

PATTY MURRAY'S WASHINGTON VIEW

U.S. Senator Patty Murray's Weekly Report to the People of Washington – July 1, 2005

Victory for Our Veterans

I have long believed that caring for the brave men and women in uniform who have sacrificed for our freedom is a fundamental cost of war. I've been working for the past several months to increase funding for veterans' health care. Unfortunately, those efforts were rejected repeatedly by the Republican majority in the Senate.

However, I'm proud to announce that over the past two weeks we've made tremendous progress in the fight to get our veterans' – including those returning from the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan – the quality, dependable care they both need and deserve. We scored a huge victory for our veterans this week, when the Senate passed my amendment to add \$1.5 billion in funding for veterans' health care.

THE BACKGROUND:

LAST WEEK'S DISTURBING ANNOUNCEMENT

Last week, the Department of Veterans' Affairs announced they are at least \$1 billion short of funding to meet veterans' health care needs this year. The announcement comes after repeated assurances – one as recently as three weeks ago – from VA Secretary James Nicholson that the VA would need no additional funds. This announcement, while not surprising to me, was extremely disappointing.

Over the past year, I've been meeting with veterans and I've visited our troops in Iraq. The stories I heard, on top of looking at the VA's own data, made it clear to me that VA is not able to meet the needs of our veterans – and I've let the administration and my colleagues in Congress know. With new veterans returning from Iraq and Afghanistan every day, I warned that what was already an emergency at VA would become a crisis.

However, time and time again, Secretary Nicholson and the Bush Administration argued that my concerns were unwarranted. The majority in the Senate used the Administration's assurances to repeatedly defeat my efforts to increase funding for the VA.

A DIRECT CALL TO PRESIDENT BUSH FOR ACTION

On Monday, fellow Senate Democrats joined me in sending a letter to the President requesting that he address the VA's funding shortage during his nationally televised speech on Tuesday night. In the letter, I stressed that veterans are accessing the VA health care system in record numbers, which is putting demands on VA that are not being met.

In his speech, President Bush made clear that he is grateful to the service members fighting for our nation, but he ignored my call to address the shortfall at the VA. I share the President's deep respect for and dedication to our service men and women. But these brave Americans deserve more than just gratitude. They deserve the health care and benefits promised to them as part of their service.

PASSAGE OF MY VETS' HEALTH CARE AMENDMENT

On Wednesday, my amendment to provide \$1.5 billion to fund veterans' health care passed the Senate on a vote of 96-0. I'm proud that the Senate did right by our veterans and I will be there to ensure that we continue to honor their service and sacrifice by providing the care they need when they return home. Caring for our nation's veterans is not a Republican or Democratic issue – it is an American responsibility.

See video of my Senate floor speech on vets' health care funding:

<http://murray.senate.gov/video/050628-vets.ram>

Sign up to get periodic updates on my work for veterans:

<http://murray.senate.gov/vetupdates/index.cfm>

Senate Passes Energy Bill

This week, the Senate passed the Energy Bill. Although I continue to have concerns about the future of energy policy in our country, I voted in favor of this bill because I believe it makes up for many of the shortfalls in the energy legislation passed by the House of Representatives.

There is still much work to be done to promote our energy independence, national security, economy and environment. But, I applaud the Senate bill for its support for the protection of our electricity system here in the Pacific Northwest from unwarranted interference by the Federal Energy Regulatory Commission (FERC). Such interference would undoubtedly have increased the rates paid by our residents.

As the House and Senate negotiate the differences in our two bills, I implore the President and my colleagues to secure the positive aspects of the Senate energy bill and continue to work toward improved measures aimed at addressing foreign oil dependence, fuel economy, and global warming.

Senate Passes CAFTA

This week, the Senate passed the Central American Free Trade Agreement. CAFTA is not perfect, but it does help workers and industries here in Washington state to compete more effectively on a global level. The agreement will also include a financial commitment from the United States to help enforce labor and environmental protections in the CAFTA countries. And for the first time in a trade agreement, the International Labor Organization will receive U.S. resources to monitor and verify progress in the Central American countries' efforts to improve labor law enforcement and working conditions.

From our world class industries, to our high tech companies, to family farmers in central and eastern Washington, our state depends on trade. Increasing our access to world markets has become ever more important to the economy and quality of life we enjoy from Seattle to Yakima to Spokane. As our state, national, and world economies continue to change, I will continue to fight for policies that keep us strong at home and competitive abroad.

Justice Sandra Day O'Connor Retires

Justice O'Connor, the first woman nominated to the Supreme Court, served honorably for 24 years. She was a pioneer in the field of law and justice and is an inspiration to women that aspire to lives in public service. Justice O'Connor had a great affect on history, and her decisions will shape the lives of the American people for generations to come. I applaud her dedication, independence and her fairness, and thank her for giving so much of herself to our country.

I take seriously the constitutional role of the Senate to provide advice and consent on Supreme Court nominees, and look forward to the start of that process. The judges who serve lifetime appointments on the Supreme Court affect the lives and liberties of every American.

In the coming months, as the nomination and confirmation process moves forward, I will work to ensure that the President's nominee to fill this position will be fair and impartial, even-handed in administering justice, and will protect the rights and liberties of all Americans.

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