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## Lawmaker, families of 2 Middlesex County students who died from sudden cardiac arrest talk possible legislation

BY GREG TUFARO • STAFF WRITER • FEBRUARY 9, 2010

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**MIDDLESEX COUNTY** — An emotional meeting with the families of two popular Middlesex County high school students, who died on the playing field last year, has prompted Assemblyman Patrick Diegnan, D-Middlesex, to begin work on introducing legislation geared toward the prevention of sudden cardiac arrest in New Jersey children.

Autopsy results made available to Gannett New Jersey newspapers for Kittim Sherrod, a 17-year-old Edison High School football star who collapsed and died during an April 30 track practice, and Brandon James, a 17-year-old South Brunswick High School senior who collapsed and died during a Dec. 17 recreational basketball game, cited hypertrophic cardiomyopathy, a detectable but often symptom-less cardiovascular disease, as the cause of their death.

HCM is an inherited cardiovascular disease that causes the cells of the heart muscle to grow abnormally thick, increasing a person's chance of dying abruptly from a violent interruption in the electrical activity of the heart, known as sudden cardiac death.

Approximately 300 high school athletes die from sudden cardiac arrest annually at organized sporting events in the United States, according to a 2006 study by the American Orthopedic Society of Sports Medicine.

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### UNDERSTANDING HYPERTROPHIC CARDIOMYOPATHY

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arrest

Known more commonly as an "enlarged heart," HCM, which has claimed the lives of several prominent professional and college athletes, made headlines again last month when Chicago Bears football player Gaines Adams and Southern Indiana University basketball player Jeron Lewis died three days apart.

Lewis, 21, collapsed and died on the court during a game. Adams, 26, died in his home just two weeks after playing in Chicago's season finale. Autopsy reports confirmed HCM as the cause of death for both athletes.

### Black Males At Risk

HCM is the most common genetic cardiovascular disease, occurring in one out of 500 people or more than 600,000 people in the United States. It usually surfaces during or after adolescence and is the leading cause of cardiac death in people under age 30. Between 1999-2006, an average of 1,565 people died annually from HCM, according to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention's registry of death certificates.

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Black males are particularly at risk, accounting for about half of all HCM sudden deaths in athletes, according to Lisa Salberg, chief executive officer and founder of the Hibernia-based Hypertrophic Cardiomyopathy Association, a nonprofit advocacy group.

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Warning signs can include palpitations, racing heart, dizziness, lightheadedness, shortness of breath, fainting and chest discomfort. Those with HCM, a silent killer whose initial strike is often fatal, may have no symptoms at all. Therefore, Salberg said, early detection is paramount.

The deaths of Sherrod and James, occurring about eight months and 16 miles apart, have renewed debate over whether annual physicals for high school students, especially those competing in athletics, should include cardiac evaluations.

Cardiovascular screening for HCM may include a review of family medical history with a cardiologist, DNA testing, an electrocardiogram, an echocardiogram and/or an MRI. Such tests can cost from less than \$50 to more than \$3,000.

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Veteran East Brunswick High School Certified Athletics Trainer Phil Hossler, a member of the National Athletic Trainers Association Hall of

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Fame, said the rising cost of preventative medicine and the number of uninsured Americans (47 million), begs the question: Who would pay for such testing?

"The percentage of athletes this applies to is so small — it's huge when it's you or your family, there's no disputing that — but from an insurance company's perspective, it's like trying to empty the ocean with a Dixie cup," Hossler said.

"It's a good effort, but you have to work like hell to find one (student-athlete with HCM out of more than 7.5 million high school sports participants nationwide), and that's the thing. Insurance is just not going to pay for it, and doctors are not inclined to do all these EKG strips for free, especially when they've got to do them year after year for the fall, winter and spring seasons."

Sherrod's grandmother, Razeenah Walker, said she does not understand how insurance companies, politicians or school officials can put a price on possibly saving a life with cardiac screening.

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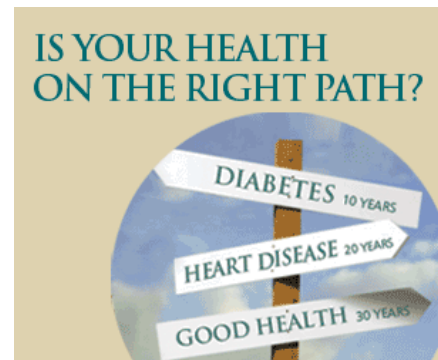
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"Right now my main concern is that I would never want another family to have to have this experience," Walker said, "and since Kittim's death, so many children have died."

### HCM Awareness Needed

During a Jan. 28 meeting at the Home News Tribune in East Brunswick, Walker and James' parents, Karen Murray and Stuart James, implored Diegnan, chair of the Assembly's Education Committee, to sponsor a bill that would at least heighten HCM awareness, encourage cardiovascular screening and recommend that cardiopulmonary resuscitation training become part of high school health classes.

"Someone surely is going to die of this, regardless of what we are going to do, but maybe not as many," Murray said.

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"Maybe my son's death wouldn't have to be totally in vain. Maybe it was a wake-up call. Maybe there's something that can be done for someone else. Maybe Brandon died so that someone else can live."

Diegnan, a lifelong South Plainfield resident,

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recently co-sponsored a bill calling for the establishment of a New Jersey Student-Athlete Cardiac Screening Task Force, which former Gov. Jon Corzine signed on Jan. 17. Last August, the Senate and General Assembly passed a joint resolution designating the final week of May each year as "Hypertrophic Cardiomyopathy Awareness Week."

After meeting with the boys' families, Diegnan said he felt those steps were both in the right direction, but clearly not enough.

"It is really difficult for me to comprehend the strength and determination that the families possess," Diegnan said.

"To have lost what clearly were two outstanding young men and to have the courage to really go forth and use their experience so that others will benefit from it is beyond admirable. It's hard to capture in words.

"It is my intention to listen to them, listen to others and put together a proposal that is really going to address this problem. It is my absolute intention to introduce legislation to deal with this issue."

Currently, no state law requires public schools to have Automated External Defibrillators on site or to include pupil training in their use or in the use of cardiopulmonary resuscitation.

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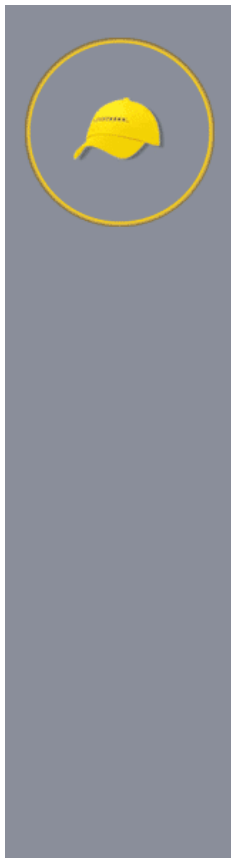
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### Teaching CPR



The New Jersey State Interscholastic Athletic Association requires all coaches to know CPR. The use of CPR and/or a defibrillator can be integral in saving the life of someone in cardiac arrest.

According to Dr. Barry Maron, the world's foremost expert on sudden death in athletes who maintains a national registry of such deaths with the Minneapolis Heart Institute Foundation, HCM accounts for about 75 deaths in young athletes per year.

Athletes comprise 20 percent of all HCM-related deaths in people under 24. HCM accounts for about one-third of sudden cardiac death in young athletes. At least 11 other cardiac abnormalities combine to cause the remaining deaths.

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The families of Sherrod and James, although still grieving, hope the passing of the Middlesex County teenagers can make an impact on other young lives. As a result, both families have agreed to become HCM advocates.

"I think there's a time for me to be crying and there's a time for me to be speaking," said Murray, noting that she became an advocate, in part, to help cope with her son's death. "I guess right now I have to speak.

"From the day that Brandon passed away, it was on my mind: How would I be able to ever heal from this? I don't even know if this will do it. But I know that if I don't do it, I certainly won't heal.

"I'm not convinced that I still will. But that (advocacy) is the only path."

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