

Rep. Peter Welch on Tuesday called for legislation allowing young people to stay on their parents' health insurance policies until the age of 27.

At a press conference at the University of Vermont's Waterman Lounge in Burlington, Welch said that comprehensive health reform legislation should make coverage affordable and accessible for the nation's largest group of uninsured people. In 2007, 13.2 million young people – 30 percent of that age group – were uninsured.

"Allowing young people to stay on the family health insurance plan will provide peace of mind to parents and affordable health care to young people," Welch said. "As they leave high school or college, many young people find themselves unable or unwilling to buy health insurance – leaving them at risk of serious illness or injury. This common sense legislation will save families money, reduce the risk of medical debt and keep people healthy.

At the Burlington event, Welch outlined his support for the Young Adult Health Coverage Act (H.R. 2831), which Speaker of the House Nancy Pelosi recently indicated would be incorporated into the final House version of comprehensive health reform legislation.

Welch was joined at the press conference by Donna Watts, whose 21-year-old son, Kerry, was injured in a serious accident this summer after he was forced off his family's health plan and took a job that did not provide insurance. Kerry now faces thousands of dollars in medical bills.

"One of the most anxiety-inducing experiences for any parent is when you reach that point in your child's life when he or she is no longer eligible for your health insurance coverage," Donna Watts said.

While Vermont's Catamount, Dr. Dynasaur and Vermont Health Access Program initiatives have made it one of nearly 30 states to offer some form of extended access to young people, Welch said that too many young Vermonters remain uninsured.

According to a 2008 BISCHA survey, 21,807 Vermonters between the ages of 18 and 34 were uninsured. Nearly 22 percent of Vermonters between 18 and 24 were uninsured, compared with an overall rate of 7.4 percent – making young Vermonters three times as likely as older Vermonters to be uninsured.

Welch was also joined at the event by Vermont Campaign for Health Security executive director Peter Sterling and Cassandra Gekas, a 27-year-old Burlington resident who was unable to afford health insurance for two years.