Rep. Peter Welch issued the following statement Wednesday upon the passing of Sen. Edward Kennedy:

"Today our country lost a true American hero, a courageous champion for the underprivileged, and a generous and caring Irish soul.

"One of my earliest political memories was watching Sen. Kennedy debate Edward McCormack during his first run for office in 1962. I had the privilege of meeting him for the first time in 1969 in Washington when I served as a Robert F. Kennedy Fellow, and I was struck even then by his deep commitment to service and to those less fortunate than he.

"Sen. Kennedy will be remembered as one of the most accomplished and respected members in the history of the United States Senate. Just as importantly, he will be remembered for his eternal optimism and for his firm belief that we can always do better - for ourselves and for our country."