

SAVE WORKING FAMILIES AND SENIORS TAX RELIEF PACKAGE

The SPEAKER pro tempore. Under a previous order of the House, the gentleman from California (Mr. FILNER) is recognized for 5 minutes.

Mr. FILNER. Madam Speaker, I rise today to introduce a tax relief package for middle class taxpayers. I collectively call them the "Save Our Working Families And Seniors" tax relief bills. The three bills, the Middle Income Senior Tax Relief Act, the Equal Indexing for Seniors Act, and the Middle Class Medical Tax Relief Act, would reduce the tax burden for middle class taxpayers.

These taxpayers see their paychecks and retirement income dwindle because of the unfair way the Tax Code treats Social Security income and health care costs. My bills would put some of their hard-earned money back into their pockets and into their savings accounts.

The Middle Class Medical Tax Relief Act would lower the exclusion percentage of medical deductions from 7½ percent to 5 percent for singles with incomes of less than \$60,000 per year and couples with incomes of less than \$75,000 per year. Thus, a family whose income was \$50,000, would be allowed to deduct all medical expenses above \$2,500 instead of those above \$3,750, as is now the law. Surely, middle class taxpayers need this tax relief.

Almost every year government employees receive a cost of living increase to adjust their pay for inflation. But retirees' tax liability is not indexed for inflation, so those who work or are seeing a return on their investments they made for their retirement years must pay an ever-increasing percentage of their income on taxes. My bill, the Equal Indexing for Seniors Act, would index for inflation the amount of income each year that a senior can earn before their Social Security can be taxed.

And middle income seniors, who earn just a bit more in a year, would not suddenly find their percentage of Social Security benefits taxed jump from 50 to 85 percent. My third bill, the Middle Income Senior Tax Relief Act, would increase the threshold for couples to \$54,000 before 85 percent of their Social Security benefits are taxed. Taken together, these two bills ensure that taxable income thresholds will rise with inflation.

We, as a Congress, should not discourage seniors from working or earning a good return on their retirement investments, nor should we exclude people who have a modest amount of health care expenses from itemizing them.

Madam Speaker, that is why I encourage my colleagues' support of the three bills that form my "Save Our Middle Class Families And Seniors" tax relief package.

The SPEAKER pro tempore. Under a previous order of the House, the gentle-

woman from Florida (Ms. ROS-LEHTINEN) is recognized for 5 minutes.

(Ms. ROS-LEHTINEN addressed the House. Her remarks will appear hereinafter in the Extensions of Remarks.)

CONGRESS SHOULD ACT QUICKLY TO HELP TURN AROUND SCHOOLS IN THE DISTRICT OF COLUMBIA

The SPEAKER pro tempore. Under a previous order of the House, the gentleman from the District of Columbia (Ms. NORTON) is recognized for 5 minutes.

Ms. NORTON. Madam Speaker, I have just come from a hearing on school vouchers, and I appreciate that I was given the opportunity to participate in the hearing because the hearing involved only the District of Columbia. I am left to wonder why the majority does not bring a voucher bill forward for the people of the United States of America, but picks only on one jurisdiction, the one that has voted at the highest rate—89 percent—against vouchers.

I want to thank the Catholic Archdiocese as well as others who support charter schools for coming. The gentleman from California (Mr. RIGGS), chairman of the committee, is the major sponsor of the RIGGS-ROEMER bill which brought the House together on both sides on the notion of school choice involving public charter schools.

I am very appreciative of the Washington Scholarship Fund. It is a private group that has put its money where its mouth is. It has not walked up and down the halls of Congress lobbying to get Congress to spend money which it knows the Congress is not going to be able to spend, but has simply come forward with the money on its own and now has raised money for scholarships in the District, for kids who want to go.

I want to thank Arlene Ackerman, who is the new chief academic officer. She is a piece of work. She is already doing it, not just talking it. Our kids will be reading the equivalent of 25 books each next year.

I asked her what she could do with the \$7 million in the so-called vouchers bill, and here is what she had to say. She would use that money this summer to send 20,000 kids to summer school so that we can end social promotion in the District of Columbia. She is going to do it one way or the other anyway. She does not have the money to do it now.

The credibility of those who are pressing vouchers is severely strained when, in fact, we can do something that will make a huge difference in the District of Columbia this very year with that \$7 million. When that vote comes on the floor of the House, however, it comes with the certain knowledge of the leadership that the President has already announced that he would veto a voucher bill.

So why are they bringing it? The bill comes with the certain knowledge that such a bill would be met with a lawsuit and an immediate injunction, because there have been two or three vouchers passed in the States and each and every one of them has been enjoined by the courts. So what is the majority trying to do? They come crying crocodile tears for my kids. If they mean it, they should give us the \$7 million so that we can end social promotion in the District of Columbia.

Instead, they have dangled free money before some poor kids in the District of Columbia. They are playing with my constituents because they know that this free money will not come out of here. They did the same thing with our ministers last year. They got them to sign on for some free money for scholarships for the District of Columbia.

But have they told my constituents there would be a veto and that the free money would never come out of the halls of this House? Have they told my constituents there will be a lawsuit, and that every such voucher bill that has been brought in the United States of America has been halted by an injunction?

Who are they playing with? Who are they fooling? Do they care about youngsters in the District of Columbia? They should prove it. They should put their money where their mouths are. It is time to stop talking about the schools of the District of Columbia. There is something they can do about it. Stop raising expectations among poor people in the District. The Congress is back again. The bill is fast becoming a cruel hoax.

I asked the two parents who testified before the committee this morning, whether they knew that they would not qualify for the vouchers if the vouchers were in fact passed by this House, because they are already in private schools? And they did not know that, my colleagues.

Please help me. The children of the District of Columbia are as desperately off as my colleagues claim. The schools are indeed as bad as the schools in all of the large cities of the United States. My colleagues can do something about it. We are not the Congress' burden, we are not the Congress' responsibility, but we seek a partnership to quickly bring these schools up and to give these kids what they deserve. They deserve much more than they have gotten from the District.

My colleagues' critique of the schools is well placed, but it will mean nothing unless they also step up and do something. And what my colleagues can do this summer is to begin quickly in the short-term to turn around a school system that has brought nothing but condemnation on this floor and in the District.

The difference between the District and my colleagues is that the Congress controls billions of dollars. With only \$7 million, we can get a bill that would

be signed by the President and would send 20,000 children to school and help them quickly improve their standards.

HONORING AMERICA'S WORD TO OUR VETERANS

The SPEAKER pro tempore. Under a previous order of the House, the gentleman from Georgia (Mr. NORWOOD) is recognized for 5 minutes.

Mr. NORWOOD. Mr. Speaker, when millions of older Americans decided to begin their military careers, one of the primary selling points used by the recruiters back then was the Federal Government's promise of retirement benefits. Those benefits included free lifetime health care.

The sales pitch went sort of like this: "The pay is not very good, your family will have to move every couple of years, and there is a distinct possibility that you might be killed or crippled. But if you can live through it for the 20 years, you will have the satisfaction of having served your country along with a decent retirement. And you will not have to worry about health care costs eating up that retirement check because you will have free health care for life at military hospitals, as long as they have room for you."

Well, Mr. Speaker, today 400,000 American veterans are dying prematurely. Many of these veterans are military retirees and now have no medical care option left but Medicare. Some do not even have Medicare coverage. They counted on the lifetime military health care promise, the promise that they were given upon entering the military, and did not sign up for Medicare Part B, not ever considering that the Federal Government might go back on its word. Now these men and women do not even have health coverage this Congress provides for draft dodgers.

While numerous good bills have been introduced in the 105th Congress to address this problem, there is one that I believe deserves some special attention, H.R. 1356, introduced by my very good friend the gentleman from Oklahoma (Mr. J. C. WATTS). H.R. 1356 offers the Federal Employees Health Benefits Program, or FEHBP, as an alternative for those beneficiaries who have lost access to the Department of Defense-sponsored health care.

This legislation has been cosponsored by 66 Members of this House. If it is modified with cost control caps, it would provide a cost-effective quick fix for those military folks and their families that are truly hurting today. It will go a long way towards solving the problems of all 8.2 million military retirees.

H.R. 1356 would require the Department of Defense to restore the current CHAMPUS/TRICARE Standard program to the quality benefit intended when the CHAMPUS program was enacted in 1966. It would allow Medicare-eligible retirees the option to enroll in the Federal Employees Health Benefits

Program. Those under the age of 65 would be provided with the plan option if the restored benefit is not available.

This legislation is very similar to the Military Health Care Justice plan proposed by the National Association of the Uniformed Services to provide care to all military beneficiaries without harming readiness.

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FEHBP, the Federal Employee Health Benefits Plan, is a wonderful example of the Federal Government providing great health care at a reasonable cost, a Federal program that has actually been working for the past 37 years. In fact, according to the Heritage Foundation, it is the most efficient health care system of its kind in the country. I, as well as my staff, know this because we are currently enrolled.

As a veteran, I feel it is essential that the Federal Government honor the commitment it made to provide quality health care to those veterans who have served a minimum of 20 years of active Federal service. These are the men and women who have defended our Nation and protected our freedom. If the military health care crisis is not corrected through legislation that provides a solution in the next couple of years, these men and women could be denied the promise, the promise, from the Federal Government of lifetime medical care that was made to them when they first enlisted.

Nine million Federal civilian employees, including DOD civilian personnel, and 1.6 million DOD and other Federal civilian retirees and their dependents have the Federal Employee Health Benefit Plan. Let us honor our promise to the men and women who have protected us and let us pass H.R. 1356.

The SPEAKER pro tempore. Under a previous order of the House, the gentleman from California (Ms. MILLENDER-MCDONALD) is recognized for 5 minutes.

(Ms. MILLENDER-MCDONALD addressed the House. Her remarks will appear hereafter in the Extensions of Remarks.)

The SPEAKER pro tempore. Under a previous order of the House, the gentleman from New York (Mrs. MALONEY) is recognized for 5 minutes.

(Mrs. MALONEY addressed the House. Her remarks will appear hereafter in the Extensions of Remarks.)

The SPEAKER pro tempore. Under a previous order of the House, the gentleman from Maryland (Mrs. MORELLA) is recognized for 5 minutes.

(Mrs. MORELLA addressed the House. Her remarks will appear hereafter in the Extensions of Remarks.)

The SPEAKER pro tempore. Under a previous order of the House, the gentleman from California (Mr. LANTOS) is recognized for 5 minutes.

(Mr. LANTOS addressed the House. His remarks will appear hereafter in the Extensions of Remarks.)

The SPEAKER pro tempore. Under a previous order of the House, the gentleman from Pennsylvania (Mr. PETERSON) is recognized for 5 minutes.

(Mr. PETERSON of Pennsylvania addressed the House. His remarks will appear hereafter in the Extensions of Remarks.)

The SPEAKER pro tempore. Under a previous order of the House, the gentleman from New York (Mr. RANGEL) is recognized for 5 minutes.

(Mr. RANGEL addressed the House. His remarks will appear hereafter in the Extensions of Remarks.)

LUNAR PROSPECTOR MISSION

The SPEAKER pro tempore. Under a previous order of the House, the gentleman from Florida (Mr. WELDON) is recognized for 5 minutes.

Mr. WELDON of Florida. Mr. Speaker, it is an honor for me to rise today and speak out in support of the men and women at NASA and at Spaceport Florida who are responsible for the recent very successful Lunar Prospector mission. And actually, this is an ongoing mission. The probe is still orbiting the Moon.

First of all, let me talk about Spaceport Florida. Spaceport Florida is a new entity. Some people may ask, "What is a spaceport?" Traditionally, most of the launches that have been done at Cape Canaveral have been done by the Federal Government, either the Air Force or NASA. Years ago, the State of Florida realized that, with the emerging commercial launch industry, that it would be very helpful to have a State agency that would actually launch rockets.

To my left on this easel is the first mission, the Lunar Prospector mission; and what we have here shown is the Lockheed Martin Athena II launch vehicle, which is this rocket right here. There are several State-sponsored spaceports, as we call them. They are like an airport or seaport, a place where you take off to another place. Instead of in an airplane, it is a rocket that is taking off.

Florida has the first successful launch of a rocket from its State-sponsored spaceport. And one of the big advantages of this is that it saves money. By having a spaceport handle it, we can cut back on a lot of bureaucracy and costs and be able to do things more efficiently. This whole mission, this Lunar Prospector mission, is part of what they call the faster, better, cheaper mode of doing things.

The reason this mission went off was because several years ago there was another mission. It was called Clementine. That was sponsored by both the Department of Defense and by NASA, which showed a suggestion that there might actually be ice on the Moon.