

Vermont stories highlight real impact of the federal budget

Rep. Peter Welch brought three Vermont voices to the debate over President Obama's proposed budget Wednesday in testimony submitted to the House Budget Committee.

Welch highlighted the stories of Vermont National Guardsman Joseph Provost of Newport, Dan and Cynthia Hampton of Hartland, and Lucinda Flint of Brandon to illustrate the real world impact of the federal budgeting process.

As the Budget Committee begins consideration of Obama's proposed 2010 budget, Welch called for a renewed commitment to veterans like Joseph Provost, who was forced to wait ten months before receiving disability compensation after bravely serving in Iraq. Citing Dan Hampton's struggle to provide health insurance for his family after working 27 years at an Upper Valley company, Welch spoke to the need for comprehensive health care reform. Welch also pointed to the story of Lucinda Flint, who, like many Vermont seniors, suffers through cold winters because she cannot afford to weatherize her home - illustrating the importance of helping Vermonters save money on energy costs.

"I am pleased that the Obama budget takes bold, new steps on health care and energy priorities while giving the Department of Veterans Affairs the resources it needs to care for our veterans," Welch said in his testimony. "I strongly support these steps, as they will help individuals and families and strengthen our nation for years to come."

Welch's testimony is copied below:

Statement of Congressman Peter Welch before the House Budget Committee

Chairman Spratt, Ranking Member Ryan, and Members of the Committee, thank you for this opportunity to come before you to discuss the federal budget and its impact on the State of Vermont. The federal budget reflects the priorities of our nation and speaks to the needs of individuals all across America, individuals who are struggling to make ends meet. I would like to use this opportunity to highlight the cases of several Vermonters who have contacted me over the last year, Vermonters for whom the decisions we make in this budget will make a real difference in their lives.

Last fall, I met Joseph Provost, a Vermont National Guardsman and veteran of the war in Iraq, at the VFW Post in Newport, Vermont, near Lake Memphramagog. At this gathering of veterans and their families, Mr. Provost and his wife spoke about their struggles since Mr. Provost returned from serving in Iraq. He was injured during his service, and came home from Iraq a different man. Mr. Provost applied for disability compensation from the VA in January, 2008, and was still waiting for a decision about his benefits when I met with him last fall. Finally, after nearly ten months of waiting and intervention from my office, Mr. Provost was awarded his due compensation from the VA. I wish that Mr. Provost's case was an isolated incident, but based on my conversations with veterans, he is not alone. Far too many veterans are waiting far too long for a final determination on their VA claim.

Hearing stories like this helps to inform my support for the Fiscal Year 2010 Budget. The Obama administration has proposed a 16 percent increase to the VA budget, or nearly \$113 billion, with a portion of these funds going to modernize the Department of Veterans Affairs disability claims process. The current process is antiquated and badly needs an overhaul. The funding included in this budget means that General Shinsecki and the VA will have the resources to address the problem head-on so that veterans like Mr. Provost do not have to keep waiting for the benefits they have earned and deserve.

I do want to take a moment to comment on the administration's apparent consideration of a proposal to transfer payment for veterans' service-related medical care to private insurers. Mr. Chairman, the cost of a war should always include the cost of caring for the warrior. This proposal undermines that basic tenet by shifting the cost of caring for the warrior to private insurers and potentially jeopardizing employment opportunities and private health care coverage for veterans and their families. The administration should think twice before sending this proposal to us. If it chooses to do so, I hope that this Congress takes a hard look and passes a veterans budget that honors the principle of caring for our warriors.

The rising cost of health care is also a concern that is squeezing the budget of many Vermonters, like Dan and Cynthia Hampton, who live in my hometown of Hartland, Vermont.

They have one son serving in the United States Air Force who is serving in Afghanistan and another who is in the eighth grade. I would like to read an excerpt from a letter that Dan and Lori wrote to me:

I've worked for Imperial Company Inc. of West Lebanon, NH for twenty-seven years. My wife is self-employed. My wife and I have reached a breaking point in terms of affordable health insurance for our family. I learned earlier this week that our health care insurance, which we get through my employer, will increase to \$242.25 per week. This increase combined with the fact that I've gone almost three years without a pay increase and even had my pay cut 10% for over a year and a half has us reeling! We are at a loss as to what our options are.

The Hamptons are among thousands of Vermonters and millions of Americans who are desperately searching for any alternative so that they can afford their health insurance. Even more troubling, there are millions of Americans who lack even the most basic coverage of any kind - Americans for whom one health care emergency could mean bankruptcy or losing their home. This is simply unacceptable.

With this budget, President Obama has shown that he is going to address the challenge of health care reform head-on. The American Recovery and Reinvestment Act made significant investments to modernize our system of tracking and sharing medical records. It also provided a substantial subsidy for many of those who have lost their jobs and are utilizing COBRA to continue their coverage. The Administrations FY10 budget continues this trend by making a \$634 billion down payment on health care reform in order to make high quality, affordable health care available for all.

The last story I will share with you today is that of Lucinda Flint from Brandon, Vermont, who contacted me about weatherizing her home. Like many seniors, Ms. Flint lives on a small income and can't afford to pay for the expensive changes to weatherize her home. She heats her home with wood and can't use parts of her house in the winter because they are too cold. As a result, she tells me, she is sick all winter long because she can't properly heat her old home. Her family is ready to help her with the installation; all she needs is some capital to buy some insulation.

The Fiscal Year 2010 budget supports weatherization programs that would help Ms. Flint, building on the Recovery Act that Congress recently passed. It is estimated that savings from weatherization could add up to \$350 per household. Weatherization and other efficiency

funding will not only help keep Vermonters warm in the winter, they will help reduce electricity consumption, create jobs, and cut down on greenhouse gas emissions that contribute to global warming. There are thousands of Vermonters like Ms. Flint, who want to save energy, help protect the environment, and improve their own financial situation at the same time - this budget sets us on a path to help them do that.

I am pleased that the Obama budget takes bold, new steps on health care and energy priorities while giving the Department of Veterans Affairs the resources it needs to care for our veterans. I strongly support these steps, as they will help individuals and families and strengthen our nation for years to come. Thank you again for the opportunity to speak here today.