

PATTY MURRAY'S WASHINGTON VIEW

U.S. Senator Patty Murray's Weekly Report to the People of Washington – April 14, 2006

Veterans Healthcare in Southeast Washington

On Wednesday, I visited Walla Walla to address some of the challenges surrounding the future of the Walla Walla VA Medical Center. We focused on two issues:

- an announcement this week that the medical center will close its inpatient care next month
- a local proposal for the long-term future of the medical center

Inpatient Care Closure

This week the VA announced it would eliminate inpatient care at the Walla Walla Medical Center until it can hire new doctors to replace two doctors who are leaving. On Wednesday, I questioned the center's interim director about the shortfall in care. He assured me that they're working to hire new doctors as quickly as possible. The VA has promised it will maintain the current levels of care in Walla Walla, and I made it clear that I expect them to keep that commitment.

Long Term Plan for Walla Walla VA

Nearly three years ago, the VA CARES Commission tried to close three VA hospitals in our state. One of the hospitals on the closure list was the Walla Walla VA Medical Center, which serves 69,000 veterans in Washington, Oregon and Idaho. The community rallied to save the hospital and protect veterans. In April 2004, I held an official Senate field hearing in Walla Walla. That hearing showed that the VA wanted to close the hospital without a study, without alternatives, and without a plan for providing the care our veterans have earned. Ultimately, we moved the hospital off the list for "immediate closure" and onto the list for "further consideration."

Then the question became – what should happen to VA care in the region? To answer that question, the VA contracted Price Waterhouse Coopers to come up with options for the Walla Walla facility. I was very concerned about this analysis, so I provided \$250,000 to the Community Task Force so that local leaders could do their own study and come up with a proposal.

On Wednesday, the Task Force presented its proposal to me – on the two-year anniversary of that Senate field hearing. In two weeks, Task Force members will come to Washington, D.C. to share their findings with VA officials.

My bottom line is clear: We must maintain a VA footprint in Walla Walla. I made that case last week in a Senate Veterans Affairs Committee hearing.

I also told the VA that if the Administration makes promises of new clinics or facilities, it needs to provide a budget that has the resources to actually deliver on those promises.

Improving Transit on Mercer Island

On Monday, I helped kick off construction of an expanded Park & Ride lot on Mercer Island. This investment will increase the number of parking spaces to 450. That will make it easier for people to use Sound Transit and will help reduce congestion and improve our quality of life.

The federal government provided \$1.7 million for the project, of which I personally secured \$600,000.

Medicare RX Deadline Approaches

Seniors should be aware that May 15th is an important day. That's the deadline to sign up for the cheapest premiums under the Medicare Prescription Drug Program (Part D). You can sign up after that date, but you'll pay higher premiums – and those premiums will continue to rise for every month you wait to sign up. I encourage you to contact the Medicare program at www.medicare.gov for more information.

I voted against the Medicare drug program in 2003 because I recognized it was a bad deal for our seniors. But now that the program is here, I want to make sure seniors have the time and information to make good choices. I'm also working to fix the law so it's a better deal for seniors.

On Tuesday, I held a Medicare Roundtable in Silverdale to hear from seniors, advocates and pharmacists. I also spoke about my legislation, called the Medicare HEALS Act. My bill:

- Extends the sign-up deadline for a full year
- Allows states to provide extra help to low-income residents
- Gives our most vulnerable more time to transition into the new drug program

Meet Me Next Week in Lewis & Whatcom Counties

Next week I'll hold two more Medicare roundtables. I want to invite you to be part of the audience:

4/20 Chehalis - Twin Cities Senior Center, 2545 N. National Avenue, Chehalis 1:45 pm, Thursday

4/21 Bellingham - Bellingham Senior Center, 315 Halleck Street, Bellingham 2 pm, Friday

Save Community Development in Kitsap

On Tuesday, I visited Kitsap County to continue the fight against budget cuts that will hurt our communities. Congress is considering cutting Community Development Block Grant funding to Washington state by \$16 million.

Bremerton has benefited greatly from these grants. One such grant helped redevelop the Admiral Theater, where I joined local leaders and residents for a rally. Our day started in downtown Bremerton on the mayor's balcony where we got a birds-eye view of all the development projects that have been funded through CDBG. We then stopped by the Max Hale Homeless Center, which uses CDBG dollars to provide critical services. Finally we gathered at the Admiral Theater to hear from residents and service providers about the importance of these federal dollars. Last month, I led the fight in the Senate to save this investment, but my amendment was defeated. Since then, I've taken my case around the state at rallies in Seattle and Bremerton. I'm hopeful that the attention we're generating will have an impact in Washington, D.C.

Upcoming Events

Lewis County – 4/20 – Medicare Roundtable – Twin Cities Senior Center, 2545 N. National Avenue, Chehalis 1:45 pm (Thurs)

Snohomish – 4/21 – Veterans Roundtable, Washington State National Guard Armory, 2730 Oakes Ave, Everett, 10 am (Friday)

Whatcom – 4/21 – Medicare Roundtable – Bellingham Senior Center, 315 Halleck Street, Bellingham 2 pm (Friday)

Skagit – 4/21 – Agriculture Roundtable, WSU Northwest Research & Extension Center, 16650 State Route 536, Mount Vernon, 12 noon (Friday)

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