door to door to promote a bill to get automated external defibrillators in schools.

Grass-roots AED group walks the corridors of power

By Robert Davis
USA TODAY

WASHINGTON — In the hall outside of her congressional office, Rep. Betty Sutton of Ohio calls fellow Democratic congressman Mike Michaud of Maine over to meet her grass-roots posse.

"Mike," she says, "I have some people I want you to meet."

Sutton is championing a bill that would give matching federal money to provide every U.S. school with an automated external defibrillator (AED), a device that can jump-start a heart that has stopped beating. To help her cause, Sutton has assembled a politically powerful team.

She introduces Michaud to her cohorts — an inspired cardiologist, a teenage girl revived by an AED and a grieving father whose loss has translated into many lives saved — all of them going door to door to pitch other members of Congress.

It's an uphill battle, because her bill,

H.R. 4926, is just one of more than 500 items on an Education and Labor subcommittee's to-do list.

Michaud shakes hands, smiles and seems genuinely moved as he hears about the teenage lives lost and the others saved that inspired the legislation Sutton introduced.

The bill is named after Josh Miller, a 15-year-old boy from Sutton's hometown of Barberton, Ohio, who died from a cardiac arrest at his high school football game.

After Michaud, who is one of 39 co-sponsors of the bill, says goodbye, it's time for the team to go to a series of scheduled visits.

"All right, go get 'em," Sutton says as she watches them walk away. "Some of the people you are going to meet are already on board. They just don't know it yet."

Over the course of an afternoon, the group will sit on some leather furniture in spacious offices with politicians who are generous with their time. They ap-

pear to have endless patience, despite the distractions of ringing phones, blinking e-mails and buzzers calling the members to the floor to cast votes.

The group also will cram into tiny corners of packed offices, talking with young staffers who actually know how to use the defibrillators mounted in the halls.

On each stop there comes a moment when something seems to click for the members of Congress or their staffers. Facial expressions change. They reach for a pen and start writing details.

For some it was when John Acompora told how his 14-year-old son, Louis, died playing lacrosse on Long Island.

For others, it was when 16-year-old Leah Olverd talked about being saved by a defibrillator that had been placed in her school because of Louis' death.

Others appear to be moved by cardiologist Terry Gordon, who quotes both the Bible and the Quran to say that the world can be changed by saving just one life.

For Rep. Bobby Scott, D-Va., the moment comes after he "saves" Olverd with the defibrillator trainer, a device the group brought into his office.

In the middle of the pitch to Scott's staffers over the office's front counter, the congressman walks in.

"We started a grass-roots effort in New York," Acompora explains. "Because of Louis' law, every school in New York must have a defibrillator. There have been 38 lives saved. Leah was No. 25."

Back in Sutton's office later, Olverd cries when she hears Acompora describing the loss of his son.

"That could have been me," she says, had a defibrillator not been on hand when the Bethpage High School sophomore class president collapsed during volleyball tryouts in August 2006. "That could have been my parents."

Toward the end of the day, she says her civics lesson has left her encouraged that the bill will become a law. "It's illogical for them to say no."