

valuable perspective on spina bifida. After losing two pregnancies, the Liguori's were informed their unborn child had spina bifida. After careful consideration and information from the SBAA, the Liguori's elected to proceed with in utero surgery that could reduce the effects of spina bifida. Since the late 1990s, doctors at four U.S. hospitals have been operating before birth on babies diagnosed with spina bifida. By closing the spinal lesion early in pregnancy, these doctors believe they can minimize the damage created by fluid leaking from the spine, as well as by the spinal cord's contact with amniotic fluid. Surgeons have found that closing the hole in the spine in this fashion before birth may correct breathing problems in 15 percent of the children receiving the procedure and may reduce the need for a shunt to drain brain fluid build up by between 33 percent and 50 percent. While the in utero surgery was successful, their three-year-old son still requires extensive therapy and medical attention. Fred Liguori's testimony made it clear that a national spina bifida program is critically needed for the prevention of this condition and to improve the quality of life for those individuals and their families living with spina bifida. Fortunately, in fiscal year 2003, Congress was wise to provide \$2 million in funding to establish and support a national spina bifida program and is poised to provide a much-needed increase in funding for fiscal year 2004. The House provided a \$500,000 increase while the Senate included a total of \$3 million for the program for fiscal year 2004. I strongly urge my colleagues to support the Senate allocation as this level of funding is needed to ensure that the CDC has the resources necessary to support and expand its comprehensive efforts to prevent spina bifida, improve quality-of-life for those living with the condition, and to deliver important public health messages to those communities most at-risk for a spina bifida pregnancy.

I want also to recognize the special work of the Spina Bifida Association of America, SBAA, an organization that has helped people with spina bifida and their families for nearly 30 years, working every day—not just in the month of October—to prevent and reduce suffering from this devastating birth defect. The SBAA was founded in 1973 to address the needs of the individuals and families affected by and is currently the only national organization solely dedicated to advocating on behalf of the spina bifida community. As part of its service through 60 chapters in more than 100 communities across the country, the SBAA puts expecting parents in touch with families who have a child with spina bifida. These families answer questions and concerns and help guide expecting parents. The SBAA then works to provide lifelong support and assistance for affected children and their families.

Together the SBAA and the Spina Bifida Association of Connecticut,

SBAC, work tirelessly to help families meet the challenges and enjoy the rewards of raising their child. I would like to acknowledge and thank SBAA and the SBAC for all that they have done for the families affected by this birth defect, especially those living in my State. I would also like to commend the leadership of Hal Pote, President of the Spina Bifida Foundation—uncle of Greg Pote who lives with spina bifida, Alex Brodrick, President of the Spina Bifida Association of America, father of Joel Brodrick who lives with spina bifida, and Cindy Brownstein who serves as Chief Executive Officer of the SBAA. The spina bifida community and our Nation owe a tremendous debt to the SBAA for its work over the past three decades.

As a Nation, we have accomplished a great deal in our battle against birth defects. However, much more work remains to be done. I urge all of my colleagues and all Americans to endorse the important efforts to prevent spina bifida but also to support those already living with this often debilitating birth defect. Those living with spina bifida and their loved ones deserve our utmost support. It is my hope that by recognizing National Spina Bifida Awareness Month we can move closer to the laudable goal of eventually eliminating the suffering caused by this terrible birth defect.

NICS IMPROVEMENT ACT

Mr. LEVIN. Mr. President, I bring the National Instant Criminal Background Check Improvement Act, formerly called the Our Lady of Peace Act, to the attention of my colleagues. On March 12, 2002, a priest and a parishioner were killed at the Our Lady of Peace Church in Lynbrook, NY, by a man who was able to obtain a gun despite the fact that he had a prior disqualifying mental health commitment and a restraining order that should have prevented him from purchasing a gun. The man who committed this double murder passed a Brady background check because the NICS database did not have the necessary information to determine that he was ineligible to purchase a firearm.

The NICS Improvement Act would provide funding to fix the hole in the current NICS background check system caused by the failure of many states to computerize and update their criminal history records. While the Brady check system currently provides fast responses to firearms dealers for over 90 percent of gun purchasers within a few minutes, responses are occasionally delayed because information concerning state and local convictions is not up-to-date or available. This can result in delays for some who lawfully seek to purchase a gun and the failure to block gun sales to some unlawful purchasers. To fix this problem States need adequate funding to input and update criminal history data. This bill would provide \$1 billion to help States do just that.

This is not a small problem. According to Americans for Gun Safety, 25 States have automated less than 60 percent of their criminal conviction records. Twenty States do not automate domestic violence or temporary restraining order records. This shortcoming in our public safety system, according to AGS statistics, has allowed over 10,000 prohibited buyers to obtain a gun because the background check could not be completed within the three business days as required by the law.

The NICS Improvement Act has been sponsored by Senators on both sides of the aisle, and I urge my colleagues to support it.

ADDITIONAL STATEMENTS

TRIBUTE TO ALTHEA GIBSON

• Mr. LAUTENBERG. Mr. President, I rise today to mourn the loss of Althea Gibson, a sports legend in professional tennis and golf and a pioneer for African-Americans in all walks of life. Ms. Gibson passed away in East Orange this past Sunday after suffering from respiratory complications.

Althea Gibson was born on a cotton farm in Silver, SC, in 1927 but spent most of her childhood in Harlem, NY. She eventually moved to New Jersey.

At an early age, Althea Gibson showed great promise in sports. Her favorite was basketball but she excelled at table tennis, too. Musician Buddy Walker noticed her ability and gave her a tennis racket as a gift when she was 14. The harsh reality of racial segregation left her unable to play tennis on public courts while growing up. Fortunately, two prominent African-American doctors had a private tennis court and gave Ms. Gibson the opportunity to play tennis there.

By the early 1940s, Ms. Gibson began her tennis career as an amateur, playing in tournaments organized by the American Tennis Association, ATA, a predominantly African-American organization.

In 1947, she won the first of 10 straight ATA National Championships. Within a few years, Ms. Gibson was ready to compete outside of the ATA.

Her talent and record should have been sufficient for her to compete against white players in tournaments sanctioned by the United States Lawn Tennis Association, USLTA. But it took the help of Alice Marble, a champion tennis player herself, who wrote an article in American Lawn Tennis magazine. Ms. Marble noted that Gibson wasn't invited to participate in the USLTA championships for any reason other than "bigotry." Ms. Marble wrote, "I think it's time we face a few facts . . . If tennis is a game of ladies and gentlemen, it's time we acted in a gentle manner, not like sanctimonious hypocrites."

Ms. Gibson finally received an invitation to play in the 1950 National Tennis