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Embryonic stem cell research supporters form advocacy group

DETROIT (AP) — Embryonic stem-cell research supporters on Thursday announced the creation of a coalition to unify and strengthen efforts of advocates nationwide who envision eventual treatments for Alzheimer's disease, spinal cord injuries and other ailments.

The Stem Cell Action campaign supports attempts to enact "comprehensive legislation" that protects and funds federal research, according to Bernard Siegel, the executive director of the Florida-based Genetics Policy Institute, which leads the coalition.

Michigan has been a major front in the stem cell battle. Voters in the state approved a proposal in 2008 to loosen restrictions on embryonic stem cell research and allow people to donate embryos leftover from fertility treatments for scientific research.

Right to Life of Michigan and others since then have pushed — so far unsuccessfully — for requiring public universities such as University of Michigan that do embryonic stem cell research to report some information to the state. Republicans had sought the requirement but it was opposed by Democrats.

The Stem Cell Action campaign took shape at the World Stem Cell Summit in Detroit in October. The summit was organized by the Genetics Policy Institute, a nonprofit.

The group's Siegel said the coalition, which comprises 30 foundations and state-based groups, is coming at a "critical time" to fight state and federal challenges to public funding, he said.

"Stem Cell Action is designed to give a voice to the broad majority of Americans that support this issue," Siegel said. "We can share resources and information so we're not operating in silence."

Controversy surrounds the funding of stem cell research because the research leads to the destruction of the embryos — which some argue is akin to abortion. But many researchers consider embryonic stem cells the most versatile types of stem cells, as they

can morph into any type of cell.

The National Institutes of Health has already spent more than \$500 million on this research, proceeding with federal funding since President Barack Obama last year reversed former President George W. Bush's 2001 directive to restrict federal assistance.

Earlier this year U.S. District Court Judge Royce Lamberth issued a preliminary injunction in which he stated that the research violated a 1996 law banning the use of taxpayer money to derive stem cells from embryos. An appeals court has since temporarily stayed that order until it can hear full arguments.