

PATTY MURRAY'S WASHINGTON VIEW

U.S. Senator Patty Murray's Weekly Report to the People of Washington – April 8, 2005

Fighting for Veterans' Health Care

Congress is preparing to provide \$80 billion for our military operations in Iraq and Afghanistan, and for tsunami relief. Last month, I supported this funding, and I'll vote for it when it comes to the Senate floor next week. However, I am very concerned that the proposal does not include a single penny to take care of our troops when they come back home as veterans. I believe that taking care of our veterans is part of the cost of war.

Recently, I traveled to Iraq and Kuwait, where I met with soldiers from Washington state. They were all very concerned about their transition back to normal life once they return home and, specifically, about access to health care for them and their families.

So, next week, I will offer an amendment to the Emergency Supplemental that would add almost \$2 billion for veterans' health care. This amendment would enable the VA to absorb the influx of new veteran patients returning home from Iraq and Afghanistan. It would reverse the budget shortfall while still maintaining the quality of care for our current veterans.

My amendment does three things:

1. Provides \$525 million for mental health care for returning veterans. Many need help with post traumatic stress disorder.
2. Provides \$610 million for our newest veterans – so they do not have to compete with existing veterans for health care.
3. Provides \$40 million for every Veterans regional network – so they can open new clinics and meet local needs. Today, most VA networks face a \$40 million shortfall that hurts our veterans.

My amendment serves as a reminder that caring for our men and women in uniform when they return home is as important as making sure they are taken care of while on the battlefield. I'll be working in upcoming weeks to see that it is included as part of the Supplemental funding.

Sign up to get my Veterans' Update:

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

Read my "blog" (online diary) from my trip:

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

Protecting Health Choices for Women

FDA Commissioner's Confirmation On Hold

I'm very troubled that the Food and Drug Administration (FDA) is ignoring sound science and blocking approval of an important drug. So, on Wednesday, I announced that, along with Senator Hillary Clinton (D-NY), I will place a "hold" on the nomination of Lester Crawford to head FDA. Our hold will prevent a vote on his confirmation by the full Senate.

We made the decision to hold Dr. Crawford's nomination after a private briefing with him in my office on Wednesday. I requested the briefing at a hearing of the Senate Health, Education, Labor, and Pensions (HELP) Committee last month. During that hearing, I pushed Dr. Crawford to answer questions about a long-pending application for nationwide over-the-counter approval of Plan B emergency contraceptives.

During the hearing, Dr. Crawford would not give a time frame for approval of Plan B. I insisted that my colleagues and I on the committee need a specific briefing on how to get this application approved as soon as possible. I told Dr. Crawford that this private meeting must take place prior to his confirmation vote as permanent commissioner.

Plan B, which is also known as the "morning after pill," has been scientifically shown to safely prevent unintended

pregnancies. Although approved for prescription use, Plan B is not approved for nationwide over-the-counter use. FDA's expert advisory committee – whose opinion is usually the key to whether approvals are granted – voted overwhelmingly in favor of approval. But FDA has not responded to the application in the nearly two years since it was filed, a highly unusual delay.

I have always supported a strong and independent FDA. By ignoring sound science, FDA is jeopardizing public confidence and the health of American women. The approval of Plan B should be based on sound science, not ideological battles. That's why we will continue to hold until FDA decides on Plan B's over-the-counter status.

Working to End the "Global Gag Rule"

In the developing world, complications from pregnancy are one of the leading causes of death for women. According to the World Health Organization, more than half a million women die each year of causes related to pregnancy or childbirth. It is well known that increased access to reproductive health care would go a long way toward reducing the number of victims.

Yet, in January 2001, the Bush Administration imposed restrictions on non-governmental organizations overseas receiving international family planning assistance. These organizations are instrumental in providing the health care poor women need. The restrictions, known as the "global gag rule," severely limit the availability of reproductive health care to the very women who need it most.

On Tuesday, I gave a speech on the Senate floor in support of an amendment offered by Senator Barbara Boxer (D-CA) that would strike down this damaging policy. The amendment passed, which moves us a step closer to saving the lives of countless women. Still, we face an uphill battle when it comes to making this change into law, so there is still much work to be done to provide women everywhere with access to a full range of health care choices.

Keeping Our Waterways Clean

In the Northwest, our waterways are an integral part of our lifestyle, and I believe future generations should be able to enjoy our natural treasures just as we do. That's why I believe in tough penalties for anyone who pollutes our waterways.

In March 2001, the U.S. Coast Guard and the Washington State Department of Ecology discovered a "mystery spill" of roughly 500 gallons of fuel oil in the Columbia River near Kalama, Washington. The agencies took samples of the spilled oil and later matched the samples to fuel carried by an Evergreen Container Lines vessel.

At the time, I was the first – and only – political leader to call on Evergreen and international entities to comply with all marine pollution laws and international environmental shipping standards. On May 18, 2001, I wrote a letter to Owen Wu, Chairman of the Evergreen America Corporation, demanding that they comply with all relevant anti-pollution laws. Wu replied to my letter, denying that Evergreen Container Lines dumped the oil.

However, the investigation that followed found numerous Evergreen vessels equipped with pipes that could have been used to discharge oil directly into the marine environment rather than through mandated pollution control equipment, as well as evidence that the company had knowingly covered it up. This week, the U.S. Department of Justice, the Washington State Department of Ecology, and the Coast Guard imposed \$25 million in fines on Evergreen shipping for illegal dumping in marine environments.

I applaud these fines. Our government and the U.S. Coast Guard worked diligently to bring this company to justice and to enforce the laws that protect our communities and our environment. I look forward to the continued growth of a shipping industry that flourishes without cutting corners and polluting our waters, and I will continue to work to ensure enforcement of the laws that keep our waterways clean.

To subscribe, unsubscribe, or change your email address, visit: <http://murray.senate.gov/updates>