

# PATTY MURRAY'S WASHINGTON VIEW

U.S. Senator Patty Murray's Weekly Report to the People of Washington – September 9, 2005

## Support for Victims of Katrina

For nearly two weeks, we've seen devastating images from Gulf Coast communities as families struggle to cope with the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina. My thoughts and prayers go out to everyone who has been touched by this disaster.

People have come up to me everywhere I've gone in our state over the last week, and my office has been inundated with calls from Washington state residents who are really horrified at the conditions they have seen on TV. They are asking what they can do to help.

But they are also asking how this could have happened. They are upset, and with good reason. Our government failed in its initial response. We now have to see that we succeed in this ongoing recovery and that certainly is my focus right now.

Last Friday, the Senate joined the House in approving \$10.5 billion in funding for Hurricane Katrina relief efforts. And Thursday night, we also passed \$51 billion in emergency funding for these efforts.

While this funding will allow us to get help to the people whose lives have been shattered by this tragedy, billions more will be needed. I stand ready to work with my colleagues to provide whatever funding is needed for those efforts. On Tuesday, I delivered a Senate floor speech to express my sympathy and support for Americans touched by this disaster. You can read it at my Web site:

<http://murray.senate.gov>

There, you'll also find links to some of the organizations to which Americans are donating their time and money. I invite Washingtonians to participate, and I want to thank everyone who is working to help respond to this tragedy.

## Remembering Chief Justice Rehnquist

Last Saturday, our nation lost a dedicated public servant in Chief Justice William Rehnquist. Chief Justice Rehnquist served honorably on our nation's highest court for over three decades, a tenure marked by historic milestones and decisions that will shape the lives of the American people for generations to come.

While I often disagreed with his decisions, I admired Chief Justice Rehnquist's dedication to our country, and his ability to work with and respect the views of his fellow justices.

## Increasing Access to Higher Ed.

Also on Thursday, we took an important step forward to help students attend college or go on to a good career. One of my Senate committees passed an update to the Higher Education Act (HEA). I worked to include some important provisions in the bill, including:

- Increasing Pell Grants by \$300 per year;
- Giving foster and homeless students easier access to higher education;
- Increasing training for literacy coaches in high schools, and providing more help for high school students to continue on to higher education or careers.

I also worked to include a provision in the bill that will allow for student loan deferments for members of the U.S. Armed Services. I know we're asking so much of our men and women in uniform and their families. We have an obligation to make it easier for them when they return home. These deferments will give them a little more peace of mind as they bravely fight to defend us all.

One area I will continue to work on is finally and fully closing a loophole in the federal student loan program that has cost taxpayers billions over the past decade. The very lucrative "9.5% loans" were supposed to have ended more than ten years ago, but they are still being issued today. Borrowers currently pay only 3.37% interest on these loans, but taxpayers provide lenders with a subsidy for the remaining 6.13%. This amounts to a massive giveaway of taxpayer funds, and I'm fighting to change that. The bill will next move to the full Senate for consideration.

## Fighting for Working Families

**PENSIONS - A GOOD FIRST STEP:** The retirement security of American workers is critical in these uncertain economic times. As I travel across Washington state, workers often ask me whether their pensions will be there for them when they retire. Retirees wonder how long their monthly checks will continue. In our state we have over 1.1 million active and retired workers who are, or will be receiving, a pension in the future.

As a member of the Senate Health, Education, Labor and Pensions (HELP) Committee, I have been working with my colleagues over the last several months to develop legislation that will shore up and protect our nation's pension system long term.

On Thursday, I supported a pension reform bill in the HELP Committee – the Defined Benefit Security Act – that I believe is a good first step for workers. Specifically, the bill passed by the Committee will:

- Improve pension plan funding;
- Provide more predictable rules for companies;
- Provide better information about the plans financial condition;
- Help to prevent future pension terminations;
- Shore up multi-employer plans;
- Provide new rules for cash-balance hybrid conversions; and
- Clarify that retirement plans sponsored by tribal governments are entitled defined-benefit tax treatment.

I know that pensions, along with private savings and Social Security, are a critical component of American workers' retirement security. I'm committed to ensuring workers in our state receive the pensions they have worked so hard to earn.

**KATRINA RELIEF WORKERS DESERVE FULL PAY/BENEFITS:** Currently, some in government and industry are attempting to suspend Davis-Bacon prevailing wage laws for the people working to clean up the damage from Hurricane Katrina. This is a terrible – and dangerous – proposition. These brave men and women are risking their lives, working extremely hazardous conditions to rescue the stricken and rebuild devastated areas. We must provide them with full pay and healthcare benefits. I'll fight against any proposition that threatens to take away the full compensation and peace of mind these heroes deserve.

## Improving Bus Service in Jefferson Co.

Last Friday, I announced a \$1.77 million federal Department of Transportation grant to Jefferson Transit for land acquisition, final design, project management and construction of an administrative and maintenance bus facility in Port Townsend. I secured the funds as the highest-ranking Democrat on the Senate Appropriations Subcommittee on Transportation, Treasury, the Judiciary, and Housing and Urban Development.

Jefferson County's Transit services have experienced rapidly growing demand in recent years. This new facility will allow for increased maintenance and repair capabilities, as well as new administrative offices for Jefferson Transit. I'm glad to be able to support these improvements and keep our state moving.

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