

PATTY MURRAY'S WASHINGTON VIEW

U.S. Senator Patty Murray's Weekly Report to the People of Washington – February 18, 2005

Fighting for Veterans

Last week, President Bush submitted his fiscal year 2006 budget to Congress. I was disappointed to see that at a time when thousands of our troops will be returning from Iraq and Afghanistan – including nearly 3,000 Ft. Lewis-based soldiers scheduled to return home next month – the President's budget drastically underfunds the health care and benefits needs of our veterans.

As the daughter of a World War II veteran and a member of the Senate Veterans' Affairs Committee, I find the President's budget request unacceptable. That's why, this week, I used my position on several key Senate Committees to ask the President's Cabinet Secretaries about the Administration's commitment to our national heroes.

Veterans' Affairs Committee

On Tuesday, VA Secretary Jim Nicholson appeared before the Veterans' Affairs Committee to answer questions about the President's budget for veterans. Unfortunately, I found that Secretary Nicholson had few solid answers about the impacts of this budget.

In Washington state, we know that our VA hospitals are facing long lines and budget shortfalls. We also know that our veterans sacrificed for us and deserve access to first-class care, especially while our nation is at war. I told the Secretary that the Administration's proposal to increase annual fees and co-pays for our nation's veterans is a non-starter.

Appropriations Committee

On Wednesday, as a member of the Senate Appropriations Committee, I asked Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld why the president's \$82 billion supplemental request does not contain a single penny to care for our soldiers when they return home.

The President intends to pay for the entire cost of the military operations in Iraq and Afghanistan through supplemental requests, but leaves out a very important cost of war – the cost of taking care of our veterans. I asked Secretary Rumsfeld if he agreed with my belief that our veterans should be included in the costs of war, and he said he did agree. Yet, even under repeated questioning, he, like Secretary Nicholson a day earlier, was unable to provide answers as to why veterans are not included in the supplemental request.

I told Secretary Rumsfeld that to make up for this glaring discrepancy, I will introduce an amendment to the Supplemental Appropriations bill to pay for veterans' health care. My amendment would fully fund health care services for current veterans and those returning from Iraq and Afghanistan. Caring for our veterans is a very important cost of war and we should have money in the Supplemental to provide the health care and benefits our veterans both need and deserve.

Get more information on my work for veterans:

<http://murray.senate.gov/veterans>

More Progress on Wild Sky

I am pleased to announce that this week – thanks to the hard work of Senator Maria Cantwell and the efforts of so many local community members and business groups – Wild Sky Wilderness again passed a key Senate Committee and will head to the Senate floor for a vote.

Wild Sky, which I wrote with Congressman Rick Larsen three years ago, will protect over 106,000 acres of forest in east Snohomish County. I am pleased that Congressman Larsen reintroduced Wild Sky in the House this week as well.

Our state has a long history of working together and across party lines to protect our environment for future generations. This week's Senate action continues this great tradition and brings us a step closer to making the dream of Wild Sky Wilderness a reality.

Find out about my work to create the Wild Sky Wilderness:

<http://murray.senate.gov/wilderness>

Fair Medicare Reimbursements for WA Seniors

Washington state has a long and impressive tradition of providing low-cost, efficient health care for our seniors. Unfortunately, due to current national reimbursement rates, our state is punished – instead of rewarded – for this quality care. In fact, prior to enactment of the new Medicare/Prescription drug bill, Washington state ranked 41st in the nation for Medicare reimbursement rates and by the time the bill is fully functional we will have dropped to 45th. Our state, our doctors and our seniors deserve better.

That's why this week Representative Adam Smith and I reintroduced our MediFair Act, to raise Washington state's Medicare reimbursement rates to the national average and ensure that our seniors are on par with seniors across the country. Our bill – which we first introduced in 2002 – has been endorsed by the Washington State Medical Association, the Washington State Hospital Association and the Washington Nurses Association.

Read more about the MediFair Act, and all my healthcare work:

<http://murray.senate.gov/healthcare>

Making Headway on Healthcare

As a member of the Senate Help, Education, Labor, and Pensions Committee, I have worked on three critical pieces of healthcare legislation over the past two weeks.

Genetic Non-Discrimination – On Thursday, the full Senate passed the Genetic Information Nondiscrimination Act. This bill is a major step forward in ensuring that genetic information is not used as a basis for discrimination against individuals or groups in employment or health insurance. I hope the House will quickly pass this legislation, and the president signs it into law.

CHEER Act – Last week, the Children's Hospitals Education Equity and Research (CHEER) Act was given to the full Senate for consideration. It will reauthorize the Children's Hospital Graduate Medical Education (GME) program, which expires this year. This program has enabled Children's Hospitals all across the country to reverse the critical reduction in pediatric residency programs nationwide.

Trauma Care - The Trauma Care Systems Planning and Development Act of 2005 was also passed out of committee. This legislation will make trauma care more efficient and effective for all Americans. As an original cosponsor of both these bills, I will work to bring them to the full Senate for a vote.

Don't Derail Amtrak

Washington state has long recognized the importance of passenger rail service and has worked hard to make significant investments in Amtrak. Unfortunately, the President's budget will force the rail service into bankruptcy. In my ongoing fight to save Amtrak, this week, I sent a letter to Transportation Secretary Norman Mineta demanding answers regarding the administration's plan. I look forward to his reply and to working to keep Amtrak viable for its 25 million riders nationwide.

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