

PATTY MURRAY'S WASHINGTON VIEW

U.S. Senator Patty Murray's Weekly Report to the People of Washington – May 27, 2005

Helping Northern Border Communities

On Tuesday, I questioned U.S. Attorney General Alberto Gonzales on the need for increased federal support for prosecution of criminals apprehended along the Northern U.S. border in Washington state. In a hearing of the Senate Commerce, Justice, and Science Appropriations Subcommittee, I pressed Gonzales to acknowledge the threat to national security posed by crowded and strapped county jails and courts.

We're doing a great job of helping our law enforcement personnel catch criminals at our borders and in our communities. Yet, despite increased efforts to catch criminals along our borders since 9/11, prosecutorial resources have not kept pace – especially along the Northern Border. In questioning Gonzales, I emphasized three areas where greater federal support is needed:

Whatcom County - I called for reimbursement of counties like Whatcom that incur heavy costs each year for detainment, prosecution, defense, and court costs for criminals apprehended at the border. Whatcom County is spending over \$2 million per year to handle these cases. These costs are placing an incredible strain on local jurisdictions.

As a member of the Senate Transportation, Treasury, and General Government Appropriations Subcommittee, I succeeded in securing \$1 million for fiscal year 2005 to offset such costs in Whatcom County. But more federal support is needed.

I also cited the Southwest Border Prosecution Initiative, a program under which counties along the Southwest border are reimbursed for costs related to prosecution of border criminals. I insisted that such a program should exist for counties along the Northern Border, particularly because these localities have already had to release non-border-related criminals due to overcrowded jails and insufficient court infrastructure.

USAG's Seattle Office - I also called for greater support of the U.S. Attorney General's office in Seattle. This office lacks sufficient resources and cannot prosecute many of the criminals apprehended along the border. As a result, cases are referred to localities, putting an even greater burden on them, and forcing release of non-border-related criminals.

Regional Justice Centers – Finally, I pushed for federal funding to increase federal court infrastructure in Washington state. At present, our state lacks adequate courts and jails to prosecute criminals caught under tightened post-9/11 enforcement policies. The state is spending large amounts of money to drive criminals, under guard, to hearings in distant parts of the state. Funding regional justice centers would save the state money and would greatly improve prosecution efforts.

We cannot allow criminals in our state to be released because our jails are full and because our court system lacks resources to prosecute them. We have to address the seriousness of the threat this situation poses to national security and to the safety of our communities.

Stopping Abuse of Student Loans

Last week, Senator Edward Kennedy (D-Mass) and I introduced legislation to finally and fully close a loophole in the federal student loan program that's cost taxpayers billions over the past decade.

Sen. Kennedy and I want to end a controversial bank subsidy that guarantees lenders a government subsidized 9.5% rate of return on a certain class of student loans. Borrowers currently pay only 3.37% interest on these loans, originally financed with tax-exempt securities, but taxpayers provide loan holders with a subsidy for the remaining 6.13%. The very lucrative "9-5 loans" were supposed to have ended more than ten years ago, but continue to be newly issued to this day. In the first three months of this fiscal year, taxpayers paid \$262 million to holders of 9.5% loans.

SLAP ACT - Our Student Loan Abuse Prevention (SLAP) Act would end the runaway 9.5% loan subsidy on new loans and give borrowers a \$1,000 or 1% interest rate discount if they pay their loans off early. Our plan will save over \$2 billion. It would permanently and completely stop banks and special interests from "gaming the system" at taxpayer expense. Student loans should help students – not line lenders' pockets.

Don't Veto Stem Cell Research

With millions of American patients and their families waiting for a cure, President Bush is threatening to veto hope. As he has in the past, the president acknowledged the benefits of stem cell research but told patients and medical researchers that to support its funding "would be a great mistake."

I believe the true mistake is to delay the potential of stem cells to treat and better understand deadly and disabling diseases and conditions that affect millions of Americans. While I am glad that the President has pledged support for research on cord-cells, this step still falls well short of what is needed to realize the full potential of stem cell research.

Stem Cell Research Act - As a cosponsor of the Senate version of the Stem Cell Research Act, I support providing federal funding to conduct research on embryonic stem cells. This legislation mandates that the bioethical guidelines set forth by the National Institutes of Health will be implemented. Stem cell research offers a potential cure for patients across our country. The President should be providing hope – not threatening to veto it

Supporting Women in Combat

On Thursday, I joined with five other Senators to send a strong message that we support America's military women. Recently, the House Armed Services Committee attempted to roll back the duties of women in combat zones – sending a terrible message to women who are serving our country.

In response, we introduced a Sense-of-the-Senate resolution that recognizes the important role that women play in accomplishing the missions of our Armed Forces. Our resolution urges the Senate to reject any law, policy or regulation which would roll back the positions and duties available to women in uniform.

Over 100,000 women have been deployed in support of America's military missions since September 11th. Approximately 22,000 women are currently serving the United States military in support of Operations Iraqi Freedom and Enduring Freedom. Women currently make up approximately 17 percent of American Armed Forces.

I have met with women serving our country in Iraq and was struck by their bravery and professionalism. Our Senate resolution sends the message that our country supports their efforts. Anything less is wrong for women, wrong for the military and wrong for America.

The Sense of the Senate resolution was introduced by Senator Hillary Clinton (D-NY) and cosponsored by Murray, Mary Landrieu (D-LA), Jack Reed (D-RI) and Barbara Mikulski (D-MD).