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FEATURED SPOTLIGHT

13-year-old Statesville goes to Washington, DC: Teen lobbies Congress for diabetes research

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Aug 5, 2025

There is no cure for diabetes yet, but 13-year-old Keegan Bissell is doing her part to raise awareness and support for research of the disease. The Statesville native and hundreds of other young people traveled to Washington, D.C., in early July as part of the Breakthrough T1D 2025 Children's Congress with the goal of making sure U.S. lawmakers continue to fund diabetes research.

Bissell lives with her Type 1 Diabetes as she balances school, sports, friends and everything else on a teenager's agenda. It's not always easy, she said, but it's also why she has been a part of the Breakthrough T1D organization that funds research and advocates for solutions to Type 1 Diabetes

"It was amazing to meet so many other people from across the U.S. and other countries impacted by T1D and learning about how they deal with living with T1D. Everyone had a story about how they are working to advocate for T1D," Bissell said. "The experience of going to Capitol Hill and meeting the members of Congress who can have such a big impact on how quickly we have a cure for T1D by voting for the long-term renewal of the Special Diabetes Program (SDP) made me so hopeful."

Keegan Bissell poses outside the United States Capitol in Washington, D.C.

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Lobbying Congress for support

Over the course of the week, the youth delegates had a chance to take part in a number of activities and events as the organization looked to raise awareness and create action to support those living with Type 1 Diabetes.

The delegates heard from Breakthrough T1D CEO Aaron Kowalski about the organization's work and the hope for a cure for the autoimmune disease, where the body's immune system attacks and destroys insulin-producing cells.

Keegan Bissell poses outside Sen. Ted Budd's office while serving as a delegate for the Breakthrough T1D 2025 Children's Congress that met with North Carolina lawmakers in July to advocate for continued funding of diabetes research.

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Bissell met fellow diabetics at a town hall meeting, including singer and songwriter Ava August, model Bambi Northwood-Blyth and shoe designer Thom Solo, while they waited to attend a Senate hearing.

The event also included the toy company **Mattel's release of a Barbie with Type 1 diabetes**, which includes a continuous glucose monitor and insulin pump.

Keegan Bissell's mother, Heather Bissell, said she was surprised at some of the negative comments she had seen about the Barbie, but felt it was important for children to see themselves represented.

"Everyone is welcome to their opinion, but as a mom with a little girl, who had a little girl who loved Barbie and had T1D since she was 22 months old, for me it is hard to find the negatives. We try to focus on the positives when we can, and I feel that has led Keegan to opportunities like this, the once-in-a-lifetime experience of Breakthrough T1D's Children's Congress," Heather Bissell said.

A handful of the group's delegates testified to Congressional committees along with Griffin Ridgers, director of the National Institute of Diabetes and Digestive and Kidney Diseases.

The Committee on Appropriations hearing was led by Sen. Susan Collins of Maine and called "A Future Without Type 1 Diabetes: Accelerating Breakthroughs and Creating Hope."

Keegan Bissell and other North Carolina-based delegates met with representatives from the offices of Senator Thom Tillis and Senator Ted Budd to share their stories of how their health and lives are affected at all times by the disease, but also how Breakthrough T1D has raised $100 million to support more research into a cure. The

Bissells also met with North Carolina District 10's Rep. Pat Harrigan, who represents Catawba, Iredell, Lincoln and Yadkin counties, and most of Forsyth County in North Carolina. "I learned that my voice can make a big difference by going and sharing my story of living with T1D. I did not realize how big what we were doing was until I got to experience it," Keegan Bissell said. "As a 13-year-old I got to use my voice to meet with the office of Congressman Pat Harrigan and tell my story and ask him to vote for the renewal of the SDP, to support the NIH and FDA and educate them about the hope for a cure in cell therapies.

Keegan Bissell, second from left, and other Breakthrough T1D 2025 Children's Congress delegates met with North Carolina lawmakers in July to advocate for continued funding of diabetes research.

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"I definitely want to do more as an advocate after going to Children's Congress. And I learned things like how Congress works and how important the NIH and FDA is to my T1D management and finding a cure."

She also said that hearing the information presented by Breakthrough T1D made her hopeful for her own future with the disease.

"Listening to Aaron, the Breakthrough T1D CEO, talk about what is happening in research with cell therapies made me excited that there will be a cure in my lifetime," Keegan Bissell said. "Also, with the other work about slowing the diagnosis and better devices to manage, it made me feel better about my T1D management and if my kids have T1D."

Keegan hopes that one day the work that the organization's efforts to fund finding a cure will pay off, but that she'll remember this trip, the friends she made, and that it is a part of the goal of finding that cure.

"Spending the day on Capitol Hill, experiencing it as a kid, and being there with so many others just like me with the same mission. One day, being able to live without insulin, blood sugar checks, and all the devices. One day, having a cure," Keegan Bissell said.

Heather Bissell and Keegan Bissell pose outside of the United States Capitol in Washington, D.C.

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By Ben Gibson