

PATTY MURRAY'S WASHINGTON VIEW

U.S. Senator Patty Murray's Weekly Report to the People of Washington –May 26, 2006

Immigration Reform Bill Passes Senate

On Thursday, I voted to pass comprehensive immigration legislation because it addresses many of the priorities for reform that I outlined at the start of this debate. This has been a challenging discussion with strong feelings on all sides. I have never forgotten that this debate is about more than fences and visa cards. It's about people's lives and the values our country represents.

This bill isn't perfect, and I voted against provisions that were wrong for our state and the direction of our nation. Overall, this bill provides comprehensive reform that will help Washington state and our nation by improving our security and our economy, while advancing a tough, but fair, approach to the complex issues surrounding immigration.

I've spent the past few months meeting with people across our state from all walks of life about the challenges and opportunities of immigration reform. From law enforcement, I've heard about the challenges of securing our borders and the need for more federal resources. From farmers, I've heard about the huge labor needs for our state's largest economic sector. From immigrants, I've heard about the many challenges they face helping their families achieve a better life. From human rights and religious leaders, I've heard about the need for laws that reflect our country's compassion and values. From business leaders and educators, I've heard about the impact of immigration on our economy and schools. I've also heard from advocates for farm worker housing and from residents of communities large and small. I want to thank those who have taken the time to share their ideas and concerns with me and to help inform my work in the Senate.

Overall, this bill advances most of my priorities for immigration reform. As I noted in March, a reform bill should do seven things. It should improve enforcement. It should treat the Northern border fairly. It should include a guest worker plan so that industries like Washington agriculture can remain viable. It should provide a path forward so that people who are here have an opportunity to become citizens and realize the American Dream. It should protect the rights of victims and refugees. It should not criminalize compassionate individuals who provide healthcare, education, food or shelter for immigrants. And finally, it should provide the resources to help families rise above their circumstances through education and training, which will then help our nation grow and prosper. On that last measure, this bill falls far short, and it is one of the areas that I hope will be improved.

The next step is for the bill we passed in the Senate to be reconciled with the House version. I strongly oppose the House-passed bill because it is narrowly focused on enforcement along the Southern border, ignores many of the problems of the Northern border, does nothing to address the economic demands of our state's economy, and takes a punitive approach to immigration. I hope that House and Senate leaders will send us a comprehensive bill that reflects the priorities I've outlined so we can move forward with real and meaningful reform.

As I noted at the start of this debate, we should make sure our actions reflect our security, our economy, and the opportunity that America offers generations of immigrants. Let's take the time to get this right.

Searching for Answers following VA Security Breach

A Major Security Failure

On Tuesday, we found out that the personal information of 26.5 million veterans was compromised due to a lapse in security at the Veterans Administration. Vitrally important information, including names and Social Security numbers, were stolen from the home of a VA employee, who had inexplicably been allowed to remove it from his VA office.

As news about this major incident spread, my offices were flooded with calls from concerned veterans. They were understandably angry that they had been exposed to the dangers of identity theft. They also wanted to know why it had taken the VA weeks to inform them of the theft. I was angry too, and I used my seat on the Senate Veterans Affairs Committee to demand answers from Veterans Secretary Jim Nicholson during an emergency committee meeting last Thursday.

Demanding Answers

During my questioning of Secretary Nicholson, I went into specific detail about many of the dangers posed by this breach. I asked about the VA's plans to inform veterans and their spouses, about the breach's impact on the VA budget, and about any effects it would have on overall care.

I also sought to get answers on how the families of deceased veterans would be properly informed. Their data can be very valuable to identity thieves. Unfortunately, Secretary Nicholson had few definitive answers for me.

A Pattern of Mismanagement

This latest incident is part of a larger pattern of mismanagement at the VA. Having dedicated much of my time to Veterans issues, I am keenly aware that Veterans have not received the level of services they deserve during this Administration.

I will continue to push this issue until I am completely satisfied that this security failure has been remedied. There is simply too much at risk.

To listen to my questioning of Secretary Nicholson visit:

<http://murray.senate.gov/video/060525-vadata.mp3>

The VA has set up a toll-free number to assist veterans. The number is 1-800-FED INFO (333-4636). The call center is open from 5 am to 6 pm (PST), Monday-Saturday.

Proof Surfaces that FDA Chiefs Delayed Decision

On Thursday, court documents were released that revealed that the last two FDA commissioners overruled FDA medical reviewers in order to block the "Plan B" birth control pill from being sold over-the-counter.

Along with Senator Hillary Clinton, I have been working hard to make sure that women have access to emergency contraception. I warned the FDA to stop playing politics with the health of American women. It is outrageous that under this Administration, an agency entrusted with making unbiased decisions based on science, has abused its authority and allowed ideology to govern its decision-making. The American people must be able to trust that the FDA is the gold standard in drug approval. Every day that goes by without a decision on "Plan B" is a threat to both women's health and the integrity of the FDA.

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