

summer, would be the vehicle for repealing Section 907—just as was attempted last year. Last September, as we were working to finish up the appropriations bills before adjourning for the Congressional elections, a provision was included in the fiscal year 1999 Foreign Operations bill to repeal Section 907. But I'm proud to say, Mr. Speaker, that we succeeded in taking that language out of the bill on the House floor. A bipartisan coalition of Members of this House kept Section 907 as the law, because it was the right thing to do.

Mr. Speaker, I would say that it would be even more imprudent and unjustified now to repeal Section 907.

As I mentioned, Azerbaijan's blockade is against both the Republic of Armenia and the Republic of Nagorno Karabagh. Nagorno Karabagh is an historically Armenian-populated region of the Caucasus Mountains (known as Artsakh to the Armenian people) that Stalin's map-makers included as part of Azerbaijan—although even in Soviet times its distinctiveness and autonomy were officially recognized. With the break-up of the Soviet Union, as the countries of the collapsing empire attained their independence, Azerbaijan attempted to militarily crush Nagorno Karabagh and drive out the Armenian population. But the Karabagh Armenians ultimately won their war of independence, and a cease-fire was signed in 1994.

Although the shooting war has essentially ceased—except for occasional sniper fire from Azerbaijan's soldiers against the defenders of Karabagh—a more permanent peace has been elusive. The United States has been one of the countries taking the lead in the peace process, under the auspices of the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE). Late last year, the U.S. and our negotiating partners put forward a proposal, known as the "Common State" proposal, as a basis for moving the negotiations forward.

Despite some serious reservations, the elected governments of both Nagorno Karabagh and Armenia have accepted this Common State proposal in a spirit of good faith, to get the negotiations moving forward. And what was Azerbaijan's reaction to the proposal from the United States and our negotiating partners? An unqualified "no." In other words, Armenia and Karabagh have agreed to work with the U.S. for peace in this strategically vital region of the world. Azerbaijan has rejected American efforts to achieve peace and stability.

Yet, Mr. Speaker, unbelievable as it sounds our State Department is trying to push Congress to reward Azerbaijan, the country that rejects our peace plan, by repealing Section 907—to the serious detriment of Armenia and Karabagh, the countries that accept our proposal. Furthermore, the Administration's budget request actually proposes increasing aid to Azerbaijan and decreasing aid to Armenia. What message does that send? That rejecting peace is okay?

Current law, Section 907, makes good sense and is morally justified. Section 907 does NOT prevent the delivery of humanitarian aid to the people of Azerbaijan; to date, well over \$130 million in U.S. humanitarian and exchange assistance has been provided to Azerbaijan through NGOs (non-governmental organizations). The blockade of Armenia and Nagorno Karabagh has cut off the transport of food, fuel, medicine and other vital

supplies—creating a humanitarian crisis requiring the U.S. to send emergency life-saving assistance to Armenia. Armenia is landlocked, and the Soviet-era infrastructure routed 85 percent of Armenia's goods, as well as vital energy supplies, through Azerbaijan. That life-line is now cut off. Despite these disadvantages, Armenia has established democracy and market reforms, and is trying to integrate its economy with the West.

But the bottom line, Mr. Speaker, is that Azerbaijan has failed to live up to the basic condition set forth in U.S. law, pursuant to Section 907: "taking demonstrable steps to cease all blockades and other offensive uses of force against Armenia and Nagorno Karabagh."

I hope that Secretary Albright and the State Department will reconsider their plan to repeal Section 907. If not, I hope Congress will reject this effort, as we have done for years.

#### H.R. 2116, THE VETERANS' MILLENNIUM HEALTH CARE ACT

The SPEAKER pro tempore. Under the Speaker's announced policy of January 19, 1999, the gentleman from Florida (Mr. STEARNS) is recognized during morning hour debates for 5 minutes.

Mr. STEARNS. Mr. Speaker, good morning. Today I want to talk about a bill that I have sponsored, the bill is H.R. 2116, the Veterans' Millennium Health Care Act. I am pleased this is a bipartisan bill. The gentleman from Arizona (Mr. STUMP) on the Republican side and the gentleman from Illinois (Mr. EVANS) on the Democrat side, as well as the gentleman from Illinois (Mr. GUTIERREZ), the ranking member on the subcommittee, have all cosponsored this legislation.

Last week, on June 9, we held a hearing and marked up the legislation, and it was favorably reported out of the full committee.

What this legislation does is offer a blueprint to help position VA for the future, and I think it is appropriately entitled the Veterans' Millennium Health Care Act. Foremost among the VA's challenges are the long-term care of our aging veterans population. For many among the World War II population, long-term care has become just as important as acute care. However the long-term care challenge has gone unanswered for too long.

It is important, therefore, that just last month the VA committee held a hearing on long-term care. The bill I have introduced would precisely address this issue and would adopt some of the key recommendations of the blue ribbon advisory committee. But my bill goes further than that in providing VA important new tools for access to long-term care.

The bill also tackles another challenging issue. Mr. Speaker, the GAO findings showed that the VA spends billions of dollars in the next 5 years to operate unneeded buildings. They testified that one out of every four VA medical care dollars is spent in maintaining buildings rather than caring for patients. A lot of these buildings are over

40 years old. Now, this is just not an abstract concern. This could be a savings of almost \$10 billion a year.

Mr. Speaker, I think it is no secret that the VA administration is talking about closing old, obsolete hospitals. In some locations, that may be appropriate. The point is that the VA has closure authority and has already used it. In fact, we could expect closures of needed facilities under the disastrous budget submitted by the President last year.

Mr. Speaker, my bill instead calls for a process, establishing a new process so that decisions on closing hospitals can only be made on a comprehensive planning basis with veterans' participation. And this is very important and very appropriate. The bill sets numerous safeguards in place and would specifically provide that VA cannot simply stop operating a hospital and walk away from its responsibilities to veterans. No, it must reinvest the savings in a new, brand new, improved treatment facility or improved services in the area.

The bill responds to pressing veterans' needs. It opens the door to expansion of long-term care, to greater access to outpatient care, and to improve benefits including emergency care coverage. In turn, it provides for reforms that would help advance these goals.

As I mentioned earlier, it is bipartisan, and we have the support of both Democrats and Republicans. I also would like to commend the gentleman from New Jersey (Mr. SMITH) for introducing H.R. 1762. This is legislation that expands the scope of VA respite care. The language in his bill has been incorporated into our bill.

My legislation also requires that the VA provide needed long-term care for 50 percent service-connected veterans and veterans needing care for service-related conditions.

H.R. 2116 would also expand access to care to two very deserving groups. It would specifically authorize priority care for veterans injured in combat and awarded the Purple Heart and provide specific authority for VA care of TRICARE-eligible military retirees not otherwise eligible for priority VA care. In such cases, DOD would reimburse the VA at the same rate payable to the TRICARE contractor.

The measure would also authorize VA to recover reasonable costs of emergency care in community hospitals for VA patients who have no health care.

In other words, this is needed. There is no other more important component in this than this long-term care I have mentioned earlier. But I think there is another segment that we are forgetting about, and that is the homeless veterans. This bill addresses that by awarding grants for building and remodeling State veterans' homes and providing grants for the homeless veterans.

To summarize, Mr. Speaker, this bill, H.R. 2116, provides new direction to address veterans' long-term care needs; expands veterans' access to care; closes gaps in eligibility laws; and establishes needed reform to improve the VA health care system. Our veterans population is in need of this reform.

“COMMUNITIES CAN!” COMMUNITIES OF EXCELLENCE AWARD WINNERS

The SPEAKER pro tempore. Under the Speaker's announced policy of January 19, 1999, the gentleman from Texas (Mr. DOGGETT) is recognized during morning hour debates for 5 minutes.

Mr. DOGGETT. Mr. Speaker, I am pleased to draw the attention of the Congress to five communities that are being nationally recognized today for making particularly effective use of public dollars on behalf of families who have children with or at risk of special needs. Considering all of the different funding sources, the many different rules and regulations from various Federal departments that exist, these communities have found ways to make government more efficient, more flexible and more responsive to families with these young children.

This year, Communities Can!, a growing national network of communities dedicated to serving children and families, including children with or at risk of special needs, is announcing its 1999 Communities Can! Communities of Excellence award winners. They are: Fremont County, Colorado; Goldsboro, North Carolina; Augusta, Maine; and Mile City, Montana; as well as Livingston County, Michigan.

Communities Can! is endorsed by the Federal Interagency Coordinating Council for Early Intervention, which is cosponsoring these awards. These communities have been chosen as award winners for demonstrating exemplary efforts in meeting the following very important goals:

First, all young children and families in need of services and supports are effectively identified early and easily brought into the community's system for delivering services and supports.

All young children and families will receive regular, ongoing and comprehensive services and supports that they need.

There is a way to fund the services and supports needed by these young children and their families.

And services and supports for young children and their families are organized in the way that families can easily use them.

Finally, they ask the families what they need and involve them in the decision-making process at all levels and determine the specific services that will be most beneficial to their real-world concerns.

These communities are being honored for their accomplishments this morning here in the Capitol Building,

and I know that many of my colleagues will be participating to celebrate this very important event.

Congratulations to each of these communities, and congratulations to Communities Can!, because it is demonstrating that every community in this country can make a difference in the lives of young children with or at risk of special needs. It can assure that each of them is able to achieve to the full extent of their potential.

ELIMINATION OF THE MARRIAGE TAX PENALTY

The SPEAKER pro tempore (Mr. STEARNS). Under the Speaker's announced policy of January 19, 1999, the gentleman from Illinois (Mr. WELLER) is recognized during morning hour debates for 5 minutes.

Mr. WELLER. Mr. Speaker, this year House Republicans have several goals. We want to strengthen and make our schools safer. We want to strengthen Social Security by locking away 100 percent of Social Security revenues and surpluses for retirement security. Republicans want to pay down the national debt, and Republicans also want to lower the tax burden for middle-class working families.

I believe this year, as we work to lower the tax burden for middle-class families, that we should focus on making our Tax Code simpler and making our Tax Code fairer to families. And let me raise a series of questions today that really illustrate what I believe is the most unfair tax, and that is the tax on marriage.

The marriage tax is not only unfair, it is wrong. Is it right that under our Tax Code, married working couples pay higher taxes than two single people living together outside of marriage? Do Americans feel that it is fair that 28 million married working couples pay on average \$1,400 more in higher taxes just because they are married? That is right. Under our Tax Code today, a husband and wife who both are in the work force pay higher taxes than two single people living together with identical incomes. Mr. Speaker, that is wrong.

Let me give an example here of what it means. As I pointed out earlier, there are 28 million married working couples paying on average \$1,400 more in higher taxes. Here is an example of a South Chicago suburban couple. I represent the south suburbs of Chicago. If we take a machinist who works for Caterpillar in Joliet and a schoolteacher in the local public schools of Joliet, and they have a combined income of \$62,000, the machinist makes \$35,500 and as a single individual when he files his taxes, if we subtract the personal exemption and the standard deduction, he pays a certain amount of taxes. But if he chooses to marry, and his schoolteacher wife with an identical income, and when they are married they file their taxes jointly, their combined income of \$62,000, when he subtracts the standard deductions and

exemptions under our current Tax Code, this machinist and his schoolteacher wife making \$62,000 a year pay the average marriage tax penalty of \$1,400.

Now, there are those, particularly on that side of the aisle, who believe that this is no big deal. That is money that we have to spend in Washington. Back in Joliet, \$1,400 is 1 year's tuition in Joliet Community College; 3 months of day care in the local child care center; and, also several months' worth of car payments.

The Marriage Tax Elimination Act, which I am proud to say has 230 cosponsors, a bipartisan majority of this House, we propose to eliminate the marriage tax penalty for all Americans. Under our legislation, we double the standard deduction for joint filers to twice that for single filers. We double the brackets so that those who are married filing jointly can earn exactly twice what a single filer can make and be treated fairly under taxes.

Mr. Speaker, the bottom line is the Marriage Tax Elimination Act would eliminate the marriage tax penalty for this machinist and this schoolteacher wife who are married in Joliet, Illinois. Eliminating the marriage tax penalty is really an issue of fairness and will help simplify the Tax Code.

What is the bottom line? The Marriage Tax Elimination Act puts two married people on equal footing with two single people. That is fair, and that simplifies the Tax Code. I am proud to say I was part of this Congress when Republicans succeeded in passing into law the Adoption Tax Credit to help loving families find a home for a child in need of adoption. We accomplished that as part of the Contract With America in 1996. And we followed up in 1997 by enacting into law the centerpiece of the Contract with America, the \$500 per child tax credit, which benefits 3 million Illinois children. That is \$1.5 billion that will stay in Illinois rather than coming to Washington. And, of course, I believe the folks back home can better spend their hard-earned dollars back home than we can here in Washington.

Mr. Speaker, we can build on that helping working families by working to simplify our Code, by working to bring fairness to our Tax Code, by eliminating what is the most unfair tax of all, and that is the tax on marriage.

Let us stop taxing marriage. Let us pass into law the Marriage Tax Elimination Act and eliminate the marriage tax penalty once and for all. Let us make the elimination of the marriage tax penalty the centerpiece of this year's tax cut.

HOPE FOR PEACE IN ERITREA AND ETHIOPIA

The SPEAKER pro tempore. Under the Speaker's announced policy of January 19, 1999, the gentleman from Arkansas (Mr. SNYDER) is recognized during morning hour debates for 3 minutes.