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"Benefis Tragedy"

Max S. Baucus

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Senator * or Department*: **BAUCUS**

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(1) Subject*: **Transportation**

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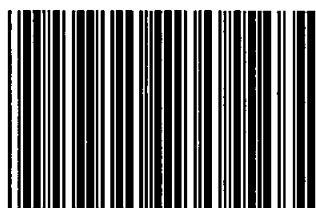
(2) Subject* **Benefis Tragedy Floor Statement**

DOCUMENT DATE*: **02/14/2007**

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* "required information"

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BAUCUS

**Statement of Senator Max Baucus
February 15, 2007**

Mr. President, Saint Luke explains in his gospel,
“The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he hath
...sent me to heal.”

Delivering care to the sick and injured is the
Lord’s work. To heal the sick at great risk to one’s
own safety reflects the best that we can be as the
Lord’s servants.

I am here to honor three healers from my home
state of Montana. Air ambulance pilot, Vince Kirol.
Paramedic and firefighter, Paul Erikson. And
registered nurse, Darcy Doyle. These Montana
heroes died tragically during an air rescue mission on
February 6th.

Their deaths are a tremendous loss to their families, Benefis Healthcare, and to all of Montana. These dedicated individuals were en route to Bozeman from Great Falls in dangerous weather to pick up a patient who had suffered a severe head injury that required immediate surgery.

Every minute counted. The victim's injury had to be treated as quickly as possible. The longer it took to get him to the hospital, the worse his chances were for survival. The only way to get the patient the care he needed was by air transport, so the dependable air ambulance team at Benefis Healthcare was called. Vince, Paul and Darcy responded to the call without hesitation. And without concern for their own safety.

They knew that someone's life was hanging in the balance. This is the type of pressure-filled situation they always operated in.

Montana is a large, beautiful state with rural and isolated areas where people who are injured may need urgent rescuing, including air ambulance transportation to a trauma center.

Unfortunately, there aren't enough hospitals in Montana that can give the kind of care someone with severe injuries needs.

So-called "Level One" hospitals have operating rooms, surgeons and radiologists available 24 hours a day, 7 days a week, waiting and ready for any patient with severe injuries that are brought in. There are no Level One hospitals in Montana.

Level Two hospitals have the right facilities, but the doctors are not in the hospital around the clock to be available immediately when a patient arrives. There are only three Level Two trauma centers in Montana.

It is very expensive to run hospitals that offer this high-level, specialized care. Only three hospitals in Montana – one in Missoula, Billings, and Great Falls – offer such services, so every patient that needs a trauma center has to go to one of these hospitals. This makes air ambulance transportation even more important given Montana's 800-mile span and mountainous terrain.

The Benefis Medivac Program provides 24-hour-a-day, 7-day-a-week, air ambulance transportation in Montana and the Northwest. Aircraft respond to isolated areas, accident scenes and hospitals to bring patients to the regional emergency center as quickly as possible.

The dedicated pilots, nurses, and paramedics that operate the Benefis Medivac program provide honorable and essential services to Montana. The three Benefis professionals that lost their lives last week were trying to do just that.

Darcy Dengel was a 27-year old registered nurse. She joined Benefis in June 2001 and transferred to the emergency room in August 2003, where she also worked as a flight nurse.

Her Benefis colleagues describe her as a bright, talented, and vibrant woman who loved her work because it gave her a unique opportunity to help people in great need.

She was able to make a difficult time for a patient a little easier with her gentle care. She was to be married this spring to Rob Beal, and is survived by parents Rich and Donna Dengel of Lewistown, MT.

A long-time friend of Darcy Dengel's family described Darcy this way: "She was a light,... She didn't worry about danger in her work as a flight nurse. She wanted to help people."

Paul Erickson was 33 years old and was the Medic on the flight. Paul was a firefighter who worked on the Mercy Flight on his days off. He worked side by side with his wife, Rachelle (Ro-Shell), who is the trauma coordinator for Benefis. They had a baby boy last July named Spenser Pilot.

Assistant Fire Chief Steve Hester said of his colleague, "Paul considered it a service to the community. He was all about service to others...He knew that in rural Montana, the only way you can get help sometimes is by air."

Vince Kirol was 58 years and had been flying for 40 years. He was a Mercy Flight Fixed Wing pilot for 13 years after working for Metro Aviation in Shreveport, LA. He is survived by his wife, Dianna, and two sons. Vince's pastor noted that he loved the mountains, and skiing and hiking with his sons.

Billy Darnell, a friend of Vince's from his church, said about him, "He cared about people. That's why he loved his job,"

Darcy, Paul and Vince selflessly put their lives at risk, transporting critically ill patients even in perilous weather conditions. They gave their own lives trying to save others. Their deaths are a tremendous loss to Montana. They were good servants and they are heroes. Our hearts and prayers go out to their families and friends.