

In determining eligibility for pension benefits, VA is required to consider not only the family income, but also the family's "net worth." Currently, unless VA determines that the land can be sold at "no substantial sacrifice", the value of farm and ranch land is included in determining net worth. Some veteran farmers are "land rich." While having little or no liquid assets, the value of their land makes their "net worth" appear larger on paper.

On May 25, 2000, Senator GRASSLEY and I wrote to VA's Under Secretary for Benefits, Joseph Thompson, requesting that he recognize the unique nature of a family farm and take immediate steps to address the need for a fair evaluation of the eligibility of our Nation's family farmers for veteran's pension benefits. On June 27, 2000, Mr. Thompson replied indicating that VA viewed a family farm in the same light as interest-producing bank deposits or securities.

Family farms are important not only for the food and fiber they produce, but also for the values they represent. Family farms should not be considered as simply substitutes for liquid bank accounts or other liquid assets.

In good years, family farms and ranches provide an adequate income. In bad times, adverse crop conditions or illness, the income and liquid resources of family farmers and ranchers are quickly depleted. Wartime veterans have made a substantial sacrifice on behalf of our Nation by serving in the Armed Forces. We should not ask them to sacrifice their family farms in order to receive the assistance they have earned by their wartime service.

I believe that an operating family farm can never be liquidated without substantial sacrifice on the part of the veteran. It is never reasonable to require a veteran to sell his or her means of future livelihood in order to obtain pension benefits or VA health care. If the farm is sold, the assets which in future years can be expected to generate income for the veteran and the veteran's dependents, are permanently lost.

The Veterans' Family Farm Preservation Act would exempt farm and ranch land owned by the veteran and the veteran's dependents from being counted in determining net worth. The bill would also exclude land used for similar agricultural purposes, such as timberland, Christmas tree farms, or horticultural purposes.

During the past century, the number of family farms in our country has declined dramatically. When a veteran is required to sell his or her farm in order to receive necessary VA assistance, another family farm may be lost forever. No veteran should be called on to make this additional sacrifice. I urge my colleagues to support H.R. 5271, the Veterans' Family Farm Preservation Act. America's family farmers and ranchers deserve no less.

Mr. Speaker, I request the response which the Honorable Joseph Thompson, Under Secretary for Benefits of the Department of Veterans Affairs, sent to me and Senator GRASSLEY concerning VA's valuation of farm lands be included in the CONGRESSIONAL RECORD at this point.

DEPARTMENT OF VETERANS AFFAIRS,
VETERANS BENEFITS ADMINISTRATION,
Washington, DC, June 27, 2000.

Hon. LANE EVANS,
Ranking Democratic Member, Committee on Veterans' Affairs, U.S. House of Representatives, Washington, DC.

DEAR CONGRESSMAN EVANS: This is in response to your letter of May 25, 2000, concerning the issue of net worth as it applies to the non service-connected pension program administered by the Department of Veterans Affairs (VA).

In order to qualify for our pension program, a veteran is required to be permanently and totally disabled. Generally, there are relatively few instances where an individual who is operating a working farm meets the basic requirements for pension eligibility. Although there is no such disability requirement for surviving spouse claimants, it is our belief that an individual operating a farm or other business with assets that could be converted to substantial amounts of cash should not qualify for pension. We view the operator of a business in the same light as an individual owning rental property or an owner of interest-producing bank deposits or securities.

VA pension, similar to Supplemental Security Income (SSI), is intended to provide an income supplement for needy individuals and not to allow beneficiaries to build up substantial assets. Although countable income limitations for VA pension are in the same range as those for SSI, our net worth guideline of \$50,000 for the preparation of an administrative decision is more generous than SSI's \$2,000 for an individual and \$3,000 for a couple.

As you pointed out, our procedural manual, M21-1, indicates that a determination of excessive net worth is a question of fact for resolution after the consideration of the facts and circumstances in each case. The \$50,000 guideline is not to be interpreted as a strict, mechanical limitation. We will issue clarifying guidance on that point.

We are also conducting an analysis of our recent net worth determinations. Based on these results we will decide whether additional changes to our rules and procedures are appropriate. At that time, we will also consider whether the \$50,000 guideline should be increased. You will be apprised of our results.

In April 2000, representatives from the Veterans Health Administration and the Veterans Benefits Administration met with Senator Grassley, members of his staff, farmers and their representatives in Des Moines, Iowa. We understood their concerns and informed them about our efforts to address their concerns.

Our reports show that between December 1997 and December 1999, an average of 213 beneficiaries had their pension benefits terminated for excessive net worth. In FY 1999, there were 131 terminations for excessive net worth. Unfortunately, no data are available on the number of claimants who are disallowed for excessive net worth, or the number of administrative decisions made annually on the issue of net worth or the type of assets involved.

I hope this information is helpful to you. I am providing Senator Grassley a similar response.

Sincerely,

JOSEPH THOMPSON.

PERSONAL EXPLANATION

HON. CHARLES H. TAYLOR

OF NORTH CAROLINA

IN THE HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES

Tuesday, September 26, 2000

Mr. TAYLOR of North Carolina. Mr. Speaker, due to flight delays, I was again unavoidably detained in North Carolina and unable to cast a vote on rollcall vote No. 487. Had I been present, I would have voted "yea" on rollcall vote No. 487.

IN HONOR OF DR. MURRAY ITZKOWITZ, AFTER 31 YEARS AS EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR OF THE BRIDGE INC.

HON. CAROLYN B. MALONEY

OF NEW YORK

IN THE HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES

Tuesday, September 26, 2000

Mrs. MALONEY of New York. Mr. Speaker, I rise today to honor Dr. Murray Itzkowitz, of The Bridge Inc., who after 31 years as Executive Director is now the Executive Director Emeritus in charge of research and new program development.

For more than 45 years, The Bridge Inc. has worked with mentally disabled adults as a nonprofit mental health, rehabilitation, and housing agency. The Bridge is a key provider of housing and support services for the chronically mentally ill within New York City. Its Mental Health Clinic provides individual, group, and family psychotherapy with specialties in, among others, bereavement and divorce counseling, substance abuse counseling, and offers treatment to victims of crime.

The Bridge offers health care services provided by a part-time primary care physical and nurse practitioner team and a full-time licensed practical nurse. This service provides comprehensive services such as physicals and follow-up visitations.

Another cornerstone of The Bridge Inc. is its residence assistance program. The Bridge operates more than 300 beds in various settings, such as 24-hour supervised residences and independent apartments. In fact in December 1998, The Bridge Inc. was granted a \$1.7 million grant from the US Department of Housing and Urban Development to finance 18 individual apartment units in the South Bronx and Harlem.

Finally, I must mention the vocational and educational programs offered by The Bridge. Among these programs include work training, on-site employment, and job-placement services. The education program includes basic literacy instruction, GED preparation, and college preparatory work.

Through his selfless leadership of this fine organization, Dr. Murray Itzkowitz has demonstrated his desire for a physical and mentally healthy, better educated, and properly housed citizenry of New York City. Exceptional individuals like Dr. Itzkowitz, help improve the quality of life for many of our most needy citizens.

Mr. Speaker, I am proud to have a deeply intelligent and compassionate man like Dr. Murray Itzkowitz working within my district and

I am confident that, as the new Executive Director Emeritus in charge of research and development, Dr. Itzkowitz will continue his rigorous pursuit of the public well being.

PERSONAL EXPLANATION

HON. RONNIE SHOWS

OF MISSISSIPPI

IN THE HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES

Tuesday, September 26, 2000

Mr. SHOWS. Mr. Speaker, because of anticipated delays in my flight from Jackson, Mississippi, on Monday, September 25, 2000, I was unable to cast a recorded vote on Roll-call 487.

On Rollcall 487, I would have voted "yea" on the Motion to Suspend the Rules and Agree to H. Con. Res. 399, recognizing the 25th anniversary of the enactment of the Education for All Handicapped Children Act of 1975.

AMNESTY INTERNATIONAL DENOUNCES ARREST OF WITNESS TO POLICE KIDNAPPING OF HUMAN RIGHTS ACTIVIST JASWANT SINGH KHALRA

HON. EDOLPHUS TOWNS

OF NEW YORK

IN THE HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES

Tuesday, September 26, 2000

Mr. TOWNS. Mr. Speaker, police tyranny in Punjab has reared its ugly head again. Rajiv Singh has been arrested in Amritsar on false charges of robbery and murder. At the time of his arrest, Mr. Randhawa was attempting to hand a petition to Jack Straw, the Home Secretary of the United Kingdom, in front of the holiest shrine of Sikhism, the Golden Temple, which was invaded and desecrated by the Indian military in June 1984. The petition asked for intervention of the British government in the matter of human rights in Punjab.

Mr. Randhawa was arrested once before on false charges. He has been a target of police harassment since he saw the Punjab police kidnap Mr. Khalra, who was General Secretary of the Human Rights Wing (SAD). Mr. Khalra was subsequently murdered in police custody and no one has ever been charged or otherwise held responsible in the Khalra case. In that light, there is reason to believe that Mr. Randhawa's life and his safety may be in danger.

September 6 was the fifth anniversary of the Khalra kidnapping. Mr. Khalra conducted an investigation which proved that the Indian government had kidnapped, tortured, and murdered thousands of Sikhs, then declared their bodies "unidentified" and cremated them. No one has been held accountable for these atrocities either.

This is merely the latest action by the police against anyone who speaks up for human rights in Punjab, Khalistan. It is clear from this action that General Narinder Singh, a human-rights leader in Punjab, was right when he said that "Punjab is a police state."

Amnesty International has issued a press release and an Urgent Action bulletin denouncing the lawless actions of the police. I will be introducing them at the end of my

statement, and I urge my colleagues to read these chilling documents.

Mr. Speaker, the Indian Prime Minister is visiting the United States to meet with the President and address Congress. Our government must press Prime Minister Vajpayee on the Randhawa case, on human-rights violations, on self-determination, on the release of political prisoners, on nuclear proliferation, and on the Indian government's efforts to construct a security alliance "to stop the U.S.," as the Indian Express reported last year. If the responses are not satisfactory, then we must take action to ensure freedom in South Asia. This Congress should put itself on record in support of a free and fair plebiscite in Punjab, Khalistan, in Kashmir, in Nagalim, and everywhere that the people are seeking freedom. We must maintain our sanctions on India and cut off its aid. And we should declare India a terrorist state.

Mr. Speaker, I submit the Amnesty International press release and Urgent Action bulletin that I mentioned before into the RECORD for the information of my colleagues.

[From Amnesty International, Sept. 6, 2000]

URGENT ACTION

A key witness in the trial of police officers accused of abducting a human rights activist has been arrested by Punjab police. Amnesty International fears this is an attempt to prevent him testifying, and is extremely concerned for his safety in police custody.

Rajiv Singh was arrested as he attempted to hand a petition to UK Home Secretary Jack Straw in Amritsar, Punjab, on 5 September. The petition reportedly called on the UK government to persuade the Indian authorities to take action over human rights violations in Punjab.

He was held overnight and brought before a magistrate the next day and reportedly charged with the murder of two people who were killed in a bank robbery in Amritsar. He was remanded in police custody until 8 September.

This is the third time that Rajiv Singh has been arrested by Punjab police and charged with serious offences. Earlier this year the Punjab Human Rights Commission ruled that police had "concocted" previous charges to persuade him not to testify against them. He had been accused in July 1998 of setting up an organization to fight for a separate Sikh state of Khalistan, called Tigers of Sikh Land. The Commission recommended that the police officers involved should face criminal charges and that there should be further investigations. Rajiv Singh was awarded compensation for being illegally detained.

Today is the fifth anniversary of the "disappearance" of human rights activist Jaswant Singh Khalra, who unearthed evidence that Punjab police had illegally cremated the bodies of hundreds of people who had been arrested and then "disappeared". A number of Punjab police are now on trial for his abduction, and Rajiv Singh is a key eyewitness in the case.

RECOMMENDED ACTION: Please send telegrams/telexes/faxes/express/airmail letters in English or your own language: expressing grave concern about the arrest and detention of Rajiv Singh on 5 September in Amritsar; expressing concern that since the Punjab police have unlawfully detained and charged Rajiv Singh before, to try to prevent him from testifying in the case of Jaswant Singh Khalra, the current charges against him may be false, and that he is at grave risk of further harassment or torture in police custody; calling for an immediate review of the charges against him by a judicial

body; and calling for commitments from the authorities in Punjab to ensure that he will not be ill-treated in custody.

APPEALS TO:

Mr. Prakash Singh Badal, Chief Minister of Punjab, Office of the Chief Minister, Chandigarh, Punjab, India.

Salutation: Dear Chief Minister

Fax: +91 172 740936

Telegrams: Chief Minister, Punjab, India

Mr. S. Sarabjit Singh, Director General of Police, Office of the Director General, Police Headquarters, Punjab, India.

Salutation: Dear Director General

Telegrams: Director General of Police, Punjab, India

COPIES TO:

Mr. L.K. Advani, Minister of Home Affairs, Ministry of Home Affairs, North Block, New Delhi 110 001, India.

Salutation: Dear Minister

Fax +91 11 301 5750

and to diplomatic representatives of India accredited to your country.

PLEASE SEND APPEALS IMMEDIATELY. Check with the International Secretariat, or your section office, if sending appeals after 18 October 2000.

(Amnesty International Press Release Sept. 7, 2000)

INDIA: ARREST OF WITNESS POINTS TO CONTINUING POLICE HARASSMENT

A key eyewitness to the "disappearance" of a human rights activist has been arrested in Amritsar, India. Rajiv Singh Randhawa was attempting to hand a petition to UK Home Secretary Jack Straw in front of the Golden Temple when the arrest took place on 5 September. Amnesty International today expressed serious concern for his safety while in police custody.

The petition called on the UK government to intervene with the Indian government on the matter of human rights violations in Punjab.

Rajiv Singh Randhawa has since been charged with robbery and murder as well as offences under the Arms Act in connection with a robbery at a bank in Amritsar in which two people were killed. The magistrate remanded him to police custody until 8 September. Amnesty International has appealed to the authorities in Punjab for assurances that he will not be subjected to torture or ill-treatment while in police custody.

"This case highlights the continuing lawlessness of sections of the police in Punjab. Amnesty International is seriously concerned that these charges against Rajiv Singh Randhawa, like other charges brought in the past, are merely a means of harassing and intimidating him," the organization said.

Rajiv Singh Randhawa is a key eyewitness in the case of the "disappearance" of human rights activist Jaswant Singh Khalra. Yesterday, 6 September, was the fifth anniversary of the "disappearance" of Khalra who unearthed evidence that hundreds of bodies of individuals who had "disappeared" after arrest in the 1980s and early 1990s had been illegally cremated by Punjab police. Amnesty International has learned that a hearing in the case was scheduled for 21 September at which evidence, including that of Rajiv Singh, was due to be recorded.

This is the third time that Rajiv Singh Randhawa has been arrested by Punjab police and charged with serious offences. On the last occasion, he was accused of setting up an organization to fight for a separate Sikh state of Khalistan, the Tigers of Sikh land. In July this year the Punjab Human Rights Commission ruled that those charges against Rajiv Singh were "concocted" by police as a means of dissuading him from giving evidence against police in the Khalra