



Q&A with New Hampshire Senator Robert “Bob” Clegg, R-Hudson

By James Zervios, OAC Director of Communications

In late August, I had the pleasure of speaking with Senator Bob Clegg of New Hampshire. Senator Clegg is a “no nonsense” conservative who is truly for the people. He is also a man who has had his own struggle with weight and sought treatment through weight-loss surgery.

On July 15, 2008, Senator Clegg made history in the state of New Hampshire by leading the fight in the passing of SB 312. SB 312 requires insurance providers to cover weight-loss surgery. The OAC had the privilege of catching up with Senator Clegg after the victory, and here is what he had to say.

OAC: Why did you decide to have weight-loss surgery?

Senator Clegg: I had been working for two and a half years reducing my size. I went to the gym and exercised, tried to eat right and other stuff – nothing worked. I was getting worse and worse. My doctor said I might have to have a tracheotomy.

I began to research weight-loss surgery. I even watched a surgery on the hospital’s Web site.

OAC: What has been the biggest adjustment for you with weight-loss surgery?

Senator Clegg: The fact that I have to be reminded to eat. People will say to me “Did you remember to have breakfast?” I just feel that my body is happy with the intake of food that I have now. I eat a lot of proteins and also eat healthy. I guess my body no longer craves food like it used to.

OAC: What were some of the challenges with passing SB 312?

Senator Clegg: Well, my insurance would pay for a tracheotomy, but said they were no longer covering obesity or

morbid obesity or its related conditions. This made no sense to me. I was fortunate to be able to pay for my own surgery. I had esophageal problems, severe dysplasia and low grade cancer.

The insurance companies were trying to cut down the fact that they were no longer covering obesity or its conditions, but were just covering weight-loss surgery. But the truth was that they weren’t going to cover anything that had to do with obesity and it back fired on them.

I wanted them to cover the ailments more than weight-loss surgery. That was my goal. The biggest help to get SB 312 through was that I put my face on the cover it. I felt that if people could see me going through it, it would mean more.

People wrote to me and said, “Hey you fat pig, if you didn’t eat so much you wouldn’t need this.” I mean, you’re always going to get that. It’s just ignorance. I combated this type of behavior by demonstrating the difference in healthcare costs to them before and after my surgery. Bottom line, after the surgery, there were none.



Senator Bob Clegg

OAC: What would you suggest to others that want to advocate to their elected officials about obesity?

Senator Clegg: Start with your elected officials. When election time rolls around, ask questions. Ask them what they will do or will not do when it comes to obesity and its related conditions.

It's simple; we know insurance cost is increasing. They say it is going up because the amount of usage is increasing, such as testing for diabetes, hypertension, etc. So why not start performing procedures to slow that down? Weight-loss surgery is a perfect example of that. I can honestly say that I've saved the healthcare community at least \$100,000 by having surgery.

Also, and this one is important - forget the form letters or postcards. I'll be completely honest with you. As an elected official, we take them for what they are. We simply pile up the pros and cons from the form letters and that's the result. Personal letters are taken much more seriously. And I'll tell you another thing - testify at a hearing. Let your elected official know what it means to you to be obese.

Everyone needs to band together and tell their story. Everything we bring to the legislature should always be focused on how we can save money. That is what they want to hear. Show them how treating your obesity will save the taxpayer money and they'll listen.

OAC: Did you receive any backlash from fellow legislators for the bill?

Senator Clegg: Absolutely! It was a sore spot with the statewide newspaper I can tell you that. To me, a conservative is someone who wants people to be healthy at a reduced cost to the population. I asked the insurance companies, "Who will take care of the obesity ailments for the people?" They said, "Medicaid will." What an answer. Insurance companies are not out there for your health. They're there to profit.

OAC: Why do you think recognizing obesity as a disease is such a battle?

Senator Clegg: It's because for years people profited on it. Look at the commercials on obesity and they all push something. People try these programs like Jenny Craig and Weight Watchers and they eat the meals and lose weight, but then they regain the weight. People say, "Oh, they have no willpower." That's not it at all.

We need to say, "Yes, there's a place for Jenny Craig and Weight Watchers, but we have to offer something else for those that the programs just don't cut it." Also, and this is very important, we need to educate.

OAC: What do you think Americans need in order to address their obesity if they wish to do so?

Senator Clegg: I think there's a self-embarrassment emotion with morbid obesity. We don't mind the jokes. Heck, we even make them ourselves. You grow to the point where you say, "I guess this is the way it's supposed to be." You give up on yourself. It's not until you have a catastrophic health problem that you realize you have to do something.

OAC: Did the bill generate any type of stigma-related comments from fellow legislators?

Senator Clegg: Absolutely. They said, "You were too lazy to diet." It was quite common. I am not a shy guy and jokingly I would tell them, "I am going to pass a law against ignorance and if you're found to be ignorant, you have to leave the state."

I had this guy who was diabetic and eating a piece of cake and told me, "Oh sure, you can eat dessert and I am paying for it." I looked at him and said, "Listen, you may be a thin diabetic, but you're eating dessert too and I am paying for the diabetes meds."

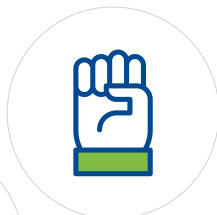
OAC: If you could ask the members of the OAC to do one thing for advocacy, what would it be?

Senator Clegg: Band together and take your frustrations out on elected officials. If enough people get together, the officials will listen. We need to show the legislators the cost savings of addressing obesity.



ABOUT THE OBESITY ACTION COALITION (OAC)

The Obesity Action Coalition (OAC) is a National non-profit organization dedicated to giving a voice to individuals affected by obesity and helping them along their journey toward better health. Our core focuses are to elevate the conversation of weight and its impact on health, improve access to obesity care, provide science-based education on obesity and its treatments, and fight to eliminate weight bias and discrimination.



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