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Obey Statement on the Labor, Health, and Education Appropriations Bill

WASHINGTON- Today, Dave Obey, Chairman of the Appropriations Committee and the Subcommittee on Labor, Health and Education, made the following statement during the debate on the FY2008 Labor, Health and Education Appropriations Bill.

“This bill, more than any other, determines how willing we are to make the investments necessary to assure the future strength of this country and its working families. We strengthen the country when we strengthen our families. We strengthen our country when we invest enough in workers to have the most competitive work force in the world.

“The decisions we make in any one year are not decisive. But if we do not think in long term, if we do not recognize the kind of country we will be in 10 years, we will not make the investments necessary to prepare for that world and we will be shortchanging the future of every American.

“Because he has chosen to put his desire to give \$50 billion in tax breaks to those who make a million dollars a year and his desire to spend \$140 billion on Iraq, ahead of these investments, the President has chosen to cut the investments in this bill by more than \$7 ½ billion in real terms.

“This bill rejects most of those cuts because we cannot disinvest in the country’s future without hurting national security and the future of every American family.

“Instead of cutting \$7 ½ billion as the President requested, we eliminate or cut 41 programs, saving \$1.1 billion. We then increase investments in critical programs by about \$4 ½ billion in real terms or 2.8% over last year after adjusting for inflation and population change.

“Now, why do we do that? Because in 10 years there will be:

- 27 million more Americans.
- 12 million more seniors needing health care
- 2.7 million more kids in elementary and secondary school
- 2.2 million more students in college
- 11 million more Americans will be without health insurance, unless we wise up and wake up and change our policies
- And within 7 years, half of the nation’s job growth will be in occupations requiring higher education skills.

“To meet those challenges, with this bill we target modest increases to crucial high priority

activities to attack deficits in worker training, deficits in health care, deficits in education access.

“On a bipartisan basis, without a dissenting vote, we provided \$450 million above the President’s inadequate request for Title I to help an additional 155,000 disadvantaged students.

“Instead of wiping out every student aid program except Pell and work study, we rejected the President’s cuts and raised the maximum Pell grant by \$650 over 2006 to help over 5 million students to go to college.

“We reversed the 3 year decline in federal support for Special Education. Mr. Walsh, the Ranking Member of this subcommittee has taken a leadership role in that regard. We reversed the President’s cuts in teacher training. We provided new after-school opportunities for 163,000 more students.

“On healthcare, nobody has ever come up to me at home and said, “Obey, why don’t you guys get your act together and cut cancer research.” But that is exactly what Congress did the last 2 years, cutting NIH research grants by over 500 grants.

“Well, we stopped that. In January, we reversed the President’s cuts and this bill adds another \$1 billion above the President’s request, which would again cut research grants.

“We have also included a package of 5 initiatives to put health care within the reach of more than 2 million additional Americans.

- \$200 million to expand access to health and dental care at Community Health Centers.
- \$75 million to help states expand health coverage for targeted populations.
- \$50 million to help states provide affordable health insurance for 200,000 people who are medical high risks and cannot get insurance from the private market.
- \$20 million to help trade impacted workers benefit from the Health Coverage Tax Credit.
- Added funding to help Medicare beneficiaries to get health insurance counseling.

“Because of high energy prices, we have added \$880 million to the President’s request for low income heating assistance, reversing half the cut Congress and the President made last year.

“To discourage abortions, instead of lecturing, we provide a \$1.4 billion package of incentives to provide real world help to women through expanded Head Start, Child Care, Domestic Violence Programs, Maternal and Child Health Care, Family Planning and Abstinence Programs.

“To help workers, we reverse the President’s cuts in a range of workforce training programs. We also provide a \$100 million increase above the President to help reduce Social Security claims blacklogs and to keep more Social Security offices open.

“Now, the President claims that this bill amounts to runaway spending.

“Fact. From 1980 to today, domestic Appropriations as a percentage of total national income have declined hugely. The President’s budget would cut them to a level 48% below the 1980 level and by 2012 to a level 57% below 1980. That is hardly runaway growth. That is a steady bleed of America’s quality of life and America’s future.”

“For the President to borrow \$1.2 trillion to pay for tax cuts and \$600 billion to pay for Iraq, including another \$140 billion next year, and then pretend this modest 2% difference with him is the cause of fiscal irresponsibility is sheer nonsense and many enlightened Republicans know it.

“These investments are not just fiscally responsible, they are necessary for the future health and strength of the nation.

“One other point – We will today hear complaints about earmarks in the bill. Let us be clear, the last time Congress was in Democratic hands, there were no earmarks in this bill. Under Republican rule, they exploded from 0 to over 3,000.

“This bill has cut back the dollar level for earmarks to half the level in the ‘06 bill. Exactly two tenths of one percent of the total funding in this bill go for Congressionally directed earmarks.

“And let me also point out the amount of dollars in spending directed by the Congress is a tiny fraction of the amount directed by the Administration. First, for instance, the Administration in this bill requests specific earmarks:

- \$10 million for Reach Out and Read
- \$10 million for Teach for America
- \$9 million for Points of Light Foundation
- \$4.5 million for America’s Promise
- \$1.7 million for the Mind and Body Institute
- \$1.4 million for the YMCA

“On top of that, in 2006 alone, the Health and Human Services Department directed spending of \$1.9 billion through 21,000 contracts that were less than fully competed. That alone is more than 7 times the amount of congressionally directed spending in this bill.

“At the Labor Department, 90% of discretionary funding for the High Growth Job Training Program was spent on a noncompetitive basis.

“The Office of Inspector General found that Education Department strong armed state and local school districts to select text books from favored publishers. Madison, Wisconsin, in my own state lost its \$2 million Reading First grant because they refused to purchase texts from an inferior program. Yet, the most thoroughly evaluated programs like Success for All and Reading Recovery were frozen out by the program administrators.

“ABC reported that one publisher, with good connections at the White House, saw its corporate net worth rise from \$5 million to \$360 million with a little help from their friends. The Office of

the Inspector General has made criminal references to the Justice Department and we have cut Reading First until the Administration changes its ways.

“So I would simply say, Madam Chair, spare us the Administration’s sanctimony about earmarks or directed spending and please spare us the pretense that this bill has anything to do with the fiscal mess this country faces. It is a disciplined set of investments. Virtually every Republican amendment in Committee did not seek to cut funding, rather it sought to increase it.

“I appreciate the bipartisan support of the bill in Committee. I appreciate the partnership of Mr. Walsh, the Ranking Member. People who have reviewed it most closely, Republicans and Democrats alike, know this bill is responsible and disciplined.

“Just one comparison, the Administration’s Defense request, even without counting the \$140 billion in new money that they are asking for in their supplemental, that Defense bill is \$43 billion above last year, which is at least 4 times as large as the difference between the Committee and the White House on this bill.

“I urge every Member who thinks about this country’s future, to support this bill.”