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November 18, 2009

Dr. Regina Benjamin
United States Surgeon General
5600 Fishers Lane
Room 18-66
Rockville, MD 20857

Dear Dr. Benjamin,

I am writing today in regards to the recent announcement by the United States Preventive Services Task Force on screening for breast cancer. Specifically, in response to the broad confusion this announcement has created among women and providers across the country, I respectfully request that you increase your efforts to educate the public on this decision and on the benefits and risks of mammograms. I appreciate the statement and general guidance of Secretary Sebelius, but that has also further added to the different messages women are hearing. That's why I believe that women deserve more detailed information and clarification from our nation's chief health educator.

As you know, the United States Preventive Services Task Force issued new guidelines recommending that women start regular breast cancer screening at age 50 and also said that women age 50 to 74 should have mammograms every two years. While I respect the autonomy of the Task Force's decision and understand that these new guidelines are based on data and analysis, this is a significant departure from previous recommendations and has understandably created some confusion and concern among the public.

For a country that has long proclaimed the benefits of early detection and prevention, I can understand why this announcement feels unnatural and unwelcomed for many. Since the announcement, many women and providers have said that they will ignore these new guidelines in an effort to catch this heartbreaking disease early on. I have also seen numerous media reports with powerful stories about women who have had a mammogram in their 40s and it helped to save their lives. These responses cannot and should not be dismissed, and the confusion and concern about what could be a life changing decision needs to be addressed with increased education.

In your role as Surgeon General, I respectfully ask you to help respond to these concerns by educating the public on the benefits and potential risks of screening for breast cancer. As 'America's chief health educator' you have an important role to play in helping to answer some of the questions surrounding the potential benefits and risks of mammograms and helping to

inform the public about the data on which these guidelines were based. In addition, I also think it would be beneficial for you to help clarify to whom these new guidelines apply and who falls into the high risk populations that should continue receiving routine testing at an earlier age.

With tens of thousands of New Jerseyans living with breast cancer, I know how devastating this terrible disease can be, and I understand how any announcement regarding screening can create unease and confusion. That is why I am calling on you to help educate the public about these new guidelines and about the benefits and risks of mammograms in general.

Sincerely,



ROBERT MENENDEZ
United States Senator